



Laid-back canalling

Richard Hill takes it easy on a relaxing hotel boat holiday from Burton-on-Trent to Rugby with the Exceedingly Good Cruising Company

The Exceedingly Good Cruising Company (EGCCo) offers a splendid and superior service that is a distinctly different class of boating holiday. Catering for up to a maximum of six on any cruise, the guests are free to relax and let the world go by. The light and compact cabins, all en suite, are particularly comfortable, and each morning begins with a cafetiere of fresh coffee or a pot of tea.

To those unfamiliar with Hotel Boats, perhaps a short introduction is necessary. The hotel boats comprise of two boats, one powered (Morpeth), and the other (known as a 'butty boat') unpowered (Alnwick). *Alnwick* contains the en-suite cabins and is towed behind (or in some cases alongside) *Morpeth*, the powered boat. *Morpeth* is where the galley and guests dining room and lounge are situated. Both are luxuriously decorated and furnished to the highest specification. And in case you thought narrow boats were dark, damp and dingy, then think again. Both *Morpeth* and *Alnwick* are fitted with full central heating and 240v mains electricity (generated on board).

Guests are free to simply relax, while the crew of two or three do all the work. There's simply nothing to do: unless a guest wants to. Owners Michael and Peter are always delighted to give tuition, even to first time boaters. Although it's not necessary to help out, most guests, especially first timers, usually welcome the opportunity for some hands-on experience.

All the meals are prepared on board using fresh and often local ingredients. Now in their third year of trading, Michael and Peter have got to know the quality grocers and butchers along their routes. Peter even cultivates home grown herbs on the roof of *Morpeth*.

The straight road that we have been cruising parallel to for much of our journey this far is the A38. It is a historic Roman road, once known as Rykneld Street.

Burton-on-Trent

Burton has, for many generations, been associated with the brewing of fine ales, and if it's beer you're

TOP - Hotel boats Alnwick (left) and Morpeth moored between bridge 33 and Shobnall Basin, Burton-on-Trent.

BELOW - Horninglow canal wharf at Burton (Courtesy of Coors Visitor Centre & The Museum of Brewing)



interested in, whether the brewing process, or the consumption of, Burton's the right place to be. This small town has been famous for its beers since brewing began here, possibly as early as 1000 ad by Benedictine Monks. It's likely that Burton became home to brewing, due to the remarkable water in the wells and springs that dot the Trent Valley and which are high in gypsum content due to the underlying strata.

Formerly the Bass Museum, the Coors Visitor Centre houses the UK's premier museum dedicated to brewing *The Museum of Brewing*, offering a unique blend of living heritage. The Brewing Gallery charts the brewing process in the nineteenth century while in the Dray Shed and Stables history comes alive with the magnificent Coors Shire Horses and the historical drays which are still used today at horse shows and promotional events.

Amongst other beers, Coors are the brewers of Carling, Britain's biggest selling-beer. Tours of the main Coors brewery and latest technology packaging plant run on Tuesdays - Thursdays. An experienced brewery representative guides the tour, which is approximately one hour long and includes one pint sampling. (All brewery tours must be booked in advance) The visitor centre is open seven days a week, from 10am - 5pm (latest admission 4pm). Tel: **0845 6000 598**

The Marston brewery tour includes a visit to the working cooperage (one of only four still in use within the UK), a tour of the impressive Burton Union System, referred to as the 'Cathedral of Brewing'. This and much more will give you a



fascinating insight into a traditional working brewery. Tel: **0128 350 7391**

Burton was once also anciently famous for ornamental works in alabaster, again due to the gypsum hereabouts. By the late 15th century, Burton had replaced Nottingham as a centre for alabaster carving. How long these works continued is unknown, but no alabaster activity has been recorded during the last 150 years.

Branston

In 1918, a factory was opened for the manufacture of machine guns but closed at the end of the First World War and before any production had started. In 1920 the government sold the factory to Crosse & Blackwell, manufacturers of preserves, who remained there until 1924, during which time they adopted 'Branston' as the brand name for their pickle recipe.

