

## Trip report – Sheffield and the eastern extremities

Not all boat-hire companies are the same. Some yards run their boats for a few years and put them out to grass, unloved. Conversely, Susan and Nigel Stevens – who have run Shire Cruisers “since records began” – believe in running their boats well into middle age... and maintaining them accordingly. In 2017, four men also <cough> well into middle age did the South Pennine Ring in *Northumberland*. So when we decided that it was time to fill in a significant gap in our navigation of the system, in the shape of the Aire & Calder and the Sheffield and South Yorkshire, our thoughts naturally turned to Sowerby Bridge. Re-acquainting ourselves with *Northumberland* would be a pleasure, the only problem being that our crew were eight years older too.

Shire’s Sowerby-based boats are inevitably limited to 57-feet by the Calder & Hebble’s gauge. That said, *Northumberland* makes the best use of every available foot, cramming a maximum of ten berths in, while still allowing a good galley/diner/lounge area. She’s a very elegant and practical boat.

Starting a holiday by means of two Northern trains arriving from opposite directions carries the obvious risk, but amazingly we were both on time. After a quick lunch and the usual formalities – carried out with customary efficiency – we (Tom, Meg, and Jonathan) were on the move. A prompt start was necessary, since the clocks were still on GMT and we needed to get to Brighouse as our skipper had been delayed by a lurgi, leaving us with no stores.

The first locks heading east from Sowerby are the Salterhebble three. The third lock presents no great difficulty, even with its bottom guillotine gate, but the first two are said to be the shortest on the entire navigation. Couple this with the tight turn into the top lock, the top paddles being handspike-operated, and the added “feature” of the leaking top gates for soaking the helmsman’s feet (or sinking the boat if travelling uphill), and you see why the yard likes to shepherd crews through these first locks. The technique is to nudge the boat’s bow behind the bottom gate to clear the top cill... but then you need to get the bow past the mitre of the bottom gates once the lock is empty – much easier if you have remembered to get a bow line ashore.

Most crews heading east will see Brighouse as a natural first night’s mooring from a lunchtime start, and it makes a very pleasant stop. The moorings outside Sainsbury’s are as good as any, although you can go one lock further into the lower basin. With much-needed supplies acquired from Sainsbury’s, we were finally in business.

One reason for Brighouse being an obvious first night stop is that you lock straight down from the lower basin into a river section of the navigation, needing all of your attention. The towing path disappears, giving the helmsman a tight turn out of the lock to pick up

the crew at the lock landing. This happens at the end of nearly all of the artificial cuts, and Brighouse is by no means the worst – but it's the first. By the time you have reached Cooper Bridge via the Kirklees Cut, Sowerby Bridge seems another world – the valley has opened up. Our way lay through the flood lock – finally on new water, having previously been to Huddersfield – to make a lunchtime rendezvous at Dewsbury, where we picked up our skipper, Guy. The turn from the bottom of the locks left into the Dewsbury Arm is to all intents and purposes impossible without taking a line ashore. We provided a certain amount of amusement to a “helpful” fisherman. Back on the main line, a long canal section follows, the artificial cuts finally dropping you back to the river at the tail of the Broad Cut on the approach to Wakefield. Here the lock landing is on the river, **upstream** from the junction. Fortunately there is a piled section below the lock where you can nestle the boat and use the ladder – which we chose to do.

The navigation cuts through the bend in the river at Wakefield, almost avoiding the city completely. The moorings in the cut between the flood gates and Fall Ing lock are adequate if unspectacular.

Fall Ing lock first thing on a very windy morning is not for the faint-hearted. The lock takes an age to empty, and then you have to open the very heavy bottom gates before you're properly warmed up – with at least a hint of silt around the cill this early in the cruising season. But finally you are on the Aire & Calder. We took on water at Stanley Ferry, admired the aqueduct, eased down to Castleford Junction, and turned left for Leeds. The automated locks on this section are easy to use – the interlocking of the various stages is just about idiot-proof, so simply follow the instructions. This section is the site of the disastrous breach in the late 1980s – when the river collapsed into opencast workings. As repaired, the river was in effect diverted to the route of the canal below Lemonroyd Lock, which itself was rebuilt to a 13' fall, eliminating one lock further down. Keep well back in this enormous lock as it is extremely turbulent as it fills.



