

Pudmuddle goes West – part 1, Going Up

14th April 2025. Pudmuddle's beta 10 engine fired up after 2 years in the mud berth at Paglesham. We set off up to Sutton Wharf for fitting out, and all would have been well had the propeller not fallen off. I deployed the electric outboard, then Nigel came alongside and kindly offered a tow.

Two weeks later a new propeller and shaft arrived, and was fitted on the slip the same evening. In the morning we would set off on an inland voyage to the river Severn, by sea, river and canal.



the tide still in our favour.

1st May, 4am, the tide serves but it's foggy and dark. We find more mud than channel, and return to the Wharf until first light. It's still foggy and ebbing fast, but using the electric outboard (less noise) we make Paglesham and stop briefly for breakfast. Then on to the Whitaker by 9:00 to catch the early flood up the Thames. We made good time so tried to get a mooring at Gravesend, but to no avail. However Thurrock SC kindly lent us a mooring so we kept going and arrived about 4pm with



Having previously booked a spot on the Greenwich YC pontoon, we set off up river an hour before LW. Under the QE2 bridge and through the Thames Barrier (contacting London VTS by phone upon entering the zone).

GYC are just upstream of the barrier, and we arrived at half tide. £26 fee for pontoon berth, showers etc. The berth here is very rolly due to Uber fast ferries, but quiet after 10pm. We were invited by son Ben, who lives close by, for a curry.

Next day we set off about an hour before LW to get a head start through the City, but ebb tide lasted much longer than expected. It's tricky dodging Uber ferries and cruise boats, and

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turbulent waters through the many bridges. However the engine held out and traffic thinned above Westminster. Some of the Paglesham barge conversions were spotted at Cadogan Pier.

The wind was gusty in the afternoon and we had to dodge a rowing regatta above Putney. We anchored for lunch, apparently this is unheard of!



On Greenwich YC pontoon



Turbulence under the bridges



Cityscape



Westminster



Look familiar?



We arrived at Richmond lock just in time to see the sluices raised, enabling free-flow bypassing the lock. But we had to troll about for 20+ minutes waiting for Teddington lock. After locking up, we purchased an Environment Agency licence for 1 week (£15) from the lock keeper. Free mooring as compensation for delay! Dinner was at the Tideway Cottage pub, just over the footbridge.

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Daughter Jenny and family joined us for Sunday, including Max the dog and blow-up canoe. We used the electric outboard up to Kingston-on-Thames for a fish & chip lunch, then to Hampton Court lock. After they returned home, we continued to public moorings at Desborough island, occupied only by two wrecks. We were to see many more sunk and abandoned boats along the Thames and the canal. It's a real problem here, probably even worse than on the coast. The wrecks did not spoil our enjoyment of this peaceful spot.



Teddington Lock



All aboard for Hampton Court

On Monday we dodged the hire boats returning to the large marina at Penton Hook, then on past Runnymede to Windsor where waterside residences increase in size from bungalows to the castle itself. By this time we have been through 8 locks, all automated (self-service push button controls) and occasionally manned. The engine battery was getting low after so many starts, and clearly charging was inadequate. We switched to the electric outboard. Next morning we called Marlow Marine at Maidenhead, and arrived there 9:30. The diagnosis was a faulty alternator, incorrectly wired and fan belt worn out. MM ordered spares and we left Pudmuddle for a couple of days, taking the train back to Rochford to collect the car, then home to Gloucestershire.



A snug berth at Desborough Island



Boatyard at Maidenhead

On Thursday 8th May we returned to Maidenhead by train, having left the car at Frouds Bridge marina, near Aldermaston. Next morning we continued up the Thames, passing through

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another 8 locks. Cookham and Bourne End had beautiful and varied woods around the river, with a grassy flood plain on one side and large houses and boat houses on the other. Hills beside the river at times, including a steep chalk ridge. Islands and channels abounded, with intermittent views of Cliveden.

On through Marlowe with its attractive old buildings and suspension bridge. Some large houses sensibly built half way up the hill. Henley was fortunately short of rowers, but wooden boards marked out the regatta course - 1 mile and 550 yards. On beneath Henley bridge, low and busy. We stopped for a late lunch at the George and Dragon, Wargrave, then on through locks and past several weirs and islands under outboard, to moor behind an island, surrounded by bird song, wild mint, clouds of mayflies and frequent dragonflies, grey lag geese with goslings, grebes, ducks, some Canada and Egyptian geese.



