

Friday 20th July: Kirkstead Bridge, Woodhall Spa

We're about half way to Boston and hoping that summer may start tomorrow – unbelievable as it's been cold and rainy for most of the day today. Last night we stopped at Washingborough. In spite of the cool, we have seen meadowsweet and marsh willow herb along the river/cut. A splendid sculpture of cattle and later, a sculptural stand of barley over the adjoining water path (this is low-lying arable farm/fenland and the waterpath is a cycle/footpath where there was once a railway and an attractive character house, incorporating an old signal, relieved the tedium. Tomorrow we walk to a small nearby community, Woodhall Spa.

Sunday 22nd: Boston



Woodhall Spa, where the memorial to the lost members of 617 Squadron, *The Dambusters*, is situated, was a lovely community, having a splendid 40's weekend – we even met an amazingly convincing Churchill, including cigar and rich Churchillian voice. There were also some stunning female outfits and military uniforms, Brit and American, strutting their stuff; they were even treated to a flypast of Hurricane, Spitfire and Lancaster.



Later in the afternoon, Gloriana parted company with 'Just Do It' and we travelled on to Langrick Bridge last evening, and onwards this morning to Boston where I was able to attend Meeting for Worship.



This opportunity was quite timely as they meet only on the 4th Sunday of the month! Fred, 97, was slowly preparing the room adjoining the Unitarian Chapel for meeting for Worship (nowhere near as grand as St Botolph's, left). He knows our home territory well as he has a daughter who lives in Reading. He also knew Chris Skidmore as they served together on Meeting for Sufferings and had spoken to him the previous evening.

It was a lovely Meeting; the five of us drifted into silence, with still ten minutes to go before the official start time. There were two regulars, one very infrequent attender and one other local Friend, late of Amersham Meeting. The Ministry shared, commented on just that; how five people can, so easily settle into a restorative, creative quiet. He read from Quaker Faith and Practice 10.19.

'In a true community we will not chose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled

view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!'

I've had to go back to the boat to find the passage, and ponder and ponder

This afternoon Nick and I walked back into a quiet town centre – very few shops open, which, for a Sunday, I find refreshing. It's a pleasant town with a pleasing blend of old buildings – so many in the mellow Lincolnshire bricks. We even had a Sunday lunch in a cafe which felt pleasantly yester-yearish. The town is dominated by 'the Stump'; the distinctive tower of St Botolphs Parish Church, 272feet high, overseeing the town and indeed the surrounding area. It isn't on a hill as is Lincoln Cathedral, but its height, on a totally flat plain, makes it equally iconic. If I hadn't already walked a fair distance I would have climbed the tower as views over the countryside and The Wash must be truly impressive, especially on this, our second lovely summery day.

We didn't hear many English voices; I believe there is a large immigrant community, particularly eastern European and Portuguese. I am told the Social Services are quite challenged here.

Tomorrow I go to Northwich to see my son and granddaughter for a few days, leaving *Gloriana* and *Just Do It* to 'do' the navigable drains.

It seems that before you venture into these quiet watery by-ways you need to check the water levels at Anton's Gowt. Four inches above a prescribed mark and you won't get under bridges and four below means you'll be dragging along the bottom. I wonder what happens if the level changes en route!!! Not my problem. Unless I have to send out a search party on my return!



**Friday 27th July: Olympic Opening;
and Gloriana en route from Woodhall Spa to Washingborough/Pyewype**

All cynicism and misery-me-ing regarding the Olympics seems to have dispersed. The church bells around the land ring out, Daniel Barenboim conducts further of the Beethoven's symphonies with an Arab/Israeli orchestra at the proms. At Patrick's we watched a programme celebrating the torch's journey around the land and it was truly fantastic, even tear-jerking. Meanwhile I have returned to the boat, crossing the country from Northwich in an England which looks so much more summery than it did a week ago. The two boats, back here didn't do the drains, except for an hour or so in Rick's dingy as the level was way down, meaning the narrow boats would have scraped along the bottom. There are now water lilies on the water and myriads of tiny dragonflies. I saw a garden last weekend with battered, spoiled roses, and this week the buddleia is rampant and one doesn't notice the last few roses!



Saturday: The Woodcocks

We were unable to moor at Washingborough (full up!) or in the Lincoln Visitor Moorings (full up!) on Friday, so had to cruise in continuing traditional summer sun and cloud, and on to moorings at the Pyewype Inn (local name for the peewit!)

Last evening we watched the opening ceremony of the Olympics until the competitors were well on the march. I felt it was inspired, as was the feedback this morning on the radio and in the Guardian. So – we missed the final lighting, Paul McCartney and the petals.

This morning we went back into a bustling Lincoln where Wendy was delighted to catch up with her grandchildren again. The Market Square had been transformed into Skegness, a huge sandpit, surrounded by deckchairs, a roundabout and a Punch and Judy. Later we travelled back along the cut to Woodcocks for a quiet evening.

