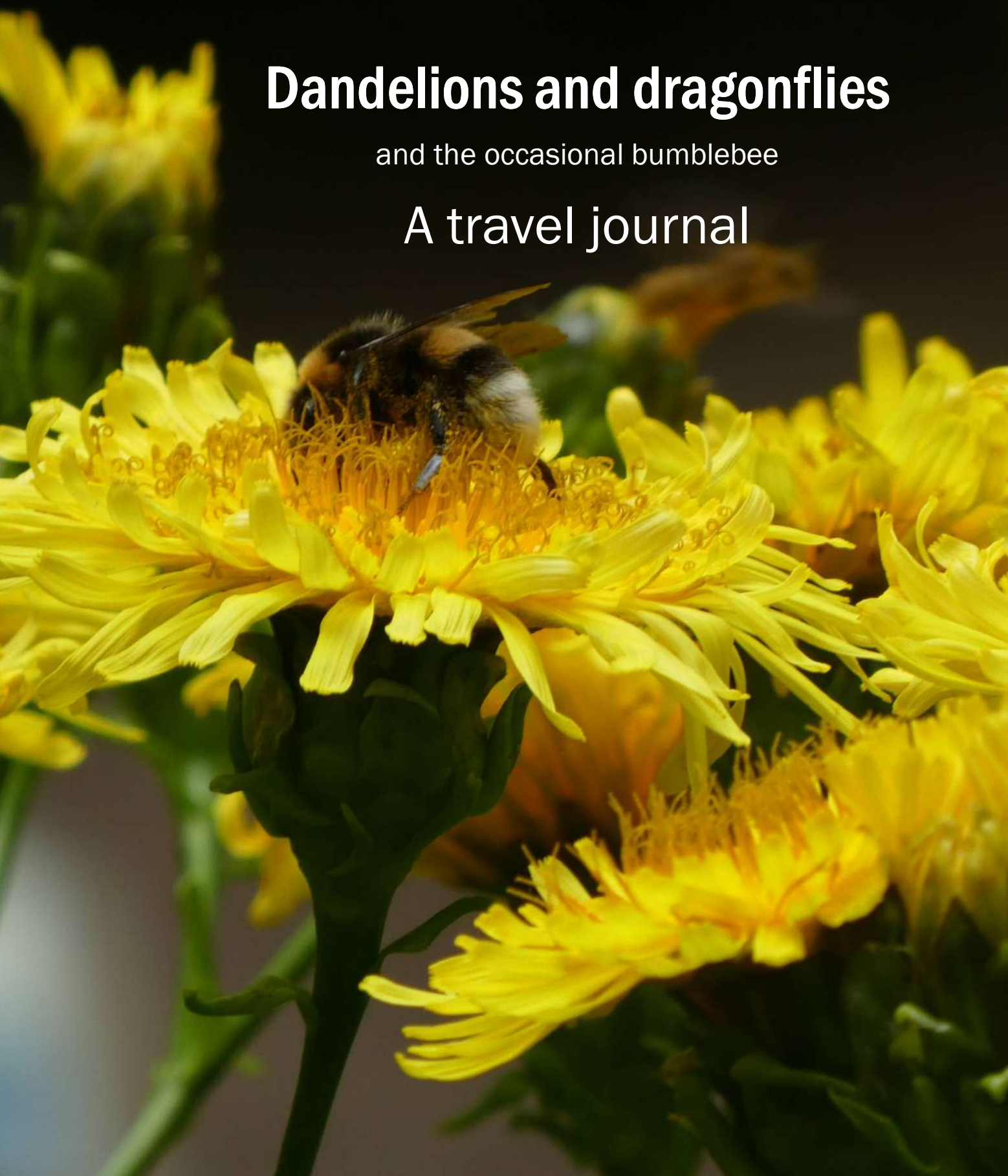


# Dandelions and dragonflies

and the occasional bumblebee

A travel journal





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Janet Rivers

Red Beak Publishing



Wellington ❖ New Zealand







## Dandelions and dragonflies

This is my blog from our trip to England and France in May and June 2017. The plan was to spend four weeks on a narrowboat on the canals of England, followed by a month in a camper car touring the UK. We had no set route for either part of the journey, other than on the canal boat we would probably do the Warwickshire loop, or perhaps, if we felt confident enough, go south from Leighton Buzzard to London. As it happened, we decided early on to be less ambitious. We opted to take our time on an out-and-back-trip from Leighton Buzzard. We started on the Grand Union, turned on to the northern arm of the Oxford at Braunston Junction, and then, at Hawkesbury Junction, branched on to the Coventry Canal. We then turned on to the Ashby Canal at Marston Junction, and headed for Market Bosworth—the end point of our outward journey. From there we retraced our path to home base at Leighton Buzzard.

As for the car camping, a few days into the canal trip, after seeing and hearing the level of traffic on the adjacent motorways and highways and realising how cramped a camper car would be after the spaciousness and comfort of the canal boat, we cancelled the car. Initially we had no set plans for where to go or how to get there. Or, more accurately, we had a million plans, but nothing we could agree on. Our itinerary evolved as we discussed possible destinations and modes of transport, and eventually we pinned down places and dates. We planned to spend the best part of a week in the Channel Islands followed by three weeks in Bretagne—one in each of Vannes, Quimper, and Roscoff. Then back to England for the start of the long haul home.

A note on the title: ‘Dandelions’ stands for the land-based bits, particularly gardens, while ‘dragonflies’ represents the watery, boaty parts of the trip. Theoretically, the first half of the trip would be the dragonfly weeks and the second four the dandelions, though in reality each week was a mixture of the two. Dandelions abounded throughout the trip; dragonflies proved a little harder to spot. Plus, though I didn’t find this out till quite late in the journey, what I had thought were dragonflies were, in fact, damselflies. Bumblebees, in case you are wondering about the cover photo, were a bonus, and easier to photograph.





# Part 1

## South East Waterways









## Wide-awake tired

Saturday, May 6

Currently about 1.30 a.m. Saturday morning as I'm writing this (about 12.30 p.m. Saturday your time). Sitting up in a warm and comfy bed, wide-awake tired after about four hours sleep, at the Swan Hotel in Leighton Buzzard. Here's a quick wrap of journey before I snuggle down for a few more hours' kip . . .

Both legs of the trip, Auckland to LA and LA to Heathrow, were comfortable, though not a lot of sleep was had. Once at Heathrow, it was a matter of finding our bus to Watford Junction and then the train to Leighton Buzzard. It was about 5.00 p.m. Friday (our time) when we finally reached the hotel and checked in. My tired brain won't calculate how many hours from the start of the journey in Wellington to arrival in LB, other than that there were a heck of a lot of them.

First impressions—how green the English landscape is in May, as seen from our hour-long bus ride to Watford. We've missed the tulips and the daffodils, but the hawthorn hedges are in full and glorious bloom, the fields are sharp green (if they are not yellow, presumably rapeseed flowering), and there are some magnificent deciduous trees (chestnuts in bloom) with that bright spring-green leaf growth. It's all so . . . English!

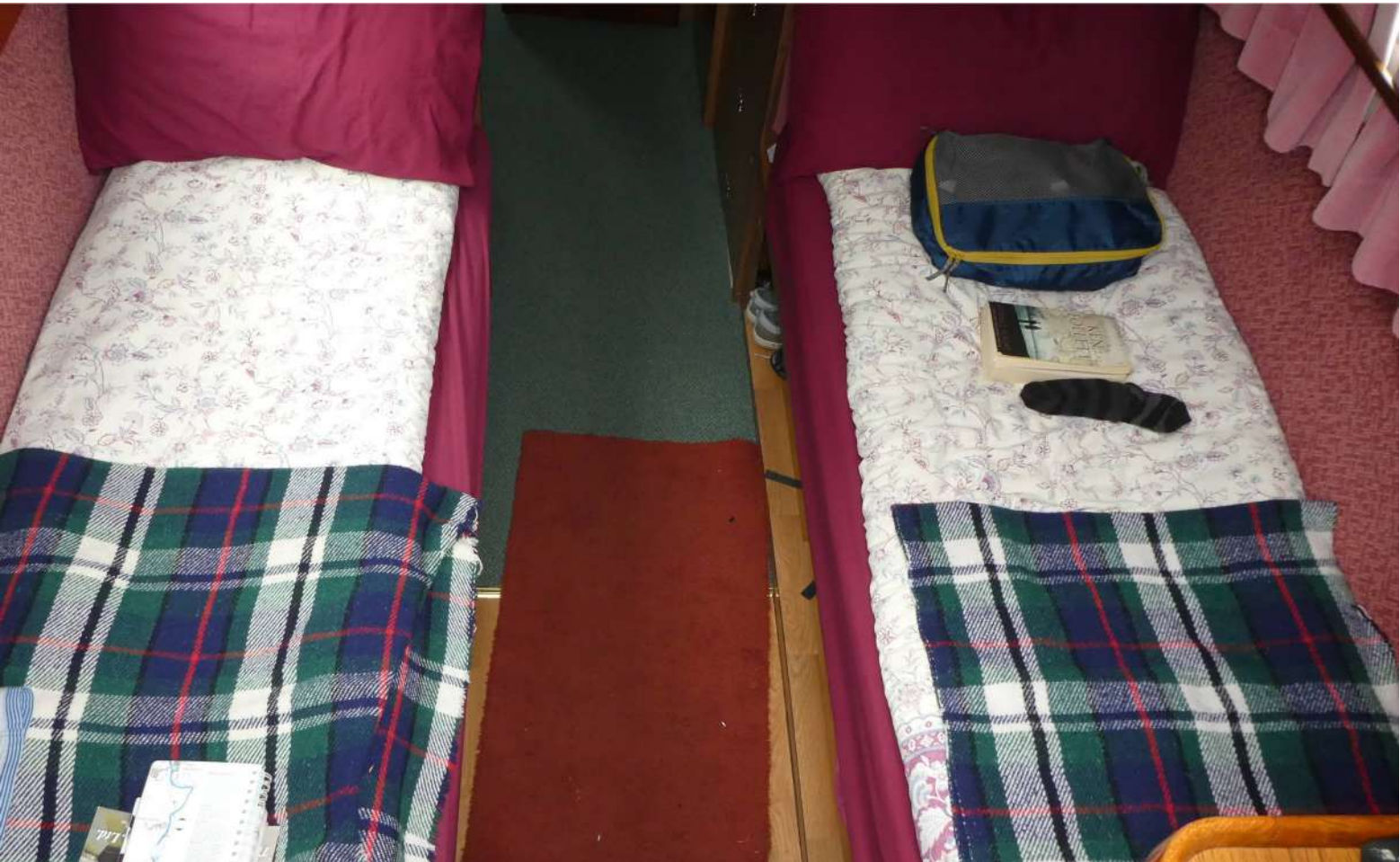
Once we'd checked into the hotel yesterday evening, we walked along a bridle path to the boat hire place, to check it out. The path was lined with cow parsley in full bloom, all white and lacy and frothy, with a few bluebells here and there, and the spring yellow of, I think, laburnum.

