

Napton and return from Springwood Haven September 2023

Springwood Haven Marina in Warwickshire is a fantastic starting point for a variety of cruising routes. In 2022 my husband David and I cruised from there to the Ashby Canal and then into Coventry, a perfect route for novices or those who want to just relax and watch the world drift by – 67 miles with no locks!

A year later, we decided to return to Springwood Haven but this time we wanted to join the Oxford Canal and travel to the historic canal centre of Braunston, and then onwards to Napton. The route takes 30 hours in total, so about 4 and a half hours every day for a 7 nights' cruise.

Day 1 – To the Oxford Canal

The boat we'd hired was ready on Friday afternoon, but we were working so we arranged with the marina to collect it on Saturday morning instead. We hired a 'Grebe' class boat, which is a 49ft narrowboat, perfect for couples, with the galley nearest to the tiller and the bedroom at the front of the boat. This means you can make drinks etc whilst still being able to talk to the 'helm' and without having to walk through the bedroom.

After our handover we cast off at midday and headed south through pretty countryside. With hay bales in the fields and bullrushes surrounding us it was just like a Constable painting. We thought we might need a Constable as the

peace was suddenly interrupted by the sound of gunshots – had we stumbled into an episode of Midsomer Murders? No, it was only bird scarers!



This section of the canal is very easy cruising and in no time at all we were passing Marston Junction and the turning to the Ashby Canal. We were carrying on however, to Hawkesbury Junction where we planned to join the Oxford Canal.

Hawkesbury Junction (locally known as Sutton Stop) was built to join the Coventry and Oxford Canals together for transportation of coal. In those days the canals were owned by different companies and there was a long-running argument between the two companies over tolls. Because of their failure to agree, the two canals ran parallel to each other for a short distance (and still do). Eventually they were joined up and Hawkesbury Junction was created, together with a 'stop lock' to isolate the water levels of the two companies.

As a result of all these shenanigans, the junction looks rather daunting as you approach it – a sharp left hand 'U' turn under a bridge, immediately followed by the lock.

Hawkesbury Junction signs



The whole operation can be made more nerve-racking to the inexperienced boater by the fact that there is a pub conveniently situated on the junction and there are always a few gongoozlers, whiling the day away by observing the success (or otherwise) of the various boats negotiating the junction. (An often-used pub quiz question; what is a Gongoozler? Answer: a person who enjoys watching activities on the canals).

I was on the tiller for the junction and it wasn't as difficult as I had feared. I felt very proud as we successfully made the 'U' turn and a gongoozler gave me a 'thumbs up'!

Straight through the stop lock and we were on the Oxford Canal, which soon became a little noisy as we cruised parallel to the M6 motorway for about half an hour. It was quite surreal to look to the right and see lorries hurtling past - a

juxtaposition of 19th and 21st century modes of transport. Once the canal veered away from the M6 it was very rural and peaceful with long wide stretches, perfect for relaxing and admiring the countryside and wildlife.



Lovely scenery

We decided to moor up for the night at the little village of Ansty and eat at the aptly named 'Rose & Castle' canalside pub. I had steak & mushroom pie, David had fish & chips and we admired the numerous pictures of pop stars which adorn the walls – The Beatles, Coldplay, Elton John, and my favourite frontman ever, Freddie Mercury. The food was tasty, the service was excellent, and we waddled back to our boat to bed down for the night.



First night's mooring spot

Total cruising time today = 4 hours.

Day 2 – Through the Hillmorton Locks!

After a leisurely breakfast (sausage & brown sauce butties – yum!) we cast off at about 9am and made for our first stop of the day, a water point at Stretton Stop near the village of Brinklow. Sometimes water points can be difficult to spot so we kept our eyes peeled, but this one had to be the most obvious I've ever seen!



Here's me sitting daydreaming at the bow while waiting for the water to be topped up!

It's a good idea to fill up the water on your boat regularly, as you use quite a lot when you include showers, washing up, and of course, flushing the toilet. All of ABC hire boats come with a hose and key to open the water points, and the water is free – just connect your hose to the tap, put the other end in the appropriate outlet on the boat (they are usually at the front of the boat and undo quite easily) and turn on the tap.