Fortunately we were waved into the lock by a charming couple in their own broad boat, who worked the lock and provided good advice (also dire warnings about the locks on the route to Selby – see below). Having dropped Tom and Meg in Leeds and turned the boat, Guy and Jonathan – now alone for a day (but fortunately not a heavily locked one) – reached good moorings at Swillington Bridge by evening.





Back to Castleford, through Bulholme Lock and the “five mile pond” river section of the river (Castleford to Ferrybridge). This is being re-claimed by nature – following the

closure of various coal mines and the Ferrybridge power stations – and is an unexpectedly attractive break from the straight sections elsewhere.



Admiring the bridge at Ferrybridge – and remembering queuing to cross it in the pre-bypass days of the early 1960s – you pass through the flood lock to a surprisingly narrow traverse of Ferrybridge/Knottingley, at the end of which the main line of the navigation sweeps half-right on to the 1826 Knottingley & Goole Canal section... but we don't (yet).

Before 1826, the navigation at this point dropped back down to the Aire through Bank Dole Lock, then following the river all the way on a sinuous course – part of it tidal – to the Ouse just above Goole (which didn't exist at the time). The first improvement arrived in 1770 in the shape of the Selby Canal, which cut through from just above the tidal limit at Haddlesey to Selby – with a lock down to the tidal Ouse. This remains the route to York and Ripon – some other time? – but we were taking it as far as Selby. Friendly Lady at Lemonroyd had warned us that Bank Dole Lock and Beal Lock (this latter on the river) might be difficult. She was right about Bank Dole – which probably hadn't been used much since October and was very silted – but Beal proved to be a pleasant experience, with a combined water fill-up and lunch on the lock landing. After an hour of going round in circles – or so it seems – on the river, you turn left through Haddlesey flood lock and on to the Selby Canal. This remains substantially as built in 1770, and is thus the



only part of this year's route that reminds one of the Midlands narrow canals.  
Unfortunately, we were too late to visit Selby Abbey.





The town's other attraction appears to be tattoo parlours – we've never seen so many in such a short space. Resisting the temptation, we picked up Simon from the station, thus restoring our crew to three, and ate on board.

Re-tracing our steps uneventfully to Knottingley, we turned sharp left for Goole. At this point you realise that you are only two locks above the level of Goole docks. The countryside opens up... and so did the easterly wind. The combination of this and the straightness and width of the canal gives the impression of very slow progress – although in fact you are making just under four miles an hour, fast for a canal. Even so, Goole looms into sight in the binoculars a good half hour before you reach it – by which time the boats in the distance have morphed into huge barges. We moored opposite *Exol Pride*, a tanker barge from Hull...



...and were awoken at precisely 0600 by what sounded like three lorries starting at once. After a couple of minutes, *Exol Pride* was on her way inland, destination unknown. Again we re-traced our steps, turning left on to the New Junction Canal.



This dates from as late as 1905, promoted by the Aire & Calder and the Sheffield & South Yorkshire jointly – with the object of providing a better outlet from Sheffield and Rotherham via the docks at Goole, as opposed to the less satisfactory facilities available at Keadby on the tidal Trent. We expected the New Junction to be boring – dead straight for five miles – but it proved to be a delight. The landscape is flat but



interesting, the swing- and lift-bridges add variety, and we got to see a kingfisher – in perhaps the last place on the waterways one might expect.

Turning sharp left at the junction with the Dun Navigation, we embarked on our final detour – to Keadby. Again we were into the wind. The route passes Thorne – traditionally a boat-building centre but now also memorable for an incredibly temperamental pedestrian swing-bridge – and passes to flatlands with views of the Isle of Axholme. The star of the show as you approach Keadby is the unique Vazon sliding railway bridge.



This is an amazing contraption. The line crosses the canal obliquely, allowing the bridge to slide across the cut. The signalman does this for you automatically. The line is surprisingly busy with both passenger and freight trains to/from Scunthorpe, so you may have to wait a while. We were lucky, being held up by a mere ten minutes or so in each direction. The bridge was built by Sir William Arrol & Co Limited, also responsible for the 1916 railway bridge over the Trent just south of Keadby – which previously had an opening span, but is now fixed. In truth, photographing the bridge is the sole remaining attraction at Keadby – the pub has closed – but obviously the inland boater will often adopt a “because it’s there” motto. For hardy types from the tidal Trent, it is a different story, since the Keadby-Knottingley-Selby route offers a much safer route than the lower parts of the tidal Trent and Ouse.