Green pastures dotted with yellow buttercups, and reed-lined banks. This photo (LEFT), near Braunston, was taken about three weeks into the trip.

The path to Wyvern Shipping, where we hired our boat *Tulip*, was lined with cow parsley in full bloom, all white and lacy and frothy, with a few bluebells here and there (BELOW).









## Getting to know *Tulip*

Saturday, May 6

Amazingly comfortable beds at the Swan, our hotel in Leighton Buzzard for our first night in England. No trouble falling asleep. Woke once for about half an hour (the first blog post), then back to sleep till 7.00 a.m.

Breakfast at the Swan was a somewhat bizarre, parallel universe experience, in part, no doubt, because of our jetlagged state. The meal was good, English-breakfast style, well cooked, well presented, and not greasy. The pub was doing a roaring trade at 10 in the morning, with both drinkers and breakfasters. As far as I could tell from the surround conversation, many of those at breakfast were locals, mostly mums with kids. It was impossible not to overhear conversations. I wouldn't call it eavesdropping as there was no intent on our part to hear what was being said. Such was the volume that we had no choice but to listen along.

I liked Leighton Buzzard. It had a nice vibe. I didn't get to see much of it as, while L went out and about walking first thing, I opted to snooze on. It doesn't seem to be a big town but it was certainly busy, with a Saturday market that was attracting the crowds. We bought a few books for the trip from the second-hand bookstall outside the pub. The small boy in the photo shyly agreed to be in the photo that his dad took for us when L had trouble getting his camera to work on the self-timer.

When we'd checked out, we walked the 20 minutes or so to the boatyard, left our stuff on board *Tulip*, our home for the next month, and backtracked to Tesco's for provisions. Back on *Tulip*, we had our briefing from instructor Alex and a trial run through the first lock, the Leighton Lock (#27), with me on the helm. Yikes. It's going to take a bit of practice to get used to going through locks. After that, Alex hopped off and we were on to Soulbury, and its three locks combined (#24–26), which looked a bit tricky and had my anxiety levels high. In the end we didn't go through as a guy in a fibreglass motorboat was blocking the entrance. Turned out he was drunk as, and a friend eventually towed his boat out of the way. We'd decided to tie up for the night anyway, but we helped two boats through the three-lock series. I'm not looking forward to going through the locks myself.







## First full day

Sunday, May 7

If anyone tells you narrowboating is a relaxing holiday, don't believe a word of it. An enjoyable and leisurely way to travel, yes, but not relaxing. At least not if you are on the helm. It requires constant vigilance to keep to the centre of the canal, unless of course there is an oncoming boat, in which case you move to the right. Sounds simple enough, but it can be tricky if the canal is narrow and boats are parked up on one side. Passing under some of the narrow bridge archways can be a trial as well. And as for entering locks, well for me at least it's a matter of positioning by touch. Or as the woman in the other boat who went into the lock with us this morning said to me, 'Just think of it as a contact sport'. They were in a rented boat from the same company as *Tulip*.

Our second-night mooring (LEFT) at Black Horse Bridge, near the Egg, the floating structure shown on George Clarke's *Amazing Spaces* in 2013.

The Soulbury locks (LEFT, BELOW). For me, entering the locks was a matter of positioning by touch. I took *Tulip* through the first of the three locks but worked the locks for the second two.

We managed a good walk this morning, along the towpath, branching away from the canal through the countryside, and back to the boat (BELOW).

That set of three locks at Soulbury this morning was a bit of a challenge, but we successfully negotiated our way through, with help and guidance from the boat going through with us. All the locks on the Grand Union Canal are double locks so usually you go through with another boat.

After Soulbury, we went through a couple of other locks (#23 Stoke Hammond and #22 Fenny Stratford) in the company of a different boat, a narrowboat belonging to a couple of liveaboards, who also helpfully talked us through the process. I worked the locks for the latter of these two. I think I prefer this to driving the boat into and out of the locks. Both are stressful, though everyone tells me that it will only take a couple of days to get used to the process.







It was such a long day today that I'm having trouble remembering everything (despite the meagre amount of water travelled). From Soulbury we went through Fenny Stratford, Bletchley, Milton Keynes—which took forever to pass through—and ended mooring for the night by Black Horse Bridge (Bridge 76), which is between Great Linford and New Bradwell. It's not the best mooring but we needed to park up to make it to the nearby supermarket before it shut at four. We made it fine, with ten minutes to spare. And we do have the Egg moored beside us—you may have seen it on George Clark's *Amazing Spaces*. The owner had a constant stream of people clustered around it until he closed shop, as it were, for the day, locked up and went home to, presumably, more comfortable and spacious living arrangements.

It was very strange chugging along a canal that meandered through residential property. It was all so very familiar, somehow. We wouldn't have been surprised if Kirsty and Phil had popped into view with potential homebuyers in tow. We were also surprised at the number of anglers lining the canal, most with expensive looking kit with all the bells and whistles. To us it seemed a strange way to spend one's Sunday, catching fish and throwing them back, but I guess it is a bit like narrowboating, more about the journey than the destination.

Our plan is to get some walking in each morning and again each evening. We managed a good walk this morning, along the towpath, along another walking path for a while, and back to the boat. This evening we are counting our trip to and from the supermarket as our evening walk. It will be another early night, trying to overcome the jetlag. At least we've had decent sleeps each night so far, albeit with a short waking period in the middle of the night. But it doesn't seem enough to overcome this deep jetlagged tiredness.

Weather note: Initially a cold wind, requiring beanie and gloves and warm layers while on the tiller. But mid-morning, sun out and warming up. Sun stayed out all day and it got very warm in the afternoon. Lovely spring day.

Parked up mid-Wolverton (LEFT, TOP) to find a Tescos and a coffee .

Approaching the Iron Trunk Aqueduct (LEFT) just before Cosgrove.







## Connectivity

Monday, May 8

We woke to the dawn chorus this morning at our mooring at Black Horse Bridge, and thought, yay, jetlag over. Tonight, as I write this at our Cosgrove mooring, I'm not so sure. Tiredness has well and truly set in so this may end up more jotted notes than coherent sentences.

As with yesterday we didn't make much progress today mileage wise, at least not with the boat. We did make some reverse progress by heading back to Milton Keynes by bus. You need winding holes to turn narrowboats around and there were no winding holes at Wolverton where we were parked up by mid-morning. The trip to MK was to find a solution to the lack of wi-fi connectivity—nothing to be had in Wolverton. And we found the solution in the form of a wi-fi dongle. Yay. I'm so happy because it works, which I didn't really expect it to.

In Wolverton, we were able to moor right in the middle of the town, or at least 10 minutes walk from the town centre, in front of new apartment blocks. We thought we'd struck lucky for wi-fi when we spied the Reading Room on the opposite bank. We remembered the excellent free wi-fi we used at the Vancouver library in 2015, and thought maybe this Reading Room would be part of the local library and have free wi-fi. But no, the Reading Room was a smart office of some arty sort, by the look of it—maybe designers, or architects. Not sure, but we liked the architecture of the building. Apparently we weren't the only ones to mistake it for part of the town library.

We did get free wi-fi from the coffee shop in Tesco's for the price of a bad double shot espresso and a delicious chocolate pastry thing, plus, from the helpful man in the Vodafone shop next door, info about where to go in MK to solve our wi-fi issue. When we returned to the boat, we cast off and headed for Cosgrove and parked for the night on a pretty stretch of the canal which is lined with narrowboats, permanents on one side and short term stayers on the other. No locks today. We did go over a couple of aqueducts, though. Our mooring for the night at Cosgrove is just past the second one, the Iron Trunk Aqueduct.