After just 15 minutes we were all topped-up and ready to resume our journey along the historic Oxford Canal. This stretch of water is characterised by elegant cast-iron bridges over side-arms of the canal - these used to cross the canal in the early 19th century before it was rerouted to make it shorter.

Spot the angler on the bank....



Passing through pretty woods, we spotted several 'old-style' narrowboats with Boatman's cabins and large engine rooms, some still coal-fed. A short while later we arrived at our first and only tunnel of the holiday, the Newbold Tunnel at Newbold on Avon. If you've never been through a tunnel before this is a great one to start off with. You can see the other end, there's room for 2 boats to pass each other, and it only takes about 2 minutes to get from one end to the other. And at the other end, there's a pub! We made a mental note to maybe stop there on our return journey.

Newbold tunnel



The canal now took us through the outskirts of Rugby (famous for being the place where the game of Rugby was allegedly born when a schoolboy playing football picked up the ball and ran with it towards the opposition's goal. The boy's name was William Webb-Ellis, and there is a statue of him near Rugby School. We weren't planning on stopping in Rugby, but in fact there was a very attractive mooring area next to Bridge 58 – if you stop there it takes about half an hour to walk into Rugby or you can catch a bus.

We had decided to get through the Hillmorton Locks before mooring up for the night. Our previous experiences with locks had been largely uneventful, but there was this one time, a few years ago, when we approached a lock and there was a boat in the lock facing us waiting to come out. Hooray, we thought, as soon as it emerges we can go in. Happy Days! David got off our boat and went to operate the lock, I stayed on the boat waiting to go in, and..... nothing happened. And nothing continued to happen for about 20 minutes. In the end I moored the boat up again but there weren't any spaces on the towpath side of the canal, so I ended up marooned at a waiting place on

the other side, unable to see what was causing the delay as the lock was around a slight bend. I saw a man walking towards the lock on the towpath so I shouted across to him "Excuse me, can you find out what the problem is at the lock please?" He said he would and, about 15 minutes later the boat that had been in the lock finally came out and I was able to go in. When I eventually spoke to David he told me that there was something stopping the paddle from opening. The man I'd asked to investigate said "I'm a diver", took off all his clothes and jumped into the lock! There was a rock lodged against the paddle and he removed it, before climbing out and putting his clothes back on. I certainly wouldn't advise anyone to attempt diving into a lock, but it did get us underway without having to wait for CRT to attend.

Anyhow, the reason I related that anecdote is that this year, David decided to get walkie-talkies for us both so that if there were any problems at the locks he could keep in touch with me and tell me what was going on. As we got near to the Hillmorton Locks, we decided to test our new gadgets. David opened a channel and said 'Mork calling Orson, come in Orson – Nanu Nanu'. If you are old enough to remember Mork and Mindy on the TV you'll know who Mork and Orson were. If not, you can look it up on the internet, it was a cult programme in the 1970's and 1980's starring the brilliant Robin Williams.

Back to our cruise, and as we neared the locks we were delighted to see that at Hillmorton there are actually double locks – two separate locks side by side. Apparently there were originally three single locks, but additional twin locks were added in 1840 as the volume of working boats increased to such a degree that large queues were commonplace. In 1842, by the end of the year 20,859 vessels had been recorded passing through the locks! Although nowadays the canals are more used for holidaymakers and live-aboards, Hillmorton remain the busiest locks in the country, with around 10,000 boats passing through each year.

Even better news than the double locks was that they were manned by CRT volunteers who were directing each incoming boat to a vacant lock. I merrily cruised into the first lock, only to hear the CRT volunteer saying "You must be Mork & Mindy. We wondered who was on Channel 1!" Hmm, good thing we weren't saying anything inappropriate, but they still clearly thought we were a bit eccentric.

Going down in the lock....



And out!

After the third lock David hopped on board again and just 15 minutes later we finished our cruising for the day, mooring up just after Bridge 73 opposite the Waterside pub where we planned to eat that night. We were on the outskirts of Hillmorton Village and, if you moor here, as well as the Waterside pub there are more pubs and a fish & chip shop about a 15-minute walk away from the canal. We went to the Waterside and managed to get the last carveries of the day before toddling back to our boat for a game of Scrabble before bed.

