



Revisiting **old haunts**

For over a decade the Mon & Brecon was **Jane Cumberlidge's** local waterway, but she never explored it by boat. Early this summer, she decided to rectify this...

Above: **Crossing the Brynich Aqueduct 2 miles from Brecon.**

A while back, we lived for 12 years close to the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal. My Ministry of Agriculture office in Brecon overlooked the then rather scruffy west terminus of this beautiful Welsh waterway. Later I moved offices to Mamhilad, near the south end of the navigable section. In those days we walked or cycled parts of the towpath, but living so close we never actually cruised the Mon & Brecon. This spring I decided it was high time to rectify the situation. We would catch up with friends, revisit favourite haunts, experience the smart new canal basin in Brecon, and do it all by boat.

The night before our jaunt we stayed with Stuart and Ann, our old neighbours near Usk, arranging to meet them along the canal later in the week. Then, on a pleasant sunny afternoon, we meandered through familiar lanes to the ABC hire base at Goytre, an ideal location for starting a week's cruise to Brecon.

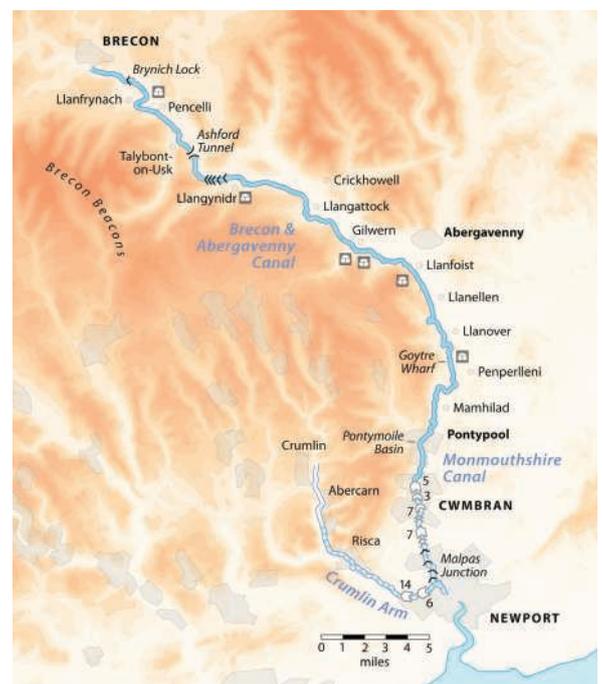
After a friendly welcome and handover from the Redline Boats staff, we set off gently in a northerly direction soon crossing Goytre Aqueduct and passing under a bridge. The usual rule of thumb of about 4mph was not going to be possible on the Mon & Brecon, because the canal is notoriously shallow. We therefore adjusted our pace of travel to a restful potter.

Following a winding contour high above the River Usk, the Mon & Brecon has wonderful views all along its languidly sinuous route. Early May is the perfect time for exploring this waterway, the trees just coming into leaf with that spectacular mixture of fresh, bright green colours. Later in the season the canal would be more enclosed, the surrounding hills less visible. But even on slightly hazy days we saw distant fields of yellow rape and sheets of bluebells carpeting the woods. Primroses, violets, stitchwort and lady's smock scrambled along the canal banks.

We spent our first night at a rural mooring above Llanover village. From Bridge 80 it's a short walk downhill to the Hummingbird Café, where a traditional Welsh breakfast set us up nicely for a day on the canal.