Bridge 65 at Cosgrove, built in the Gothic style of dressed limestone (LEFT, TOP).

Haybales amid acid yellow fields between Bridge 65 and Bridge 62 (LEFT).



## Cast adrift

Tuesday, May 9

Woke at our Cosgrove mooring at 4.00 a.m. this morning to find we were lying cross-ways across the canal. Some prankster of mischievous or evil intent had hopped aboard, untied one end of our bow line and detached it from the pin, and then stole or otherwise disposed of the pin, leaving the rope sunk in the canal. Result: our bow drifted out across the canal. No damage caused and no great drama. I had the problem sorted in no time. But slightly unsettling all the same.

So that was Cosgrove. We also took on water there before going through the lock—I did the lock gates this time with the help of a genial, chatty fellow, a liveaboard. From there to Yardley Gobion and a marine shop to buy a replacement pin for the stolen one, and on to our overnight mooring at the beginning of the seven locks, near Stoke Bruerne. We tied up early, about 1.30 p.m., though we still managed about five hours cruising, given our 8.00 a.m. start.

Lots of incidental conversations along the way, with other bargees (owners and renters) and people walking the towpath, often with dogs. Lots of the canal boats have dogs, and some also have cats—though that’s less frequent, and the cats don’t look as happy as the dogs. The towpaths are also popular for dog walking; luckily most people are good about using the plastic bags that are provided free at the dog poop stations at various points along the way. Also lots of picturesque countryside along the way. Of course I took way too many photos.

As we’d decided not to do the seven locks today, we walked the 25 minutes to Stoke Bruerne, where we had a beer, and then on for another 10 minutes to the beginning of the Blisworth Tunnel (the next challenge after the seven locks). Then back to the boat, tea, and now we are writing up our blogs for the day. It’s been a lovely evening, with the sun finally poking through the clouds.

Putting my helming skills into practice en route from Cosgrove to Stoke Bruerne (LEFT, TOP).

A touch of frost starts the day at Stoke Bruerne (LEFT).





## Did we make the evening news?

Wednesday, May 10

We woke this morning at our mooring near Stoke Bruerne to a frost, which promised a sunny day—and it delivered. Absolute stunner of a day. It was also a big day for us, with the seven locks as a starter. It was a nerve-racking time, for me, for each and every one. We checked with other boats moored behind us but none was going through so we pushed on by ourselves. There were a number of barges going through from the other end, so as well as the stress of getting into the lock without hitting the gate, there was the stress of getting out the other end and not hitting the boat waiting to enter. Lots of advice freely given, most of it kindly and generously. The nicest was from a sole woman in a small boat who was a permanent liveaboard. She cruised from spring to autumn and wintered over in a marina. She was lovely, told me not to worry, it was a steel boat and would withstand any knocks. Once she was through, she tied up, walked back, and chatted as I was waiting for the lock to fill and the gate to open. Ninety-nine point nine per cent of the bargees we've met have been helpful and generous, but this woman was especially so.

Apart from the fine art of getting in and out of a lock, there's also the business of keeping the boat steady when you are in. There's the cill mark that you must not go past or you risk having the bow caught as the water recedes. You also have to make sure you don't drift back and have the stern bump the gate or get stuck on it. It is an anxious time for me holding the boat steady, not too far forward, not too far back, while I'm waiting for the lock to fill and the gate to open so I can move on through.

But we got through all seven okay. The last was perhaps the most stressful because there was an ITV film crew filming a news item about the Canal and Rivers Trust. I asked the cameraman as he filmed my waggling entry to the lock whether I'd get paid handsomely for making a fool of myself. Apparently it was to be on the news this evening but we don't know if it was, as we opted to go out for a pub tea. In the slim chance the item did include us, I think it's better I don't know.

But before we got to relax over tea, we had to negotiate our first tunnel. This is the Blisworth Tunnel, England's longest self-navigable canal tunnel in regular use, at a bit over 2,800 metres long. That's a mighty long way in the dark when the tunnel is 4.57 metres wide and a narrowboat is about 2

metres wide and you have to pass boats coming from the other direction (about four, in our case).

Once through the tunnel we chugged on to Bugbrooke, which, despite its name, is one of those quintessentially picturesque English villages with buildings of honey-coloured stone. We walked from the canal to the village along a public path that made its way through a field of steers, past the church (beautiful in the late afternoon sun), found the one village shop and bought a few provisions. After taking them back to the boat, we retraced our steps to the Five Bells pub and a very good meal. This pub was recommended to us by a local who stopped and chatted as he was making his way home, with wheelbarrow and strimmer, from his allotment on the other side of the canal. I love allotments so before we went for tea, I had a peek: they're well ordered and well maintained.

The Stoke Bruerne pump house by one of the seven Stoke Bruerne locks (BELOW).

All in all, a satisfying day.



## Staying put

Thursday, May 11

Something of a rest day today. We are having another night at our mooring in Bugbrooke, after having spent a fair portion of the day in Northampton. Met Bramble, a lovely, friendly lurcher, and her owners, a family who lives aboard their boat at Bugbrooke. Given their wheelbarrow, I thought they were off to the allotments, but no, it turns out wheelbarrows are the mode of choice for liveaboards for carrying goods, and sometimes children, along the towpath to and from the boat. Bramble is my No. 1 favourite dog of the trip so far.

We caught the 9.30 a.m. bus from Bugbrooke to Northampton, which took us through picture postcard rural and village landscapes. Sitting up the back of the bus gives a good view across the landscape and of people's gardens, some of which were amazing. I sometimes think that these small-scale personal gardens are more inspirational for gardeners of my (lack of) ability than all the large for-public-display gardens put together.

We covered a bit of ground in Northampton, seeking a computer shop for L's computer problem and a camera shop to get my camera lens checked and cleaned (I'd got some gunk on it when we went through the tunnel). We enlisted the help of the friendly staff at Debenhams to get directions, which turned out to be the first of several encounters with helpful people who directed us to where we needed to go. We ended up doing a lot of walking but both computer and camera problems were satisfactorily resolved. So back on the bus for the return journey and a relaxing rest of the afternoon on the boat.

Officially this is the dragonfly part of the blog: the water bit. But sadly I've not seen any dragonflies apart from one on a plaque, above which a notice said: 'No mooring here at all times. Swans require access under this pass'.





## Short and sweet

Friday, May 12

Have been having wi-fi connectivity problems but finally got on the blog. Because it's late and because I'm tired (the captain is already snoring—the crew has been left to do the writing up), this is going to be a short log of the water covered today.

Somewhat later start than usual this morning, in part because it was raining, in part because . . . well, just because we felt like starting later. By the time we were under way, the rain had more or less stopped. Our route took us through Nether Heyford, where there were lots of permanent moorings, some with cultivated gardens and seating areas on the verge between canal and fence. Some of these gardens are lovely—roses, perennials, seats, the works. It's difficult to get photos as one doesn't want to intrude. Likewise later on, the gardens of the lock-side cottages, presumably originally lock-keepers' cottages. The wisteria, the irises, the roses. . . No chance of photos of those, I was too busy with the boat. But they were picture postcard perfect. We stopped at Stowe Hill to take on water. The rain had stopped by this time but the cloud was low and threatening more rain. The canal on our route today is close to the rail line and Virgin trains whirled their way through regularly. At parts of the journey, we had the railway on one side and the motorway on the other.

The next stop was a lunch stop at Weedon Bec. By the time we'd finished, it was raining again, so we read a bit, wrote a bit, had a kip, had a cuppa, and finally got going again when the rain had stopped. Good job I was rested, as the next bit was seven full-on locks, the Buckby Locks. I drove and L did the locks. It was less stressful than yesterday, but boy was I pleased when we were through the last one. Weather-wise, the day turned out okay in the late afternoon and evening. We passed Norton Junction, where the Leicester section of the canal branches off, continuing on the Grand Union to our mooring for the night near Welton Wharf. Tomorrow is another tunnel which takes us through to Braunston. The Braunston Tunnel is not as long as the Blisworth, but at nearly 1,900 metres, long enough. And now I've got to catch some zeds.



## Slow travel at its best

Saturday, May 13

So I know we've come 42 miles at least, because the first Braunston milestone I photographed, near the start of the trip, was the 42-mile one. And now here we are in Braunston. I can't remember how far out of Leighton Buzzard we were when I took that first photo so maybe we've covered a smidgeon more than 42 miles. Or not. Slow travel at its best.

And yes, another short day today, although a productive one—we finally found a laundry and so are now washed (though not pressed) and ready to face the world.

First up today after we left last night's mooring was the Braunston Tunnel, L at the helm and doing a good job. We met only the one oncoming boat, and that not far from the exit. Out of the tunnel and straight into the first of the six Braunston Locks. We struck it lucky. Another boat was waiting to go through so we teamed up. The skipper was travelling solo so L held the line to his boat in the locks while he (other skipper) and I worked the locks. It was great to have someone to guide me through the process and I found the locks less stressful than being at the helm. We were lucky, also, in that there were quite a few boats coming through from the other end which meant they left some gates open for us to drive straight in, and likewise we left some open for them.