Sunday: Woodcocks

Torksey Castle

Back into Lincoln for a busy Meeting for Worship on Sunday, my second time at Lincoln Meeting and again quite a busy meeting and children, which just happens once a month and that is always nice.

And yet again, quite busy, ministry-wise, an inevitable one about how we can all become Olympians in our own way, another more sombre about death. And, what a small community we are!: Jo Rado from Reading Meeting was there. I left them preparing for a shared lunch, which happens every month. Later we met Angela from the station and travelled back thro' a shower – the first rain for a week!

Tuesday: Newark on Trent

Yes, we're on our way at last! It took us 6 hours down the tidal Trent today from Torksey, the greater part in rain. In spite of that, it does feel good to be on our way, and moving south from those flat plains, big skies and a waterway flanked with steep banks. Meeting a monster barge motoring down river, just around a bend was a tad disturbing, at least for me! and the angle of focus belies its size!



We were let through the lock at 7.00am, jacket potatoes replaced the bread and rolls cooked en route, and we all enjoyed them with some homemade coleslaw, I'd made.

We are moored opposite Newark Castle, certainly another of the most delightful moorings on the waterways. I've returned from the equally delightful town and we're looking forward to visiting the market in the imposing town square tomorrow before we move on.

Thursday 2nd August: en route

Newark was indeed a delightful town; besides the large imposing market square, buzzing on market day, there are narrow cobbled streets and alleys full of attractive independent shops –even the Morrisons seems to be tucked within the medley (of streets and alleys).

The river frontage is also attractive with old warehouses, some attractively updated, and of course the castle (remains - used by Royalists in the civil war), surrounded by lovely gardens, is a very special feature.

Yesterday we travelled onwards in pleasant summery cloud and sun and in surprisingly summery temperatures along the winding river, and where the river allowed, side by side, through Hazelford Lock and upriver to Gunthorpe Lock, where we over-nighted. Three of us enjoyed a lovely riverside walk after supper. A splendid moon rose on our port side over an expanse of water, overlooking Trentside Marina and woodland beyond, the union jack flying proudly across the water, on this special Jubilee/Olympic year. I thought how great it would have been to have seen the moon through Newark Castle's gothic windows the previous evening, though that didn't happen.



We set off towards Nottingham, quite promptly this morning, hoping to beat the promised showers.

Sunday 5th August: Burton on Trent

We are approaching the scene of the dreadful 'rope round the prop' debacle! Anyone following our progress on a Waterways map can see we have travelled across the heart of England (the north-west midlands) in a more or less westerly direction. Although the lower reaches of the Trent are really quite pleasant, Nick and I are particularly happy to be back on the canals, negotiating overhanging willows, and with wild flowers, finally at their loveliest after the very late onset of summer. The night before last I picked a posy of great willowherb, meadow-sweet and honeysuckle, and very lovely, in a delightful jug (charity shop. Newark), it looks!

We have travelled in typically-July weather, warm, sunny periods and the odd, and occasional violent shower. Nottingham, one night, then beyond Shardlow the next and last evening beyond Willington. Television is now more of an issue, as so often the enclosed nature of the canals means we can't get a satellite signal. But I was insistent we find an open spot last evening, and consequently enjoyed the athletics triumphs of Team GB.



Wednesday August 8th The Broad Water, Tixall Wide

We are now definitely in the Midlands, having passed through the delightful Fradley Junction yesterday and just this afternoon, we turned off the Trent and Mersey and onto the Staffordshire and Worcester Canal at the busy and ever popular Great Haywood Junction.

And today, after several days of sun and showers we have had a wondrous balmy summer day. For a while this afternoon I sat in the cratch in idyllic summery warmth, watching the gentle English countryside pass by. For a short while the monstrous cooling towers at Rugely hove into sight and the huge toilet works, Armitage Shanks. But these were soon, once again, replaced by bucolic countryside and some delightful canal-side gardens as the canal wound its way along the contours of the land.

Angela spent a night on board with us at Alrewas before hitching a lift with Rick and Wendy's friends, Chris and Ian, who had called to see Rick and stopped overnight.

Sunday 12th August: en route

Glorious twelfth? No way!! I am writing this as we travel along in overcast skies and rain. It's just past midday. At 1.00am when I struggled to the bathroom I saw an amazing moon rising in the distance and this morning it was beautiful as we set off through summery fields with fast-ripening wheat and vibrant poppies. Truly British, glorious summer with a balmy breeze. Within the hour the rain started and we are now on the southern section of the Staffs and Worcs. Canal, heading south-west

toward Stourport and the River Severn. In the last week we have slowly climbed up across the heart of our green and pleasant land, under the M1 near Nottingham and then, yesterday, under the M6; its distant rumbling has 'lulled' us to sleep for the last few nights!

We have enjoyed a surprisingly summery spell, shorts and t-shirts (just shorts for the blokes!) being the order of the day, and delightful summer flowers and dragonflies along the way. I've even thought that I will be missing this way of life when we return to Hungerford in October. We appreciated a stop-over in Rugely and a convenient Morrisons and even more the delightful Market Street of Penkridge with some small independents and a classy Co-op tucked away, not spoiling the ambience of the place.