Black Mountain vistas

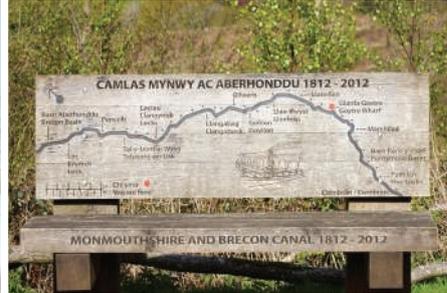
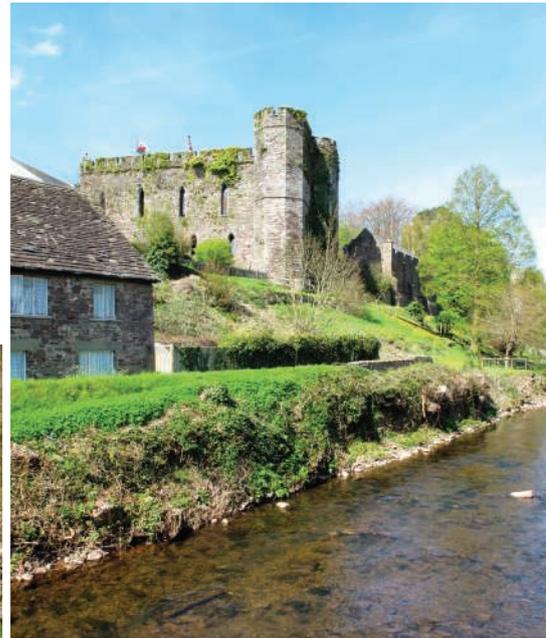
Along most of the Mon & Brecon's commanding route you can see different aspects of the sparkling Usk in its wide



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Left: Brecon Basin and Theatr Brycheiniog. Below left: Brecon Cathedral. Below right: There are carved benches all along the canal.



DON'T MISS

Crickhowell. Below the canal at Llangattock you can cross the Usk on an ancient stone bridge with 13 arches. In Crickhowell visit Webb & Sons' fascinating department stores, opposite the Bear Hotel. The high street has some great shops selling local produce and there are many good eateries.

Brecon Cathedral. There are free lunchtime concerts on Fridays in summer, and the tower has fabulous views over the town and Beacons. Pilgrims tearooms is in the old Tithe Barn.

Brecon Tap. New in the centre of Brecon, 'Brecon Tap' is run by Ob and Will and serves tasty pies and fine cask ales. Their smooth and malty Copper Beacons ale is superlative.

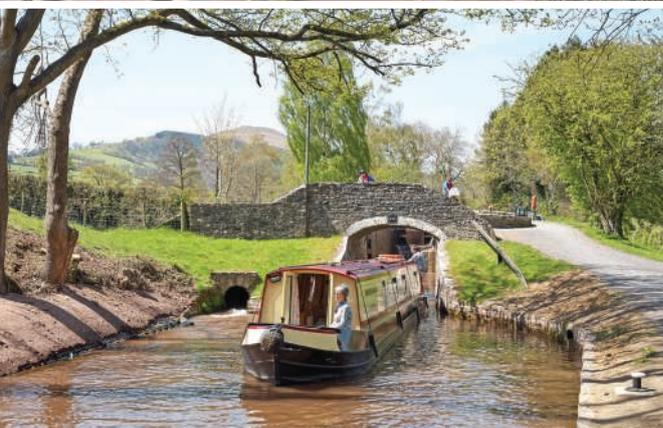
Industrial history walks. From several places on the canal there are walks to the old tramroads and workings for which the Mon & Brec was built. Starting at Llanfoist you can explore Hill's Tramroad on the Bloreng. From Talybont, follow the Brinore tramroad to Talybont Reservoir.



Top right: Brecon Castle, above the River Honddu. Above: Passing under Talybont lift-bridge. Left: Cruising the canal with Pen y Fan and the Brecon Beacons in the background.



Right: Cwm Crawnon basin in the Llangynidr flight of locks.
Below: Cross Oak Lift Bridge.



flood plain far below. This first 25-mile pound is an amazing feat of engineering, accurate excavation all achieved with theodolites, spirit-levels, shovels and barrows. Approaching Abergavenny, the waterway winds around the prominent Bloreng hill, inspiration for “the purple headed mountain” in the hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’. Countless small streams tumble towards the Usk and the canal has several almost 180° bends with small aqueducts across them.

Just before Nant Ochram I discovered how shallow the canal is and went steadily aground. After much backing and filling we eventually worked free and continued under a string of stone bridges, with regular glimpses of the Sugar Loaf, Skirrid and Little Skirrid hills. The moorings at Llanfoist are the closest the canal gets to Abergavenny, a vibrant market town with good shops and a famous September Food Festival. Throughout the year there are lively events in the market hall – craft and antiques fairs as well as regular markets.