We tied up at Braunston and the rest of the day was spent doing housework (laundry, washing the bird poop from the boat—you know, all those things we boat-proud boaties do), and going for a walk around the village. Braunston is another village with amazing stone block buildings, walls with flowers and climbers growing over and on them, a church, bridges, and green fields with public paths cutting across and black-faced sheep grazing. I love it. I never get tired of this landscape. Or of photographing it.

Tomorrow we turn right at Braunston Junction on to the Oxford Canal (northern arm) and head for Rugby. No tunnels, but three paired locks. They are narrow locks, so one boat at a time.

RIGHT: Double locking through the Braunston locks with John, the captain of the *Aylesbury*.











## Leaving the Grand Union Canal

Sunday, May 14

A slight change of routine today. We had our siesta before lunch. What can I say? The sun was streaming in the windows, demanding a rest for a read which turned into a zizz. By the time the siesta and lunch were over, we thought we may as well stay put for the night where we'd moored, just before the Hillmorton Locks, and leave the locks till the morning. Incidentally, these are paired locks which doesn't mean three sets of two (or six in total) as I'd thought, but three lots of two single locks side by side. This pleases me. Three is better than six any day.

Today hasn't all been idleness, though. This morning we had left our mooring at Braunston about 8.30-ish and doddled along quietly, taking in the sunshine, enjoying the landscape, talking to dogs and their owners. I also did a hop-off, hop-on walk for about a three-bridge period.

Not long after Braunston is the Braunston Junction where the Grand Union becomes the Oxford Canal and, if you want, you can make a sharp left and head for Oxford. We didn't. Instead we turned right on to the northern arm of the Oxford Canal. The canal here is flat and meandering (no locks), and the fields often go right to the water's edge, which has resulted in some significant degradation of the banks by animals. County-wise, it's Northamptonshire on one side and Warwickshire on the other. We passed the Willoughby Wharf and Barby Moorings and tied up just before the Hillmorton Locks.

We finished the day with a walk to the pub—an interesting bar, small, rather like someone's living room, with the walls lined with canal memorabilia, including photos of the last few years of commercial carrying.

Old tin shed at Braunston (LEFT, TOP).

Braunston Junction (LEFT). We turned right on to the northern arm of the Oxford Canal, towards Rugby. Veering left, under the bridge, would have taken us to Oxford.



## Hillmorton Locks to Rugby

Monday, May 15

We saw Kieran Reid today. Not in person, of course. He'll be doing his thing to help the Crusaders win the Super-however-many-teams Rugby. No, he was on a street banner, in full flight haka, advertising the Rugby's Rugby Hall of Fame. We didn't bother going to to see it. But nice to see a touch of Kiwi on the banner.

The day started with the three locks at Hillmorton, which I managed without getting all stressed out. I think I'm getting the hang of it. There was a volunteer lock-keeper on duty who helped, plus I had to get L to turn one of the paddles, which was so stiff even he had trouble opening it. We got chatting with the volunteer and turns out he's heading for New Zealand soon, to follow the Lion's tour. We'll have to see if we can find a sports pub to watch the tests.

We didn't make much headway today as it was more of a boat housekeeping day—a pump-out at Clifton Cruisers at Bridge No. 66, the Clifton Bridge, and a bit further on, a top-up of the water tank. We pulled over at lunchtime by a Barley Mow pub at Newbold on Avon and walked about 45 minutes into Rugby to get more wi-fi from the 3Shop and a few other provisions. Good to have a nosey into people's front gardens along the way. Quite a few peonies in flower, as well as those giant purple globe alliums which are so eye-catching en masse. There was a wonderful planting of them at a roundabout but there was so much traffic, it was impossible to get a photo.

We caught the bus back to the Newbold shops and I was just in time to get a photo of a glorious planting of wallflowers before the gardeners pulled them out in readiness for the summer planting. I'm sure the next display will be every bit as good as those wallflowers.

We pushed on through Newbold Tunnel (240 metres, short compared with the previous two; we could see the light at the end as we entered) and moored for the night shortly after.

A section of the *Screen of Saints and Angels*, engraved by John Hutton (RIGHT, TOP) and St Michael's Victory over the Devil, by Jacob Epstein (RIGHT) at the new Coventry Cathedral.



## To Coventry and back

Tuesday, May 16



Once we had everything ship-shape, apart from the occasional hawthorn petal, we chugged along slowly from Newbold to our overnight mooring at Hawkesbury Junction. No locks. The canal continued to wind through green fields, interspersed with narrow sections of tree-lined banks. We tied up some time early afternoon and shared a pie and chips for a late lunch, which L bought as a takeaway from the local pub, the Greyhound. The pie looked lovely. It would need to, at £12. L says it was tasty. I was more interested in the chips. Hawkesbury Junction is where the Oxford Canal ends at Coventry Canal, one arm of which heads to Coventry and the other towards Marston Junction and the Ashby Canal (our direction).

The afternoon was spent in nearby Coventry, a bus ride of about 30 minutes. We could have taken the boat up to Coventry but were advised the Coventry Arm was a boring up-and-back trip, so we opted for the bus instead. We visited the new Coventry Cathedral. Unfortunately we were too late to see inside, which, from photos, looks stunning. But the outside was impressive enough. The cathedral was built in the fifties to replace the one bombed in WWII, the shell of which remains alongside, a sombre reminder of the devastation caused by the war. The new cathedral has a large engraved glass window known as *The Screen of Saints and Angels*, and on the adjacent side there is a sculpture called *St Michael's Victory Over the Devil*. I'm sorry we were too late to see the interior. Another instance of having a good reason to come back.



By the by, there were some good examples of mass planting in some of the public gardens—the lime green euphorbia and the purple wallflowers particularly caught my eye.

Tomorrow we'll push on through the small lock at Hawkesbury Junction, carrying on along the main Coventry Canal to the Marston Junction, where we turn right to go up the Ashby-de-la-Zouch canal. We're heading for Bosworth Field.

We see lots of dogs on the canal. Many are on boats, either and the towpaths are also popular with locals for walking their dogs.











## Good weather for ducks

Wednesday, May 17

Persistent all-day rain today, not heavy, but wetting enough when standing at the helm, and on the cold side after a while. Even though he was toggled up in his wet weather gear, the captain looked a bit bedraggled at times. But happy. I was mostly inside, luck of the draw. I was on coffee duty. Well someone had to do it. I still managed to get my two pairs of shoes wet and two raincoats wet (mine and the one provided by Wyvern Shipping) from doing the one lock of the day, my tiller duties from time to time, and the casting off and tying up routines. Just by the by, the captain did a nifty job of a bit of backwards this morning to get out of a Wrong-Way Roger moment, an inadvertent wrong turn at Hawkesbury Junction. We had to reverse back quite a way to get enough width in which to turn and head in our chosen direction for the day—to Marston Junction rather than Coventry. Reversing these boats isn't easy.

We probably wouldn't have bothered moving on from Hawkesbury Junction today except we needed to get refill gas bottles, which we had all done and dusted by about 1.30 p.m. at a marina at Hinkley on the Ashby Canal, where we stayed tied up for the rest of the day, and which is our mooring for the night. One hopeful bargee travelling in the opposite direction said it would be better weather tomorrow. Don't know. Haven't looked at the forecast. But the rain certainly curtailed photographic activities today, which not a bad thing. I've way too many photos already, though I'm sorry I messed up getting one of some ducklings by getting the exposure wrong. They looked so cute all nestled up and jostling each other on the bank right by our boat; even they found it all a bit cold for comfort.

I wish now I'd had the room, and the foresight, to pack Rummikub. On days like this it would be perfect, plus I'd be honing my skills in readiness for combat with arch-competitor Jq when I get back home.

PREVIOUS PAGES: A cathedral-like canopy of trees lining the Oxford Canal, and green pasture and hedgerows lining the Oxford Canal between Newbold and Hawkesbury Junction (PAGE 30).

The Britannia Foundry bridge at Hawkesbury Junction (where we mistakenly turned left instead of right), and the Exhall Basin footbridge, Bridge 11A, with the swan sculptures, also at Hawkesbury Junction (PAGE 31).

THESE PAGES: We happened upon the perfect mooring at Market Bosworth: A mooring with a garden.