Wychnor

On the opposite side of the canal to the village is the former coaching inn known as the 'Flitch of Bacon', a title which originated from a local custom as described by William White in 1851: '*...the tenure of this manor, ...requires the Lord to keep a flitch of bacon hanging in his hall at Wichnor at all times of the year, except in Lent, that it may be delivered to any man or woman who shall come and claim it, and at the same time swear that he or she has been married for a year and a day without quarrelling or repenting.*'

Alrewas

Alrewas has a population of just under three thousand and is famed for its natural beauty and is well worth a visit. Many of the cottages have attractive thatched roofs and are of traditional timber frame construction.



TOP - Branston Pickle at Branston Lock!

ABOVE - Approaching Tatenhill Lock near Branston on the Trent & Mersey.

RIGHT - The dining area and lounge aboard motor boat Alnwick.





LEFT - Michael Gibberd (foreground) steers Alnwick and Morpeth safely around the Trent weir approaching Alrewas.

BELOW - The dining facilities.

BELOW LEFT - Typical double cabin.

Alrewas is also home of the National Memorial Arboretum. The idea for a National Memorial Arboretum was conceived by the Director, David Childs, during a visit to Washington in 1988. He felt that a living tribute to the war-time generations of the twentieth century should be planted in such way that it would be a gift in their memory for future generations to reflect upon and enjoy. Entry to the arboretum is free.

Fradley Junction

Fradley Junction sees the meeting of the Coventry Canal with the Trent and Mersey. The junction has a canal visitors centre nearby and *The Swan*, a very popular pub. The junction can get very busy in the summer months, and this is where we turn onto the Coventry Canal.

After winding through Fradley Village, and again briefly alongside Rykneld Street, we arrive at

Huddlesford Junction, formerly a junction with the now disused Wyrley & Essington Canal. We then pass through Whittington, Fisherwick and on to Hopwas.

The novelist Guy N Smith, author of *Alligators* and *Entombed* (amongst others) was born in Hopwas. We pass Hopwas Hays Woods where there are signs on one side of the canal warning that it is a military firing range. At Peel's wharf near Fazeley Junction, we moor to replenish with water. The wharf here has been redeveloped and has many fine waterside properties.

Fazeley Junction

The district of Fazeley includes the north end of the Park of Drayton Manor, the seat of Sir Robert Peel, Bart, whose grandfather, the first Sir Robert Peel, established two extensive cotton mills here on the River Tame. Until the coming of the railway, the

canal was the main form of transforming these goods.

A short distance south of Fazeley Junction, the canal crosses the Tame Aqueduct. We're now running through Tamworth with ample to do and see. History enthusiasts may wish to visit Tamworth Castle, a typical Norman motte and bailey castle set in the south-west corner of what was a Saxon burgh, located in order to dominate the approach over two rivers from the south. Its sandstone walls and superb herringbone wall - all that survives of the 'curtain wall' of the bailey - are believed to date from the 1180s. They replaced a pallsade and wooden tower, built on the present artificial motte or mound shortly after the Norman Conquest.

We continue through Tamworth and Amington and shortly after crossing the Staffordshire - Warwickshire border, just after passing through Bridge 59, chance upon the remains of Alvecote Priory. Sitting in a sharp bend in the canal, this is an ideal location for family picnics and games. The



mature shrubs and trees once formed the gardens of the house which was built from the stone of the old Benedictine Priory.

Atherstone

The next stage of our trip takes us past Polesworth, Bradley Green and on to Atherstone Locks, a flight of 11 locks, one of which caused difficulty. Usually, Alnwick, the unpowered butty boat can wait her turn before being bow hauled to take her lock of water.



At one lock on the Atherstone Flight however, there was nowhere to moor her alongside the towpath to await her turn, and so she had to be tied to the gate and 'jump a turn', much to the frustration of a boater coming in the opposite direction who expected to be able to lock through after motor boat Morpeth had cleared the lock.