At Govilon we stopped opposite one of the oldest Baptist churches in Wales. The Govilon Boat Club and old BW yard make this a gently bustling backwater, with boating folk pottering at the start of the season. We’d been warned that some bridges were *extremely* low (you can’t carry bikes on the roof) but at Humphrey’s Bridge, with barely an inch clearance, you have to line up the bow, duck and hope for the best!

Between Govilon and Gilwern the peace is disturbed by works where the nearby Heads of the Valleys road is being made into a dual carriageway. Gilwern was important in the life of the waterway and you can still see the Clydach Iron Company wharf, an iron ore tramroad and five lime kilns. This historic village has four pubs, a couple of shops and a post office.

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Lessons in locking

We’d arranged to meet Stuart and Ann at Llangynidr locks the next day. The views down to the river were breathtaking, and we could see the magnificent 18th-century multi-arched bridge, the longest such stone structure in Wales. After the bends by Llangattock wharf, vistas opened up across the Glan Usk estate between the canal and the river.

John Norris’s excellent guide showed what looked like an idyllic spot for lunch, with views across the valley to the Gliffaes Hotel and its grand wooded park. Unfortunately we went aground here while approaching the bank and it took some time to break free. When we finally tied up for a late bite, it started to rain – a good excuse for a lazy afternoon!

Next morning at Llangynidr we topped up with water by Bridge 131. The cut between here and the locks was drained and relined last winter, and while this stretch still looks a bit stark and earthy, it’s an impressive job. As we bobbed to the top of the lower lock, Stuart and Ann were just parking near one of the distinctive Mon & Brec seats with a canal map carved onto them.

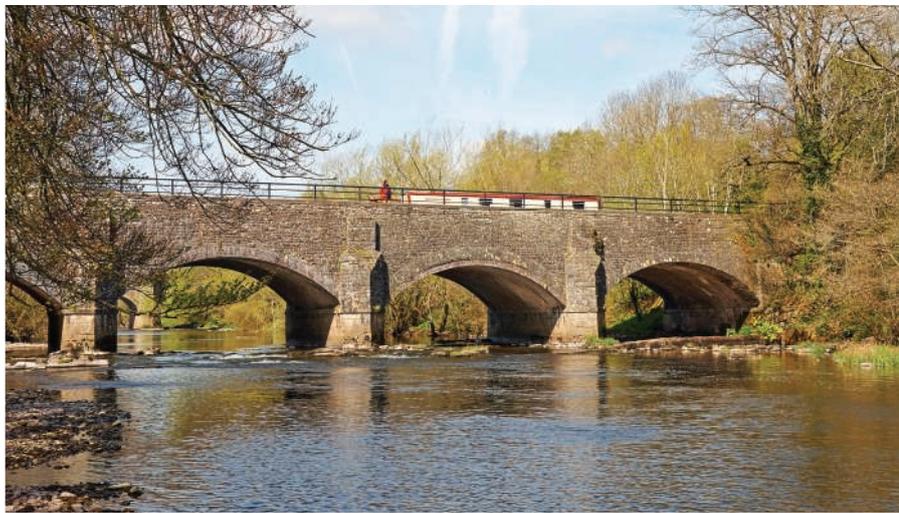
Ann came aboard and Stuart and I walked up to Cwm Crawnon Lock. Stuart is a keen canoeist and has paddled pretty much the whole canal over the years. Cwm Crawnon has an information centre and all the usual CRT facilities. Stuart and I waited for Peter to bring the boat in, then we shut the gates and Stuart started his first lesson in locking.

“At Humphrey’s Bridge you have to line up the bow, duck and hope for the best”

Above left: Leaving Llangynidr bottom lock.
Above: Bronwyn and Jane.
Centre (middle): Maldwyn giving a helping hand.



Left: Lock 64 at Llangynidr.
Below left: Stuart and Ann 'knitting'.
Below: Brynich Aqueduct over the River Usk.