## A boat and a garden

Thursday, May 18

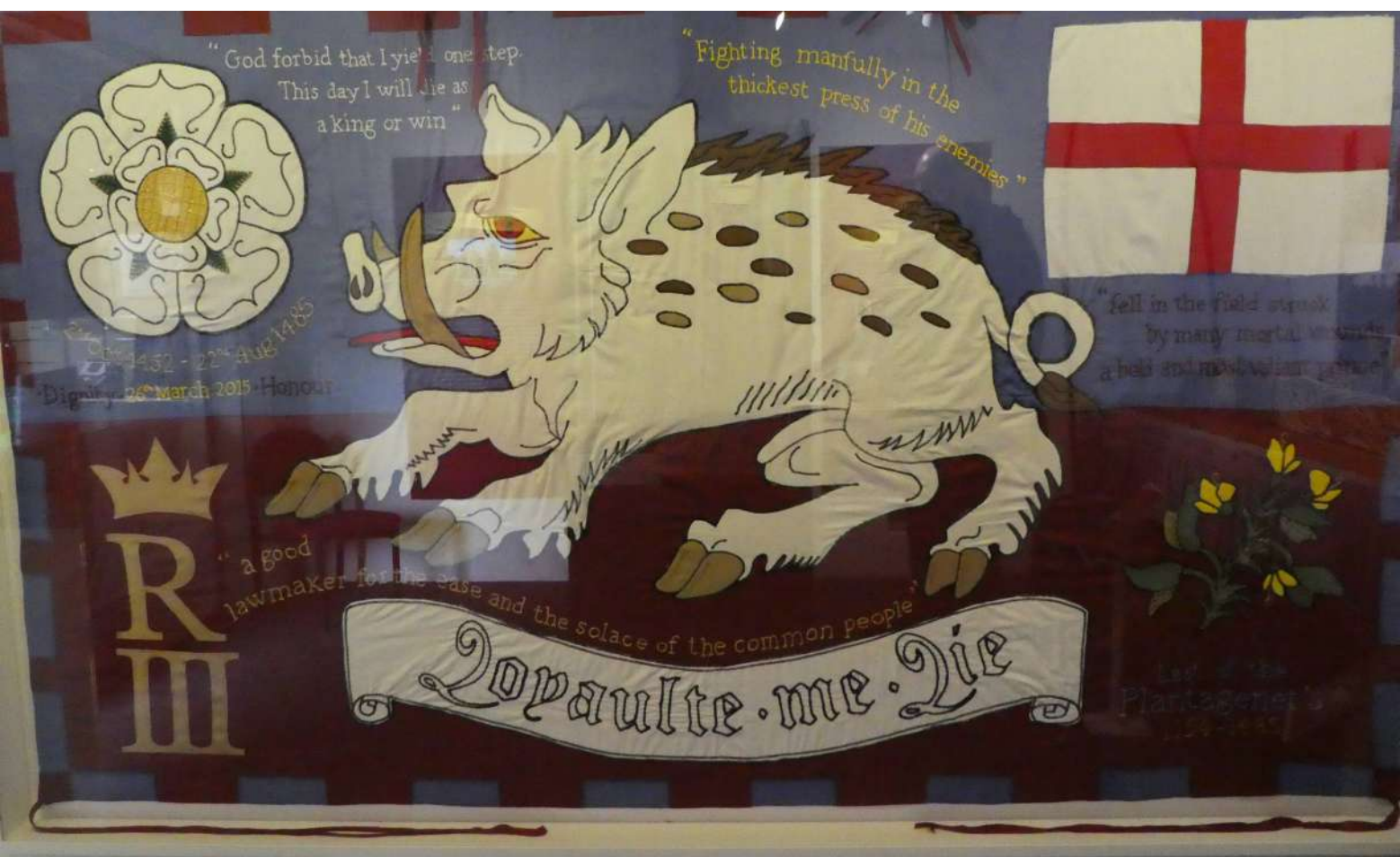
Yay, today I discovered we can have a boat and a garden. Only temporarily, you understand. But a garden, of sorts, nonetheless.

We are moored for the night at Market Bosworth after a super sunny day's travel from Hinckley along one of the best bits of canal we've been on yet. So it was the icing on the cake, so to speak, to find a mooring with garden between the towpath and the hedge.

It's a bit on the wild side, looks after itself (which is probably intended), but has clearly had some planting done by someone sometime—a peony, perennial cornflowers, aquilegias in blue and in purple, a cranesbill geranium, bluebells (or possibly harebells), hawthorn hedging as a backdrop, the ubiquitous cow parsley and Queen Anne's lace (or is it Bishop's flower, *ammi majus*) laced through with grasses and other weed plants. Dandelions even.









## A bit of history

Friday, May 19

The memorial sundial at the battle site of Bosworth Field (LEFT).

A handmade banner displayed on the route of the cortège on 22 March 2015 to the battlefield area before the re-interment of Richard III at Leicester Cathedral (LEFT, BELOW).

The landscape as it may have looked in 1485 and as it looks today. (BELOW).

Today was the half-way point in our month on the boat and so time to start retracing our steps to ensure we have time to get back. So we left Market Bosworth this morning and tied up for lunch at the cafe at Sutton Cheney Wharf. And even though it was still raining, we decided to make the walk through Ambion Wood to the Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre and Bosworth Field, or as close as you can get to the battle site where King Richard III was killed on 22 August 1485 in the battle against the rebel army of Henry Tudor. Glad we did. Most interesting.

We are moored for the night somewhere on the Ashby.









## Backing up

Saturday, May 20

I'm not referring to L's nautical ability at reversing; rather, I'm backing up to last Thursday to tell you a bit more about Market Bosworth. It was a town I liked, even though we didn't see much of it, apart from a bit of a walk around and a short stop at the Olde Red Lion pub for a beer where I met an enormous dog, Bruno. As an aside, it still comes as a surprise to find dogs in pubs and tearooms.

Bosworth Hall was the first stately home we've seen on our canal journey. It was built in the late seventeenth century by the Dixie family, whose connections to the area date back to the twelfth century and who also, we note, gave their name to Market Bosworth's grammar school. The Dixie family apparently ran into money troubles (gambling) and the place was sold in the 1880s. Since then it's had a few owners, been a hospital, and is currently a conference and spa hotel.

Of course Market Bosworth had more than a country seat. There were houses of varying ages and construction (including many new or newish builds that looked expensive, and a thatched cottage with an amazing garden), a steam train that ran the Bosworth Battlefield Line (not operating the day we were there), a couple of pubs, some shops, handsome iron gates, a mighty fine beech hedge, and surrounding fields and grassy verges with lots of dandelions and buttercups.

This morning we left the Ashby Canal at Marston Junction to rejoin the Coventry Canal, but instead of turning left (our way home), we turned right for a short diversion to Nuneaton, our closest option for refuelling and also for some provisions. The larder was running a bit low. We liked Nuneaton. It was market day and we bought a couple of mini fruit cakes for a pound. Delicious. Back on the boat, we found a winding hole, turned round, and chugged back to our mooring for that night, just past Marston Junction. It's tricky to keep track of the route details given our main milestones are bridge numbers rather than towns and villages.

Market Boswell: a thatched cottage with its quirky garden (LEFT, TOP), and a street of painted brick terrace houses with container gardens (LEFT).



## Heading back to base

Sunday, May 21

Today we topped up the water at Hawkesbury Junction, which is a particularly tricky junction to negotiate. I'm pleased we are not one of the longer 70-foot boats. After the water tap, there's a narrow passage where a lock used to be that leads into a basin for a sharp turn left under the bridge and immediately another sharp turn left into the stop lock—a 180 degree turn in all, which L executed with aplomb and to applause from the pubside onlookers drinking their Sunday morning lattes. So we're back on the Oxford Canal and retracing our path.

Tonight we are moored more or less in the same spot we used on the way up—Newbold on Avon near the Barley Mow pub, where we had a beer and watched the awarding of the medals for the London Sevens (the All Blacks didn't feature, but Scotland won the gold and were very happy.)

We were happy to see, on the way back on the Ashby, a moorhen sitting on a nest we'd seen on the way up and thought was abandoned. The nest was built on a forked branch that was sticking out into the water and had two eggs in it. We thought they'd been abandoned, but no, seems not. Mother moorhen sat calmly on the nest as we passed, untroubled by the slight turbulence caused by the boat. Unfortunately I didn't have my camera to hand to take a pic of the hen back on the nest.

Today I also met a super cute dog who just happens to be called Bramble. So now I have two favourites from the trip so far, both called Bramble. Very different dogs, both lovely. Bramble No. 2 is an older dog, I think about 16 years—a rescue dog, found abandoned in a car park about ten years ago. At least there was a good outcome. Bramble No. 2 is also deaf and has cataracts, hence being taken for a walk in the buggy. There are lots of other dogs that have caught my eye—thanks to all the owners for stopping and chatting and agreeing to photos. Of course, lovely though they are, none of the dogs is a match for G and J's dog Stella, back home.



Through the narrow former lock at Hawkesbury Junction (RIGHT) and then a sharp turn left under the bridge (RIGHT, BELOW) followed by another sharp turn left on to the Oxford Canal.

Bramble No. 2, the rescue dog who was found abandoned in a car park (BELOW).









## From bridge to bridge

Monday, May 22

There can be few walks as pleasant as the one we've just done along the towpath, Bridge 81 to Bridge 86, on a mild and calm evening in English springtime. Yes that's right, calm. No wind. Not a puff. Not a zephyr. So not-Wellington. What a pleasure to have an evening's walk without a raincoat or jacket. The only problem was the occasional rabbit hole to trip the inattentive walker, or the small flying insects that come in swarms every so often. Yes it may be raining tomorrow (though from the faint red in the sky, it doesn't seem likely), but if it does, it can't take away the cracker of a day we had today.

I may have already mentioned how, at the moment, our lives are measured not by coffee spoons but by bridges. Tonight we are moored near Bridge 81, which seems to be in the middle of nowhere. Even the bridges here go nowhere. They've been closed off, with fields where once were lanes. However, there are about eight or nine other boats moored here so it is clearly a recognised mooring spot.

We started the day at about Bridge 50, just after the Newbold Tunnel (the very short one where you can see the light at the end of tunnel before you begin), stopped at Bridge 66, Clifton Arm, and spent a pleasant late morning and early afternoon outside the café in the sun while we got our washing done, through the Hillmorton Locks, and finished the day at Bridge 81. We have Northamptonshire on one side and Warwickshire on the other. We're not far from Braunston.