Total cruising time today = 5.5 hours.



The Waterside Pub at Hillmorton

Day 3 – To Braunston and beyond...

We woke looking forward to getting to Braunston today – we'd heard so many boating people mention Braunston that it seemed almost like some mythical place with castles and dragons. It's not quite that dramatic, but the village of Braunston is the busiest section of canal anywhere on the British canal network. In the days before railways were built to carry goods it was a crucial junction between North and South and joined the Oxford Canal to the Grand Union Canal, where all the locks are double width and the canal is straighter and wider, all the way to London. First though, we had about 3 hours of easy cruising through the countryside, so we occupied ourselves spotting as many unusual and interesting boat names as we could see. Some of the ones we liked were 'Ermintrude', (complete with cartoon cow), 'Time to Pootle', 'Waterloo Sunset' (must be Kinks fans), 'Phantom' (this one was painted black with a big white ghost on the side), and 'The Old Bovine'! At one point we went past a boat named 'Abacus', whereupon David remarked "I bet someone's counting on that!"



Tootling by – a sheep, a monkey, and...



Something scary!

The land in this part of the country is pretty much unaltered from hundreds of years ago – looking out over the fields we could see original ridge and field furrows which were ploughed by villagers in medieval times.



Medieval
ploughed ridges

We were really starting to feel like we were stepping back in

time, especially when we spotted the spire of Braunston's All Saints Church perched on a hill.

Approaching
Braunston with its
church on the hill



The church was built in the 14th century and contains lots of interesting items such as the tomb and effigy of the Fourth Baron Ros, who died in 1352 on a

pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The church is known locally as 'The Boaters' Cathedral' as many boatmen and women are buried in a specially reserved graveyard there.

Just before Braunston there is a sharp left hand turn in the canal with a separate turning off to the right and this is where the Oxford Canal temporarily disappears and becomes the Grand Union Canal. If you turn there you can travel down to Napton and pick up the Oxford Canal again heading South. We were continuing into Braunston where Our Nicholson's Guide showed a water point on the right-hand side, so we decided to head for that and fill up and then see where we could moor. The towpath was in fact choc-a-bloc with boats so after topping up with water we carried on to Butcher's Bridge, turned the boat there and eventually found a mooring spot opposite a nice-looking pub called The Boat House. Time to explore!

Just next to the water point is The Stop House, built in 1796 and originally used to collect tolls from boats passing from one canal to the next. There's a plaque on the wall explaining its history and the building itself is now used as a Canal & River Trust Welcome Station.



Close by we found the Gongoozler's Rest Café, a

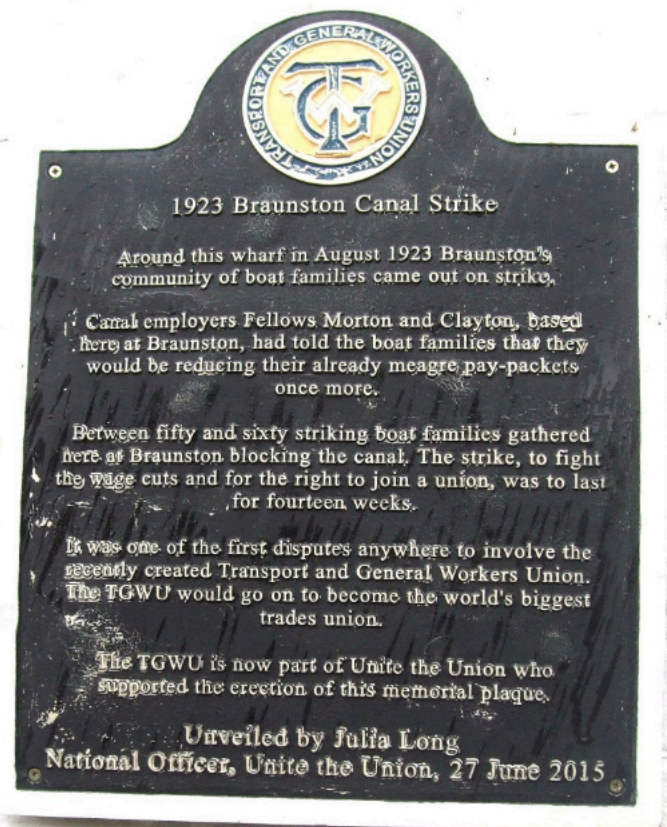
welcoming café within a narrowboat, usually open from 9am to 2pm for breakfasts, brunches and light lunches, as well as homemade cakes and hot