...and an hour or two later .. it's warm and sunny again as we lock our way down the locks along a canal we have never before travelled.

... and at five o'clock, we are moored just above Womborne, where my sister lived in a caravan and taught in her first teaching job after teacher training and first discovered porky scratchings at The Round Oak,half a century ago!

Tuesday 14th : Kidderminster.

This canal is amazing; it is one of the earliest canals and must have been a seriously challenging project as in the last day or so we have seen it drop dramatically on its way to join the River Severn, cutting its way through the red sandstone land and typified by the circular weirs. I get the impression that, once engineers saw this could be achieved, then anything was possible.



Dawn on the Staffs & Worcs, short of Penkridge



Just after Bumblehole Lock and Bridge the dramatic falling away starts at Bratch, where three locks in close unison, though not a staircase, allow the canal to drop 30+ feet. This is a place of interest to students of canal architecture and engineering, with a brick octagonal toll office. Nicholson tells us the set-up is 'curiously illogical'. We walked down to look at it the evening before, and you could see Nick working out the logic. (Logic there was, as it took us less than 20 minutes to get down the next morning. From the locks you look down the valley into Wombourne and the site is beautifully

tended and manned (at this time of year, I guess!) by two lock-keepers, one a volunteer.

You then continue to wend your way, under Giggety Bridge, to another 20-foot drop at Botterham and then more falling away to Kinver, our last night's stopover in a delightful spot. This morning I pulled the curtains by my bed porthole and this was clearly a signal for a moorhen across the way to shoot across the canal for breakfast. There followed a half hours entertainment as the two parents ferried (from daddy-beak to mummy-beak to baby-beak!) the goodies (Jac's bread) across the canal to their five black babies, determinedly ignoring the ducks who were attempting to intimidate them.



We moved on a way to allow a foray into Kinver – certainly a picture perfect village. A baker, cooking on site, a butcher with attractive brother and sister who knew their products, a greengrocer who also stocked basic

pet, gardening, and household stuff, and just a small Co-op and Spar which were not too obtrusive!

We then continued through the steep sandstone valley through a lock where a cave had been cut to stable the horses. Approaching Kidderminster you look back to the very lovely church, raised above on the hillock, framed with copper beech and green below, and sky above. Then, all too soon you are approaching serious town. The modern Pizza Hut and MacDonalds, an eye-sore, in front of the beautiful old converted Victorian warehouses and a splendid square chimney which dominates the skyline.

Lesson, learned by Nick this morning: don't grab the back door (held to hull with merely a magnet!) and rely on it as you take a large step ashore over the water. It will give way and splosh!!! I made the back of the boat in seconds, Rick, a few paces behind me to reach man overboard!! No damage done apart from his expensive specs which were catapulted over his head as he toppled backwards; he contemplated going back in for them but decided against it – a good decision as it took goodness knows how many rinses to get the mud out of Nick's jeans, and the chance of recovery zilch!



Lesson learned by Rick the other day: when you put on waders to paint your boat below the gunnels take your £400 smartphone from your pocket as the said waders might just leak!

Friday 17th : Worcester and Birmingham Canal

We wend our way down the Staffs and Worcestershire to the Severn at Stourport, down the Severn to the newly re-opened Droitwich Canal and are now heading south to Worcester.

The weather has been kind to us and I thoroughly enjoyed the southern end of the Staffs and Worcestershire Canal – it is unfailingly picturesque and the points of civilization en route are attractive. Stourport, with its locks and basins was an attractive stopping point; we arrived quite early, and holed up in the upper basin for most of Wednesday, as the skies opened. As we left bright and early on Thursday morning, enjoying the handsome 18th Century buildings as we wended our way from busy basin to basin.



We were attempting to beat the weather but it stayed fair all day for the cruise down the Severn and we were soon on the Droitwich Canal, and with the fair weather still with us we wound our way up through this river-like canal through reeds and willows and lovely countryside. There were no opportunities to stop, had we wanted, just the regular locks climbing up to Droitwich and the welcome BW, (beg pardon, CaRT) secure moorings in a pleasant park like setting to the east of the unspoiled High Street and the biggest Waitrose I've ever encountered.



We are now travelling alone for a day or two as Rick and Wendy have gone away for the weekend, leaving Just Do It in Droitwich Basin.

The eastern end of the Droitwich canal, taking us on up to our present location, was less enticing – modern cement-sided locks (especially the staircase variety) are nowhere near as comfortable as brick or stone! Just call me conservative! Nick was also miffed at taking down the cratch for the n'th time to go under the M5 (see right) when we would have just made it without the effort! There were a clutch of CaRT volunteers to see us up the final three locks onto yet another canal. At midday, we're just short of Shernal Green and the Dunhampstead Tunnel. The cratch cover is back up, just as well as it's blustery and we're presently experiencing a thundery downpour.