## On the Grand Union again

Tuesday, May 23

Early start this morning (for us), and arrived at Braunston about 9.00-ish. We are staying here for the night and maybe one more—depends how we feel in the morning. We don't want to linger too long and get caught up with the boats heading for the Crick Boat Show this coming Bank Holiday weekend. Braunston Junction is where we leave the Oxford Canal and move back on to the Grand Union.

Braunston is a lovely village. We moored here on the way up. Today we had a quiet day, coffee (cafetière-style, not so bad) and breakfast at the barge cafe, a bit of shopping in town at the local shop and the butcher-come-greengrocer, plus we bought a replacement map at the marina shop for the one we lost overboard. I liked the butcher's shop, looking forward to trying the lamb chops. Also how could I go past the roses on the stone wall? Or the plantings on the verge over the stone bridge. Or the green fields with church spire in the background. There's always room for just one more photo.

Looking across to the church spire at Braunston (BELOW).









## Selfies, our way

Wednesday, May 24

We've finally got the hang of doing selfies. Well camera selfies, using the self-timer. We tried true selfies (i.e., phone selfies) one other trip and they were a real disaster. It's taken a while for me to work out how to use the camera self-timer but finally, with a bit of help from he-who-knows-how-to-do-these-things, I've got it sussed. Turns out, like locks, it's not that difficult. But you know me, I'll always find a way to make the easy difficult.

Today was a rest day, at Braunston. It's hard work, this slow travel. So an easy morning, followed by a walk. We checked out the six locks ahead of us and walked on to the Braunston Tunnel, a mile and a bit. Obviously we couldn't walk through it, but we could, like the canal horses of old, walk over the bridle way, which we did, ending up on the outskirts of Daventry. By the time we got back home, about three and a half hours later, my legs were telling me we'd done a decent walk. Lots of rests along the way, of course. It was hot.

Later, L completed a nifty reversal manoeuvre to take the boat back to the water tap we'd missed on our way into the mooring yesterday. We'd been advised to be careful and keep our water tank topped up as it is easy to forget and suddenly find the water tank is empty. Ours was at half full, so needed filling. Backing these boats is not easy and not for the faint-hearted, but L managed it to perfection. We followed that with another walk to swap our books at the marina book exchange, and on to the Old Plough for a beer and and a cider. Another calm and balmy evening, with the sun casting a golden glow on Bridge No. 1 on the Grand Union.

Getting the hang of taking selfies with the self-timer (LEFT, TOP).

Bridge No. 1 on the Grand Union in the evening sunlight (LEFT).

At the end of the bridle way over the Braunston Tunnel (BELOW).



## Locks 101

Thursday, May 25

I've finally worked out how locks work. Or rather, how one works the locks. Kindly people keep explaining it to me in terms of the bathtub analogy. But it doesn't do it for me. I mean, who knows of any bathtub where the taps are at one end and the bath plug is at the other? And where sometimes the taps at one end become the bath plug and the bathplug at the other end becomes the taps? It doesn't work. I've only known baths that have the plug and the taps at the same end. And the plug stays the plug and taps stay taps. Enough to say that in my short lock-working experience, the bathtub analogy fails the helpfulness test.

I've now got my own set of rules and they seem to work okay. I'll conveniently forget for the moment the one failure today when I forgot to put a paddle down and had to suffer the indignity of having said failure pointed out to me by a sniffy who thought I was altogether too slow anyway—but I must add that he was the exception to the rule of friendly helpful canal boat people. Ninety-nine point nine per cent are kindness itself. Another aside—I was lucky to work one lock with a Canal and River Trust worker who was taking a working barge to Coventry to fix some job or other. He was telling me how he had worked the canals all his life and had been born on a working barge—his parents and the kids lived on the barge, and his grandparents had done the same. He said he and one other man were the only two working the canals today who'd been born on a working narrowboat.

Before I get to my rules, here is some terminology. The lock gates are just what the words say—gates in and out of locks. They are heavy, and one or two get stubbornly stuck and require hard grunt to get shut. The paddles are the things you lift up and down to let the water in and out—the sometimes plugs, sometimes taps, if you like. Whether they are taps or plugs depends on whether you're going uphill or downhill. There are ground paddles, which are set a bit away from the lock gates, and there are gate paddles that are set within the gate. The key is like a winch handle and used to raise and lower the paddles.





So here are my rules, my mantra, for working the locks:

#1 All paddles should be down unless they need (temporarily) to be up.

#2 Keep the safety ratchet on when using the key to raise the paddle. People are always relating stories of others who lose control when winding the paddle up, and the key has flown off in their face as the paddle rattles its way back down with speed. And you wonder why I was nervous?

#3 Keep the gates closed at all times unless they need (temporarily) to be open. Obviously you've got to let the boat in and out or the whole exercise would be pretty pointless. Even I can see that.

#4 Open the ground paddles first and then the gate paddles; if one is stuck, try the other side. Some are back-breakingly hard work to open.

#5 Hold on when you are crossing the gates to the other side, don't try leaping a gap (sometimes a gate drifts open), and don't get oil on your best pink puffer jacket.

I had tons of opportunity to test the rules today. Two flights of locks (13 locks in all, six Braunston locks and seven at Buckby), with the long Braunston Tunnel in between the two flights. I worked the locks and L expertly navigated the tunnel. After the Braunston Tunnel and before the Bucky Locks, we passed Norton Junction where the Leicester section of the Grand Union branches off. We had another stunner of a day (no need to worry about oil stains on pink puffer) and by the time we were through the last lock, I was more than ready for an ice cream from the handily placed canal shop. We are moored at Whilton.



## Old boots and little boats

Friday, May 26

Good things come in small packages. I'm referring to a small boat of 25 feet aptly named *Along Shortly*. It was parked in front of us at our mooring in Whilton last night and L couldn't resist going along for a nosey. The boat is beautiful, and complete with impeccably maintained containers of pansies—including one that was an old leather boot. I won't go into details of the boat as I'm sure L will have have all that in hand. But if we were to buy a canal boat (we won't, I hasten to add), this would be the size I'd want. The owners and their friends (a couple who had their own boat) were great fun to chat with, full of good humour and clearly getting max enjoyment from their boats.

It was the perfect evening for a canal-side chat—another balmy evening, more summer than spring. As it is again tonight, pleasant now after a hot, hot day—I saw 27 degrees but it felt even warmer to me. Fabulous run of weather. Not forecast to continue but loving it while it is here. We're moored tonight at Weedon Bec, another classic English village, and we spent a fair bit of the day blobbing out and reading, though we went for a decent enough walk this evening around the village.

So we haven't come far today. Mind you, for a bit we weren't sure we'd be going anywhere. When L went to do the start-up this morning, the engine wouldn't fire. So a quick phone call to base, and some instructions to L to wiggle some wires to see if that made a difference. He did and it did and we were off.





## The great cap rescue

Saturday, May 27

We have a steady stream of athletes running and sometimes walking past our mooring here at Bugbrooke. I googled and found out it is the Grand Union Canal Race, a 145-mile non-stop race along the towpath from Birmingham to London. Competitors are required to complete the race within 45 hours. What a punishing race. The first ones we saw had been going for about 12 hours. We saw one Kiwi (the flag was the clue) so gave him a shout along. He managed a wave and a smile. I hope he finishes. There were 107 starters this morning, but the website was reporting that a number had already retired from the race.

We, of course, are moving at a much more leisurely pace. After a skype call with the family (a guaranteed way to bring on homesickness), we moved along from Weedon to Bugbrooke, and moored more or less in the same place as on the way up. No sign of Bramble or owners, unfortunately. Maybe they've gone away for the long Bank Holiday weekend.

On the way here, we stopped off for a pump-out at the Rugby Boat Sales yard. Great service from Paul, the man on duty. We got chatting, as you do, and turns out he has family in the Hutt Valley (our kiwi accent was the link to that conversation).

The only other event of note today was the captain's cap rescue. It's been windy off and on. The most Wellington-like it's been so far, though still far warmer (another hot day). And sadly, in a random gust, the captain's cap was blown off his head. After an attempt at reversing, which nearly came unstuck as another sudden gust snatched the bow across the canal, the captain decided to walk the boat back to where said cap was barely holding its peak above water, and the reliable crew (i.e., me), standing at the stern, was able to rescue it using the boat hook. Mission accomplished. It did seem a lot of effort, though, for a \$5 cap with not even a kiwi or a silver fern on it.

As we moved through the water, swans and cygnets stayed in the path of the boat, totally unfazed, to be gently pushed to the side by the bow wave (L said they were looking to be fed). There's an abundance of bird life on the canal, many of them families with young in tow. And the abundance of yellow irises along the canal banks, which were budding up as we passed up the canal, are now coming into full bloom, as are the roses.

The beautiful *Along Shortly*, with her captain and crew and well-maintained container plantings (LEFT).

The five-dollar captain's cap (BELOW).

Roses and old stone buildings at Yardley Gobion—a winning combination (OVERLEAF, LEFT AND RIGHT).

















## A dragonfly at last

Sunday, May 28

I was so thrilled finally see a dragonfly—and on our boat, no less. I'd more or less given up hope of seeing a dragonfly. Never mind that I was to find out later that it wasn't a dragonfly but a damselfly—more on that later.)