drinks. We weren't hungry yet though, so walked on to have a look at the huge Braunston Marina.

Braunston Marina entrance



Wandering past the numerous workshops and boats, I noticed a plaque on the wall, commemorating one of the first strikes organised by the Transport and General Workers Union. In 1923 the working boat families were told that their pay packets were being cut by 6%. Can you imagine the outrage? 684 men and their families used their boats to completely block the canal in protest, and the strike went on for an incredible 14 weeks. And the result? A reduction in the reduction from 6.47% to just 5% spread over 2 months. They were clearly hard times for working boating families, as the canal carrying trade started to decline after the introduction of the railways.



There was a welcoming-looking shop on site so we popped in for a browse, and I spotted a series of novels by an author called Leo McNeir, featuring Marnie Walker and her boat Sally Ann. Marnie keeps getting accidentally coming across murdered people, in and around the canals. I'm an avid reader so we bought the first 3 books in the series. At the time of writing I'm halfway through the second one ("Death in Little Venice") and enjoying it very much. So far, they've been based around the Grand Union Canal and I'm hoping the next one ventures further afield. Whilst in the shop the shopkeeper recommended a nearby pub 'The Admiral Nelson' so we decided to head there for lunch.

We walked along the towpath towards the pub, passing a bespoke gift and supplies shop on the way, as well as the tall chimney of the original pump house that used to pump water back up to the top of the flight of locks. The locks themselves at Braunston are double width so that 2 boats can lock together and save time. It's quite a novelty to see 2 skippers having a chat while their boats gently sink to the bottom of the lock!



♪ The narrowboats went in two by two, hurrah! Hurrah! ♪

The Admiral Nelson is in a scenic spot next to Braunston Lock No.3 and has a long and mysterious history. It pre-dates the canal and is rumoured to have



originally been opened by a member of Admiral Nelson's crew who named it in honour of his former employer. During the late 18th century one of the rooms served as a morgue, and there have been several reported sightings of a ghostly figure in black who walks through the wall between the pub and the cottage next door.

We didn't see any ghosts I'm glad to say and the service and food was excellent!



Feeling much refreshed, we walked back to our boat to resume our journey. Cruising back to Braunston Junction, we turned left under the bridge and headed through rolling countryside to our final stop for the day. Napton is a small village on a hill and is where the Grand Union Canal splits again to become the Oxford Canal going South and the Grand Union going North. It's very confusing!



On the way to
Napton

This was the furthest we were going on our jaunt down the Oxford Canal, so we turned the boat just before Bridge 111 and moored up in a peaceful spot between some other boats. It literally felt like we were in the middle of nowhere, just fields all around and very quiet. Time for a game of Scrabble!

I'd identified a pub within walking distance (there's only about 2 in Napton). Good job we had a torch, as the pub was a short walk up a very dark lane. Only about 10 minutes later we arrived at the Kings Head.

The pub was built in the 1920's so may have been named after King George V but the painting on the pub sign looks like King Charles I so I think it was probably him. A very nice eaterie featuring dishes



such as Venison Sausages and Breast of Gressingham Duck. We tucked into traditional cod and chips, before walking very carefully back down the hill and along the towpath to the Hooded Grebe.

Total cruising time today = 5 hours.

Day 4 - Back to Rugby and on to Newbold on Avon

David checked the weather forecast and it looked like the following day might bring torrential rain, so we decided to do a long cruising day so that we wouldn't have to do much tomorrow. A long cruising day in our book is anything over 6 hours, although I know plenty of boaters who think nothing of doing over 10!