Back to the main line via Thorne – where we picked up Tom for a second stint on the boat – we had what was for us a quite short day, mooring at Doncaster. These are secure moorings – BWB key needed – just below St George’s (or Doncaster Minster as we should now call it), a fine town church by George Gilbert Scott from 1858.





Dinner out was at the excellent Da Leo, an authentic Italian restaurant.

Approaching Doncaster Town lock as we cast off on Friday morning, we noticed that the usual yellow traffic light – “manual operation” – had been replaced by red and green – “lock-keeper operation”. This could mean just one thing – *Exol Pride* was on the move.





We passed her in the very pretty reach between Doncaster and Sprotbrough, just by the A1 bypass viaduct, fortunately on a relatively straight stretch. Sprotbrough lock and bridge occupies an idyllic setting, completed by a pub, The Boat Inn – stored in the memory bank at this stage. The navigation between Doncaster and Mexborough is a most attractive river section, in quite a deep valley, with much interest – especially



Conisbrough Castle and the massive 1909 railway viaduct, now part of a long-distance path.



We had booked our passage up the Tinsley flight for Saturday morning. You can moor at Eastwood lock – the last of the upgraded locks and just below *Exol Pride's* mooring in Rotherham – and make an early start, but we decided to press on right to the bottom of Tinsley – wisely, as Rotherham lock is a bit fiddly and Ickles lock isn't one to be doing in a hurry. Nigel, the CRT lock-keeper, had advised that the off-side mooring just above Ickles would be a good place to stop, but in the event it was occupied. However, we were able to get close enough to the bank about 100 yards short of the tail of Holmes Lock – the first one for which you need CRT assistance. This, if not the most salubrious of moorings, proved to be perfectly quiet.

After a rendezvous with Nigel from CRT – who also had a volunteer lockie with him – progress up the flight was swift and uneventful, moorings in Sheffield Basin being reached by lunchtime.



A free afternoon was spent at the excellent Kelham Island Museum. Unfortunately the River Don Engine was not running that afternoon.





We were joined in Sheffield by Peter, Emilia, and their two children – bringing the boat to eight on board.

Returning down the flight on Sunday morning – in an even quicker time – we were able to press on to moorings at Sprotbrough, with an excellent supper at the Boat Inn.





A cold morning – complete with frost on the boat roof – gave way to yet another beautiful day. This was just as well, as we intended to make Castleford by evening, which we did – even allowing an hour for lunch. A complicated session with the railway timetable saw Peter accompanying Emilia and the children to Wakefield (for home) from Knottingley,



Peter then returning to Castleford – having been given leave to finish the trip with us on his own.

One of the joys of a canal holiday is seeing the lie of the land in a way that is totally missed by road travellers. Few of those who whizz over the Aire on the new motorway section of the A1 will realise that they are a mere fifteen feet or so above the level of Goole docks. And in Yorkshire you see that the old companies thought nothing of running up a viaduct here or there just to get a slice of the action in moving coal. Similarly, a run from Castleford to Cooper Bridge takes you from the estuarial plain to the foothills of the Pennines in one long day's cruising. It can be briefly reported that Fall Ings lock was no more pleasant on the way back – warmer but infested by drug-addicts – that the bridge chapel at Wakefield is worth a visit...



and that at least the lock landing problems on the river sections are easier on the way up – because you can drop a crew member and allow the current to take you back to manoeuvre. At Thornhill, we gained revenge on the grumpy angler – who was there again – as the boat had to hover in front of him while the lock was prepared. Some hard lock-wheeling work allowed us to reach the Kirklees Cut – but this was a very long and hard day.

On the final run from Brighouse, we were lucky enough to encounter a pair of CRT inspectors, who were on foot – the towing-path is excellent here, and well used –

investigating all the way up to Salterhebble – giving us in effect two extra lock-wheelers. The stub of the Halifax branch at Salterhebble provided a good lunch mooring.

A boating holiday is often compared to a “walking holiday with a windlass”. This route is slightly different – more open road than many – but it’s worth it. And of course you don’t need to do all of the detours that we took.

JWM

April 2025