Another hot day today, and a hard working day too. One tunnel, the Blisworth, which is the very long one. It wasn't as pleasant as the first time through because we were following a boat and the tunnel was filled with diesel fumes. L did a sterling job though. About three northbound boats passed us. There's not a lot of room to spare but it all worked as it should.

Then it was the seven Stoke Bruerne locks. That was hard going in the sun, and all the more so because it is a bank holiday weekend and people were out in their droves. Stoke Bruerne is the sort of place that attracts hordes of day trippers on sunny holiday weekends and today was no different. I was daunted at the thought of doing the first two locks in front of the many gongoozlers but in fact it went okay. No-one cheered but no-one jeered either. I think L caught some flak at times for steering and having me work the locks so I must make it clear, I was given the choice and I chose the locks. Now I've got my mantra (paddles always down unless they need to be up, gates always closed unless they need to be open) and a bit of practice under my belt, I find the locks easier than trying to hold the boat steady in the churn and flow of the lock water. It can be ferocious as it flows through the paddles.

We're tied up for the night at Yardley Gobion. It is another lovely village, some old houses and lots of new builds but sympathetically done. Some great front gardens.

Taking on water at Gayton Junction, where the Northampton Arm branches off from the Grand Union (LEFT, TOP).

Picturesque Yardley Gobion and its elderly ducks sign (LEFT).

Bank holiday tourists at Stoke Bruerne provided an interested audience for lock manoeuvres (RIGHT).









## Dragonflies, and lily pads

Wednesday, May 31

Saw more dragonflies on the way into Fenny Stratford. There were dozens of them, in one small area, iridescent colours glowing as they hovered above and landed on the water lilies. They sure did like those lily leaves for landing pads. They looked just like micro helicopters. I wish I'd been able to get some photos of them.

Our route from Yardley Gobion to Fenny Stratford took us back through Cosgrove, Wolverton, and Milton Keynes. We moored at Cosgrove and had a wander around the village, including walking through the horseshoe-shaped tunnel under the canal—it was once used by boat horses to get to their stables.

We moored for a bit at Milton Keynes, where we enjoyed the walk through the sculpture-dotted meadows to the shopping centre, which is vast. We needed to get to the 3Shop to sort out a 3G-chip problem. We had bought the dongle and first data chip at the MK shop in the early days of our trip up the Grand Union. We later bought a second chip from the 3Shop at Rugby so we'd have a replacement for when we'd used the data on the first. Turned out the second chip was a dud. But the service provided by the 3Shop staff at MK has really won us over. The dud chip was replaced immediately, as a matter of policy: no fuss, no bother, no charge.

We've been moored at Fenny Stratford for a couple of nights now. We've a problem with the 240V electrical inverter, and despite the boatyard's best efforts, it can't be fixed. So we have had no way to charge our computers or use any of the 240V appliances. The latter is not such a hardship. But not being able to charge our computers and phones has been a nuisance. Luckily Wyvern Shipping has now provided us with a small portable converter that converts from 12V to 240V. So we are back online. Only one plug to share between us, but that's a whole lot better than nothing.

We are only a few hours (canal boat speed) and five locks from Leighton Buzzard, though we are not due back till Saturday morning. So we are dawdling for these last two or three days, with a lot of walking and a lot of time spent planning our next month of holiday, in between sorting electrics and wi-fi problems.

Disposing of the rubbish at pretty Fenny Stratton (LEFT).

Jules Fuels at Cosgrove, a working narrowboat with its booty alongside; a selfie taken in the misty rain at Cosgrove (OVERLEAF, LEFT).

Artist Martin Heron's *Reaching Forward* canalside at Wolverton, and a section of the 160 metre canalside train mural at Wolverton (OVERLEAF, RIGHT).

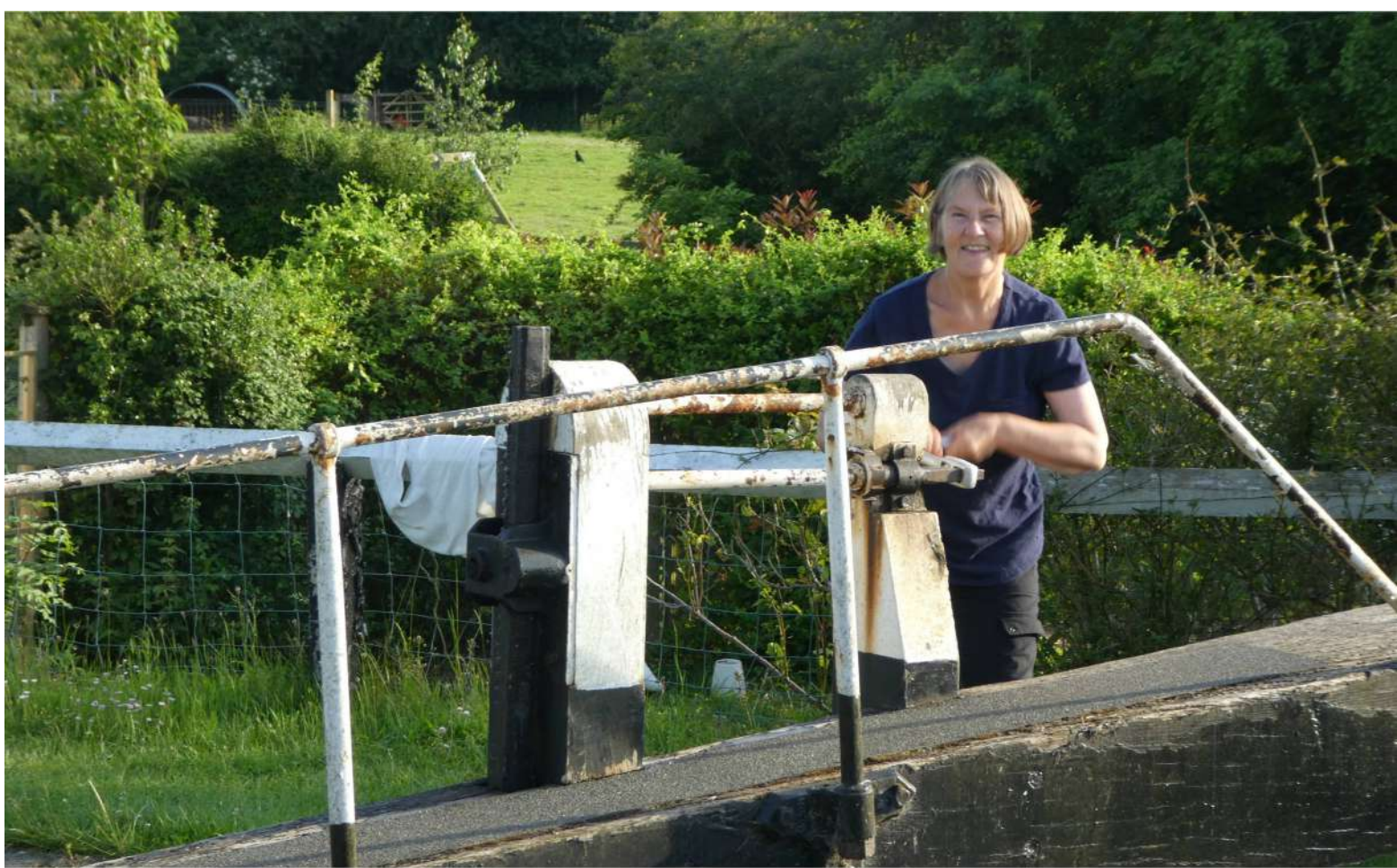














## The captain is a happy man

Thursday, June 1

Happiness is searching charity shops for Dick Francis novels and finally coming across not one, not two, but ten near-new Dick Francis's as a box set. The captain is indeed a happy man. We've found DFs are surprising hard to find in book exchanges and charity shops, but finally we struck gold, in Bletchley, which, incidentally has a large number of charity shops. We must have visited at least seven or eight in the main street, and there may well have been more.

And that was largely our day. And another hot and sunny day it was, though tomorrow, apparently, there are storms forecast so the fantastic run of weather may be coming to an end. That's okay, so is our canal boat holiday and time in England.

We untied from our mooring later in the afternoon today and moved along through a couple of locks (Fenny Stratford and Stoke Hammond) and moored for the evening just before the three Soulbury Locks. So tomorrow we have these three locks to go plus the Leighton Buzzard one, and we will back to base, ready to return the boat by the required 9.00 a.m. time on Saturday morning.

The captain casting off at Fenny Stratford (LEFT) and the crew working a Stoke Hammond lock (LEFT, BELOW).

Through the Stoke Hammond locks and waiting for the crew (BELOW).







## Goodbye Tulip

Saturday, June 3

So here we are, in Leighton Buzzard, canal trip over and waiting for Part II of our holiday to begin. An interlude of sorts, in the luxury of a comfortable hotel room with a large bathroom. Large by recent standards, that is. I've loved our canal boat holiday but whatever way you look at it, the only word for the amenities is cramped.

Early start to the day yesterday, Friday, for the final day of our canal trip, from Soulbury Locks to *Tulip's* home base, Leighton Buzzard. The dawn chorus woke me. By my standards it should be called the pre-dawn chorus because these birds were warming up at 3.45 a.m., which is way too early for dawn for me.