Typical Thames lock, solid, automated



Berkshire woodland



Spot the Castle



Other des res

Next day we continued through Sonning, with its attractive bridge, plenty of moorings and (important to us) loos at the lock.

Approaching Reading the entrance to the river Kennet is hidden between moored boats, and the channel between brick and concrete walls is narrow compared to the broad Thames. Under several bridges to Blakes lock, last of the Environment Agency locks on our route but very different from the button-operated Thames locks. We now had to get used to 19th century lock technology in varying states of repair. Only 104 locks to go.

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Town centre mooring, Reading Prison



Kennet riverside back gardens, Reading

We moored by HM Prison, Reading, and the abbey ruins for a shop stop, then hurried on to Burghfield bridge where we arranged to meet David Bessey next morning. The river wends its way through the new shopping centre, then terraced houses with steep gardens coming down to the water. Out of town the river meanders across a wide flood plain, canalised here and there, with many lakes formed from flooded gravel pits. Still waters in the canal cuts, but a fair flow against us in the river bits.

We arrived at Burghfield in the late afternoon, and moored to rhond-anchors by the towpath, near the Cunning Man pub. David joined us next morning and we set off down a particularly meandering section to Burghfield lock. We had walked to the lock the previous evening, to find a notice indicating that one of the sluices was out of order. Luckily the sluice was stuck in the closed position and the lock was empty so, after opening the lower gates, we could go straight in. Lucky for us, most of the next 7 locks were also empty so we were not unduly delayed.



David at the helm



Narrow passage up the Kennet

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Typical Kennet and Avon canal lock



Swing bridge

However we did have to operate 5 swing bridges and one lifting bridge (Aldermaston Wharf). Some of these required our Watermate key, the first day we had needed it. David took on the Bridgemaster role and we got through without holding up the traffic for too long.

We arrived at Froud's Bridge marina on the dot of 4pm and checked in before the staff left for the day. Then it was back in our car to the Cunning Man where David's car was parked, for a well-earned dinner. After which we went back to the marina and packed up the boat for a few days.



*Frouds Bridge marina:
99 canal barges and one sailboat*



One of 200+ bridges, mostly picturesque



A turf lock, one of the most primitive



Newbury

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On Friday 23rd May we returned to Frouds Bridge marina to spend a rainy night aboard. Rigged an awning over the main cabin in case of leaks (there were still some drips from the port window but nothing serious). Over the next 3 days we passed Newbury and Kintbury, to stop near Hungerford station. We moored near Thatcham reed beds just to the east of Newbury, where a reed warbler 3m away warbled until dusk and started up again at dawn. In Newbury, we stopped alongside Victoria Park for tea and cake, and in Kintbury we moored next to Vicarage Bridge. Before Dunn Mill lock on the approach to Hungerford, we moored against a reedy bank to rhond anchors and a tree, and left the boat for a few days at home.

On 30th May we returned to the boat, joined by Naomi, Tom and their children. Having 2 cars helped with logistics, especially as Tom was happy to drive a few miles ahead and run back along the towpath. No time to stop in Hungerford as we have 9 locks to Great Bedwyn, but had a good dinner on arrival at the Three Tuns.

We continued to the Crofton pumping station (famous for its beam engines, but unfortunately closed today) to pick up Wren, and do more logistics to get our car to Pewsey Wharf. There were now just 5 more locks to the highest stretch of the canal at about 450 feet above sea level. It was hot, and we stopped for a late lunch before Crofton Top Lock, unaware that the lock would be closed at 15:00 (this is done so the top section can be topped up by pumps overnight). We just slipped through in time, and proceeded towards the 200-year-old Bruce Tunnel.

This was to be our first canal tunnel, at about 500 yards. As we entered the portal, the far end was just visible as a faint point of light. You are supposed to sound your horn, but we didn't have one so banged on saucepans instead. We glided in silently under electric power, a head-torch our only light. The darkness closed in.



To be continued...