Setting off at 9am, it was very windy and blowing us to the left, so every time we went past moored boats, I was steering well clear to make sure we didn't get blown into them. Upon reaching Braunston Junction there was a huge collection of ducks spanning the canal with about 20 more about to jump in. I

wonder what they were doing? Perhaps they were playing a game of 'let's make the boaters go the wrong way!'



Ducks galore!

David and I usually share the driving, doing about half an hour each before swapping over. I was lucky this morning, as it was quite busy with boats and while he was on the tiller he had to reverse twice to avoid hitting an oncoming boat coming through a bridge. There's a generally agreed custom on the canals of, whoever is nearest to the bridge when you spot each other goes through first and the other makes room for them. It can induce a moment of panic for novice boaters, but your boats are only approaching each other at a combined speed of about 6 mph so there's plenty of time to slow down or go into reverse for a short while to bring your boat to a halt until you can carry on.

Back on the tiller myself, I saw we were about to pass between 2 moored boats on either side of the canal with their side hatches open and 2 people having a conversation across the canal. They stopped talking and watched me as I approached and then one of them said 'we're not worried. You're handling that boat beautifully – well done!' I was chuffed to bits!

In what seemed like no time at all we were back at the Hillmorton Locks where I noticed some lines of verse that had been etched into the lock gates. They didn't seem to make much sense though; one read 'This door makes depth' and another one read 'Climbs carefully down'.

What? It wasn't until much later that I discovered the words are lines of poetry carved into a series of lock gates to commemorate the creation of the Canal & River Trust in 2012.

They can only be found at 4 sets of locks in the country, and we hadn't

been to any of the others so no wonder we hadn't seen any before (the others are at Gargrave Lock on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, Huddersfield Narrow Canal Milnsbridge 9E on the Manchester & Pennine, and Farmers Bridge Lock 8 on the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal).



The lines at Hillmorton are part of a poem by Roy Fisher, which reads:

Working Water, held captive for a while
Then sluiced away to join the World's other Waters again.
Open, enter, and be lifted Safe
With words at your back
These doors make depth
Power to sink your boat bodily into the land
And let it go riding out
Unharmd.
Step at a time a river climbs carefully
Down through the Town.

There was a water point just after the locks so we stopped to top the boat up and then continued for about hour and a half before mooring just before Newbold Tunnel.

Once we were safely tied to the bank, David decided to check the weed hatch. This is something all ABC boat hirers are shown how to do by the marina before they set off and it's incredible what a variety of objects can be found wrapped around the propellor of a narrowboat. David found some bits of plastic and cable ties so untangled them and used the bilge pump to drain out a bit of water that had collected in the engine compartment. Again, this is nothing to worry about and is usually caused by rainwater getting through deck hatch edges and condensation.

We hadn't originally planned on stopping at Newbold on Avon but there were some 48 hour mooring spots right next to the village and the Barley Mow pub. In fact, it's a good place to stop – there's a water point, rubbish bins, a Co-Op grocery store, a fish and chip shop, and of course the pub. We ventured there in the hope of getting a meal and were warmly welcomed by Richard and Paula, who had only taken over running the hostelry 3 weeks before.



The Barley Mow at Newbold

The interior had a traditional friendly feel to it with a few locals at the bar and classic pub menu. I had a scrumptious Chilli Con Carne and a couple of glasses of wine, while David tucked into a burger accompanied by a couple of pints of Guinness. Then it was back to our cosy boat for a game of Scrabble and David won! (I'm blaming the wine for my poor performance).

Total cruising time today = 6.5 hours.

Day 5 - Another change of plan!

We woke up to some mild drizzle so decided to get going in the hope of staying ahead of the rain. No such luck, after a short while it began tipping it down, just as the forecast said. Luckily all ABC Boats come equipped with 2 full sets of waterproofs in a very generous size, so we both got toggged up pretty sharpish! We had originally planned to stop for water at a place called Stretton Stop. The 'stop' itself is a narrow part of the canal which used to have a pair of gates across it for stopping the flow of water from the canal if there was a breach of one of the large embankments. The water point is just after the old Toll House, which is now occupied by Rose Narrowboats. They apparently have a collection of historic photos and information about the history of the canals and I quite fancied a browse, but by now the rain was so torrential we decided to forgo a water stop and keep cruising. Perhaps another time....