We topped up with water and planned our assault on the three Soulbury Locks. The map book makes these sound difficult. Apparently there can be problems when there are lots of boats because the pools between the locks are small. So you have to get the gates to the next lock open before the boat leaves the one it is in, giving a straight run through the three locks and minimising the chance of boats running out of waiting room and banging into each other in the ponds. We were told it can get ugly if there's a bit of a wind, no mooring bollards, and boats of up to 70 feet. However, we were the first, and only, ones through at that time of the morning so no problems on that front. We did have one hitch, though, in that the last pond was empty. Just mud. Not good for boats that need to float. So we had to open all the paddles of the last lock, both gates, and wait till the pond had filled.

We stopped just above the Leighton Buzzard lock and walked the mile and a bit into the town, to get a bit of exercise. Then back for our customary siesta. Later in the evening, once the outpouring of Wyvern Boats starting their trips had dwindled, we went through our last lock and tied up for the last night at the Wyvern Boats marina.

And so, this morning at 9.00 a.m., Part I of our holiday came to an end as we handed back the keys to *Tulip*, trekked our way into Leighton Buzzard, found the launderette, had breakfast in a very nice café while the washing was washing, collected the washing and trudged on to the Swan Hotel. With the hotel in sight, I must have momentarily lost concentration at the

For our second-to-last evening on *Tulip*, we were moored just before the Soulbury Three Locks (LEFT).

thought of all that comfort because one minute I was looking at the Swan Hotel sign and the next I was looking at the pavement. I could blame the pack on the back—and it possibly didn't help my balance once I stumbled—but really, I was doing my usual head in the clouds, not paying attention, and didn't see the uneven paving. Luckily no harm done.

We've loved the month on the canal boat. It's been a great holiday. The weather has been fantastic, the countryside and villages beautiful, and I've enjoyed the boatie bits too. I never imagined I would be able to take a boat through locks, but I can now manage the opening and closing of the locks with confidence.

Our plans have changed for the second half of our holiday. Originally we intended to car camp around the UK in a Postman Pat-sized van. Once we arrived and saw the traffic here, we changed our mind. That would have been one stress-charged holiday for us. Plus the reality check of realising the back of the van would have been smaller than the size of the bedroom on the boat, with no headroom.

So change of plan. We start the next stage tomorrow with a train trip to Poole and on Monday we take a ferry to Guernsey where we'll stay for the rest of the week. We are still working on our itinerary for the remaining three weeks, though they will be spent in France.





# Interlude

## Poole







## Welcomed by a Wellington wind

Sunday, June 4

Sod's law. No sooner have I posted my woolly hat back to Wellington than Wellington arrives here in the form of a typically cold and breezy northerly to welcome us as we stepped off the train at Poole. That said, on the plus side, my MacPac zip-up black cardigan, which I was only carrying because I hadn't found a clothes recycling bin between Leighton Buzzard and Poole, came in useful and has now been spared the indignity of a binning.

We spent most of the day at train stations waiting for delayed trains. We had woken this morning to news of the London terror attack, which, like the earlier Manchester attack, has shocked and saddened us. I know there were stations closed in London and whether that had a knock-on effect or not, I'm not sure. Not that it matters, in the context of the lives lost and shattered by these tragedies.

Being us, we inadvertently took the long way round to get to our accommodation quayside in Poole. A lovely room, one of two in a small guest house. It is up a couple of flights of stairs, has a good vibe, restful decor, comfortable bed, and everything we need, including wi-fi. Budget accommodation at its best.

Poole is lovely. As always, it is nice to be near the sea again, that sharpness in the air you don't get on the canals. Because we arrived late-ish, we didn't have much time to explore but after dinner at a super Italian restaurant (first wine of the trip, a rosé of course, in prep for France), we went for a walk along the quay. The captain, if I may still refer to him as such, was full of bits of information about the various boats. I was madly snapping photos, despite the failing light.

Fishing boats at Poole. The harbour was packed with fishing boats, yachts, ferries, container ships and other commercial craft (LEFT).







## Be careful what you wish for

Tuesday, June 6

We are not in Guernsey as planned. We missed our ferry yesterday and now we are stuck in Poole. By Wellington standards, the weather is not all that bad. A bit of rain last night and a stiff breeze today, and that's about it. Except it isn't. He who knows these things says that out in the approaches to the channel, it would have been gale force winds, not the sort of thing a fast ferry trimaran could cope with. So we were probably lucky to have missed the Monday ferry by a few minutes; it had left an hour earlier than scheduled, but we hadn't got the message. Then, because of the unfavourable winds, today's crossing was also cancelled.

As it happens, we'd been thinking Poole would be worth a bit more time than we'd allowed, so we haven't minded the enforced stopover. It does mean, though, that at best, we'll get only one full day in Guernsey. And I suspect the non-captain is planning on spending that on a day trip to Sark.

Speaking of ferries, we took a ferry trip today on the Purbeck of Poole, up the tidal reaches of the harbour and the River Frome to the town of Wareham, where we had an hour or so to wander around before the trip back—the timing scheduled to fit with the tides. It was a lovely trip. The wind was brisk, to say the least, especially going up river. It's the first time either of us has seen so many yachts moored on a river. It made the navigable channel very narrow in places for the ferry. Lots of birdlife as well, plus one seal bobbing its head up as we passed. The Saxon church was also amazing, especially the stained glass windows.

We've enjoyed Poole and wandering around the quay and along the streets of the old town. But we are also looking forward to even a short time in Guernsey and are crossing our fingers the ferry finally sails tomorrow. With us on it.

Dinner at an Italian restaurant on our first night in Poole, and taking selfies along the quay (LEFT).









# Part 2

## The Channel Isles & Bretagne









## And so to Guernsey

Wednesday, 7 June

The Saint Peter Port harbour, Guernsey at mid-tide (LEFT) and at low tide (LEFT, BELOW) with *Sweet Sue*, the Uffa Fox-designed Fairey Atalanta, in the foreground.

A hardy seaside garden at Saint Peter Port (BELOW).

The ferry trip was something to be endured rather than enjoyed. I've experienced rougher sailings on the Cook Strait crossing but I'd still rate this one worse because the movement was a sort of twisty sideways churning that made me feel queasy rather than outright seasick (though not all passengers got away as lightly). Also it went on for longer—about two-and-a-half hours' worth of unpleasant motion. The rough bit in Cook Strait usually only lasts about an hour. Anyway, I'm pleased the sailing went ahead and we're here in Guernsey for at least two of our four planned nights. Lew is entranced by the boats in the harbour. I'm entranced by the seaside gardens.









## Sark: The perfect island

Thursday, June 8

We did a day trip to Sark today. And guess what? It has a garden, La Seigneurie. So what with the ferry trip over for him and a garden for me, it all adds up to the perfect destination. Of course there is more than the garden to Sark, and it needs more than a day to fully explore, at least on foot. There are bikes for hire and that would make it possible to cover a great deal more ground. We spent a full-on day walking the roads and tracks and now I'm too tired to write a blog. So I'll leave a fuller commentary on Sark to some other time, or to the no-longer-captain to write about, and just say here that it is one of the best day trips we've done (and that covers all our trips). And that the garden of La Seigneurie is definitely worth a visit. It has all the elements of such big English-style gardens—a walled garden with axes and focal points and box hedges; roses, climbers, perennials, shrubs; an orchard, a vegetable garden, and a maze; and an arbour for non-gardener types to sit and read. Smaller but equally as good was a private garden open to passers-by to enjoy. It was a long day which we finished with a great meal at a restaurant just along from the guest house we're staying at.

The large garden of La Seigneurie on the island of Sark with its courtyard for reading (LEFT, TOP) and glorious displays of roses (LEFT, AND BELOW).









## Au revoir Guernsey, bonjour France

Friday, June 9

Today we travelled by ferry from Guernsey to St Malo to start the France stage of our holiday. This was a smoother ride than that from England to Guernsey, and shorter, about two hours. St Malo is lovely and if we hadn't spent a week here on an earlier trip, we'd definitely have stayed longer than one night. However, we are here only as an overnight stopover on our way to Vannes, where we are spending the first of our three weeks in Bretagne. We initially thought we'd do an evening walk around the St Malo ramparts but flagged that in favour of a walk along the promenade on the Atlantic side. Was tickled to see Peter Blake's name on the side of a wall among other famous nautical figures.

As you know, we didn't have as much time on Guernsey as we'd planned on—basically one full day, which was spent on Sark. I did think we'd have some time to explore this morning before we caught the ferry, but the nature of travel days is that it's best to keep them simple, especially when there's no convenient place to leave the luggage other than on one's back. So it was Costas for coffee, a trip to the money changer for some euros, and a walk to the post box. Our accommodation was great. Best breakfast ever. And the meal we had on the Thursday night after our day trip to Sark was equally fabulous.

So there's not a lot to say other than Guernsey's a place to go back to. We did manage a bus trip around the island (a St Peter Port local bus, one pound for the round trip) which gave us a sense of the island as a whole (though we had no idea where we were at any one time). Lots of beaches, lots of villages, and lots of glasshouses, many of them derelict. I read that Guernsey was once famous for its tomato growing, but competition from cheap European growers has put paid to the industry.

In a smaller private garden on Sark, which was open to the public (LEFT, TOP).

Exchanging gardens for fields (LEFT).

No cars allowed on Sark but there were many tractors, plus hire bikes and horses and carts for the tourists (BELOW).



