

## Preparing a boat for a UK canal journey

In 2025 we took our old boat Pudmuddle on a cruise from the Roach to the river Severn, by way of the London river and the Kennet and Avon canal. You can read our blog of the journey on the RSA web site (<https://roachsailingassociation.org/blog/>). This article describes the preparation we did for the canal journey. As well as the practical considerations (would the boat fit through locks, bridges and tunnels?), the boat had to comply with the Environment Agency and Canal and Rivers Trust (CRT) regulations.

### Boat Safety Certificate (BSS)

The first CRT requirement was to have the boat examined and have a current BSS certificate. It wasn't hard to find a qualified examiner (Boat Safety Scheme web site), but not so easy to interpret the rules as applied to our little boat. In the end we had to make these changes:

- To prevent an engine oil or fuel spill polluting the waterway, I added a small water-tight bulkhead between the engine well and the main bilge pumps.
- Added 2 fire extinguishers with clear labels
- Added a stop valve between the diesel tank and the filter.

As we had no heating system or fixed cooker (we use an origo spirit stove), we were not subject to the relevant regulations, such as a separate gas safety certificate. We didn't pass first time, but all we had to do was send photos of the improved labelling, to get our certificate, valid for 4 years.

### Will the boat fit?

Pudmuddle is 21 ft LOA with beam 7 ft and 2ft draught. CRT and various canal guides publish sizes of every lock, bridge etc. We were not unduly worried about length or draught (we only ran aground once – in the Roach!). However locks on some canals (such as on the Stratford on Avon canal) have shrunk over the centuries and now have a minimum width of 6'10. So we decided not to go that way. Fortunately many other canals take 'widebeam' barges of 10-12 ft.

Obviously, we were not going to get far with the mast up. But we did not want to forego the option of sailing in the right conditions; we needed a mast that could easily be raised or lowered. So I extended an old mirror mast and we simply used a loose-footed standing lug sail (borrowed from our 12' lugger Winks). The whole rig could be easily raised and lowered. In the end we only used the sail after we reached the Severn estuary, and later in the Gloucester canal.



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### Boat modifications

Pudmuddle is about 55 years old, wooden construction, so a bit drippy when it rains hard. The hatch had no garage or hood over it, and there was nowhere to put a decent sized solar panel. So I added a plywood garage that lifted up aft to form a hood, with the panel on top. We found a light tarpaulin that fitted over the cabin to keep us dry in wet weather.

We wanted use the electric outboard as an auxiliary engine, so added a lifting pad on the stern. This proved a great success and we were much admired for our silent progress on the canals. The epropulsion outboard is designed for a much smaller boat than Pudmuddle's 1.5 ton, but it coped perfectly well on the canals (and even upstream on the Kennet) except in strong headwinds. We could even charge the battery off the solar panel – about 3 hours charging gave 1 hour motoring in good sunlight.

We added a string of fenders on each side, as there is a lot of grinding against stonework at the locks. We needed long mooring lines (15 metre lines for the Severn sea locks). Also we needed grass anchors for mooring along the towpath. We used Rhond anchors but the bigger boats have longer stakes that are hammered in. As we often left the boat for a few days, it needed to be secure (we added a padlock on the hatch too).

### Licensing, mooring and locks

Most of the canal and river network is managed by CRT, and you need a licence from them when afloat on these waters. For our journey we chose a 6 month "Continuous Cruising" licence which was about £600 (bigger boats pay a lot more). This allowed us through locks and bridges, and mooring in CRT areas, which includes most of the towpath. Some areas (typically near locks and populated areas) have mooring restricted to a few hours or days, and mooring in any one place is restricted to 14 days. So you have to keep moving on.

The Thames, like some other rivers, is managed by the Environment Agency, not CRT. To cruise through London we required no permit, except for calling up the Port of London Authority (PLA) at the Thames Barrier, however there are PLA regulations and useful guidance which is well worth looking up. Above Teddington Lock we needed an EA licence, available from the lock keeper. We only needed a week to get to Reading, which was £15.

Lifting and swing bridges on the rural canals you have to operate yourself, which sometimes involves stopping traffic. Some require a Watermate Key (a yale type key which anyone can buy from CRT or some chandlers).

Another essential piece of ironmongery is the lock (and bridge) windlass. It's best to have one per crew member, and get in the habit of checking they are all accounted for before leaving each lock!