There are a number of curiosities at the top lock at Atherstone, including a wicker plant holder in the shape of a boat, some mannequins of BW workers head down in a 'well' and a beautiful carving entitled 'Ball Game' by Bob Illife.

Atherstone was once famed for its 'makers of hats'. Indeed, it became known as 'The Hatting Town'. Samuel Bracebridge, born in 1612, was the town's first recorded 'haberdasher of hats'. He weighed out wool for the cottagers so that they could make felt 'hoods' (the name for the unshaped hat), at home or in small communal workshops. Although none exist today, six hat factories survived into the 1950's.

After Atherstone, there are no more locks until we reach Hawkesbury Junction, having passed by Hartshill through Nuneaton and past Bedworth.



Hawkesbury Junction

Hawkesbury Junction is a promising challenge, having to navigate and negotiate the two boats Morpeth and Alnwick through what is in essence a tight 'U' turn as we leave the Coventry Canal and turn onto the Oxford Canal.

The junction is formed by the meeting of the Coventry Canal and the Oxford Canal, and it is known locally, together with the area immediately around, as 'Sutton Stop'. This is also the name of the private unmade road which gives access to the area, both being named after the Sutton family who were well known lock-keepers for over half of the nineteenth century.

The first junction at Hawkesbury was made in 1803 and in the 1830's the Oxford Canal was



shortened and the Coventry Canal Company asked the Oxford to sanction a new wider junction at Hawkesbury. This was agreed subject to the protection of the latter's tolls; the present junction was made in 1836 and the connection bridged in 1837.

One of the most striking features at the junction is the elegant bridge over the actual junction. This cast iron structure is a fine example of the Victorian engineer's art, and has a span of 50 feet. The bridge was cast at the Britannia Foundry in Derby, and was erected for the Coventry Canal Company in 1837, at a cost of £630.

Another interesting sight is the engine or pump house. The lean-to at the rear is the oldest part and housed the first engine installed in 1821. This was a Newcomen type engine which had already seen around one hundred years' service at one of the local collieries. It was named 'Lady Godiva' and used to raise water into the canal from a stream flowing underneath. By 1837, however, this supply proved inadequate, a 114 foot shaft was sunk and a new, more powerful engine installed alongside

'Lady Godiva' in the three-storey building which now fronts the canal. In 1913 this water supply failed due to the sinking of the new Coventry Colliery and the engine house fell into disuse. 'Lady Godiva' remained in place until 1963 when it was moved to Dartmouth, the birthplace of Thomas Newcomen, as the centrepiece of a memorial museum.

We now pass through Ansty, which has a reputable pub restaurant; the *Rose and Castle*, aptly named for boaters, and then on to Stretton Stop. From here to Rugby, the canal meanders and meets up with its former and now disused route.

This is just a flavour of what lies in store for boaters. This trip was aboard a hotel narrow boat and this type of boat offers a different way to enjoy routes such as this. As guest of EGCCo, there is little to do but enjoy the experience. However, the crew offer opportunities for guests to have 'hands on' working through locks etc, should they wish.

However, much of the delight of the hotel narrow boat is in the ability to chill out and do absolutely nothing.



WAY TO GO!

Fact file on this cruise

Contact details

Exceedingly Good Cruising Company, Hyde Park House, Cartwright Street, Hyde, Cheshire SK14 4EH. Tel: 0161 367 0066

Useful Guides

Pearson's Canal Companion: Four Counties Ring + Trent and Mersey Canal by Michael Pearson. Publisher: J M Pearson & Son/Wayzgoose.

ISBN: 0-907864-68-6

Pearson's Canal Companion: South Midlands and Warwickshire Ring by Michael Pearson. Publisher: J M Pearson & Son/Wayzgoose. ISBN: 0-907864-50-3



TOP - A tight turn at Hawkesbury Junction.

ABOVE - The remains of the old priory at Alvecote.

www.goodboats.co.uk

www.canalsandrivers.co.uk