We were heading to Tusses Bridge No. 4, where we planned to moor up and later visit the Old Crown Pub which had 5-star reviews for its food and was situated a short walk from the canal. Alas, we'd forgotten how close to the M6 motorway this stretch of canal was and we guessed that if we moored there overnight it would probably be very noisy.

Realistically the next mooring spot near facilities was the busy Hawkesbury Junction. There are 7-day visitor moorings there and we feared we wouldn't be able to find a space, but our luck was in, and we slotted into a gap not too far from the stop lock and the junction. It was still pouring with rain so after tying up the boat we went inside and put the central heating on for a bit to dry out our waterproofs.

It's a bit wet...



The Greyhound Inn at Hawkesbury is another historic location in the boating world. Built in the early 1800's, it takes pride of place next to the canal with views of the stop lock, the old engine house, the junction of the Oxford and Coventry canals and the 1837 cast-iron bridge, built by the Britannia Foundry in Derby and originally used to gauge boats.

The lock itself is widely known as 'Sutton Stop' after Richard and Henry Sutton who were lock keepers there from 1807 to 1876 (they must have started young!) We decided to go in for an afternoon pint to see what it was like.



The Greyhound at
Hawkesbury
Junction

Wow! Walking into the pub is like stepping into a long-ago world. The seating areas wind around the bars in a higgledy-piggledy fashion and the low ceilings, stone floor and open fire create a lovely cosy atmosphere. Everywhere you look there is canal and local paraphernalia, including enamel signs, old photographs, horse brasses, coat scuttles.....you get the picture. David was delighted to find they served Theakstons Mild Ale, so had a pint of that while we took a look at the menu to see what we might eat later on. It's traditional pub fare for hearty appetites and all home-made. Braised Beef Featherblade, award winning pork sausage & mash, Haddock with chunky chips, shortcrust pastry Steak & Ale Pie, and various burgers including Vegetarian Moving Mountains Burger on Gourmet Sourdough Bun with Lettuce & Tomato, Salted Fries and Hound Slaw. Crikey, I think I'd feel like a moving mountain after eating all that!

By the time we emerged from the pub the rain had stopped and there was a beautiful late-afternoon light over the canal. I took a few photos of the outside of the pub, the bridge and the stop lock.



The Stop Lock

Early evening light
over Hawkesbury
Junction moorings



We returned to the Greyhound for our evening meal and feasted on Chicken Kiev and a steak. It's nice to see a pub that's thriving when so many have closed in recent years.

Total cruising time today = 4 hours.

Day 6 - Familiar sights and new friends

Our last full day afloat (sob), and the sun was out! We got some water, went through the stop lock and enjoyed easy cruising back to Nuneaton. Passing the marina we carried on towards Atherstone and moored by the Anchor Inn at

Hartshill. We'd been to this pub before and it's right by the canal, yet only 20 minutes from Springwood Haven for returning the boat in the morning. This little stretch of the waterway is really pretty and goes past some attractive old Canal & River Trust buildings with a splendid clock tower and old dock.

When we got to the pub the canal was full of kayakers and canoeists who appeared to be on a training course. A couple of them unfortunately capsized but help was on hand and they seemed to be enjoying themselves!



Canoeing chaos!

Soon after we arrived we spotted another ABC Boat Hire boat moored up next to ours. We walked over to say hello and were greeted by Simon and Max, two brothers who were doing the Warwickshire Ring out of Alvechurch Marina. We had a good old chinwag about all things boating, which continued later in the pub – what a lovely way to end our holiday.

Total cruising time today = 4 hours.

The Anchor Inn



Day 7 - Time to say goodbye.....

After breakfasting on board it was a leisurely cruise back to Springwood Haven to say goodbye to our trusty boat. Can't wait till next year!

The
gorgeous
Oxford
Canal.