As Peter and Ann headed for the next lock, Stuart and I reset the one we'd just passed. The Mon & Brec custom is to leave all locks empty with the bottom gates open. Waiting for the next lock to fill we met Maldwyn, a jovial canal volunteer who said there was a boat coming down, so we could leave this lock full with the top gate open.

Helping hands

Maldwyn spends a week each month volunteering at Llangynidr locks. Two other volunteers were on duty and our passage through this attractive flight was easy and sociable. There are good moorings above the top lock, where we pulled in to do justice to Ann's delicious lunch hamper.

Although a popular canal for first-time boaters, the Mon & Brec is so shallow and winding that it's actually not that simple for beginners. Ann had a turn at helming, but distractions caused by the ever-changing views led to a few interesting moments. As we approached the Ashford Tunnel I suggested that Stuart and Ann might like sitting in the bow. It's always a challenge to steer through a tunnel without touching the sides, especially with an expectant audience.

Emerging into warm sunshine we soon found ourselves at Talybont. The lift-bridge here is operated with a CRT key, but for an hour each morning and afternoon it must stay down for the school buses. We moored behind a couple of other boats to wait and Stuart treated us to luxurious ice creams from the café/stores just below the bridge.

A nifty tow

A crew coming the other way offered to lift the bridge and let us through first. Having cleared the bridge neatly, the boat ahead soon went aground, but Peter Downloaded by Jane Cumberlidge from waterwaysworld.com



Fact file

We chose our comfortable 56ft *Red Rumped Swallow* from **Redline Boats** at Goytre Wharf, near Abergavenny. As we have found at all ABC bases, the Goytre team were friendly and welcoming, and our boat was ready and immaculate when we arrived. Nathan gave a clear and thorough instruction session before we set off.

Contact the Goytre Wharf office on 01873 880516, or the central booking line 0330 3330 590, everythingcanalboats.com

MAPS AND GUIDES
The Monmouthshire and Brecon

Canal by John Norris is a perfect bridge-by-bridge companion. John has only recently sold his boat *Archimedes*, which has been on the Mon & Brec for 30 years. The sixth (2012) edition was his last, but the guide will continue.

Ken Haynes' charming 'sketch-book' **Here and There on the Monmouthshire Brecon and Abergavenny Canal** is still available second-hand.

- ▶ Pearson's Canal Companion, Welsh Waters
- ▶ Nicholson No 4, Four Counties and the Welsh Canals
- ▶ OS Landranger 160, 161 and 171



edged past it, Ann took a line and we managed to pull them off. Stuart and Ann had left a car at Talybont, so after a few more bridges they decided to jump ship and walk back. We'd had a lovely day with our friends and they'd enjoyed a first taste of narrowboating.

Back on our own we reached a picturesque trio of manual lift-bridges. The first was open but we saw a farmer crossing the next to feed his sheep. I got off to open the bridge and let our little convoy through. The final bridge was also open and then it wasn't far to Pencelli, a favourite destination when we lived in Brecon, usually to eat at the Royal Oak. In those days this popular inn was run by a charming couple who were virtual alcoholics, but early at lunchtimes the cooking was always superb. We stopped for the night at Pencelli, strolled round the village and identified a pretty cottage once owned by a retired brigadier and his wife who'd been fellow students on our Spanish evening classes.

Brecon Basin

Waking to glorious sunshine, we were under way in good time. From Pencelli the canal takes a wide sweep before returning to the river, which it finally crosses on the stately Brynich Aqueduct 2 miles outside Brecon. From this section the Brecon Beacons rise majestically to the south and west. The last lock is just after the aqueduct and then the A40 runs alongside the canal almost as far as Brecon Basin.

We saw lots of changes since our time in Brecon, but also many familiar landmarks. The attractive canal basin, visitor quays and stylish theatre were not there in our day and have really improved the town. The once-backstreet view from my old office now takes in the theatre, a row of canalside cottages and colourful narrowboats. A stroll into the town was very nostalgic. I browsed a second-hand bookshop before wandering down to gaze at the sturdy Norman castle across the River Honddu. Later I walked up to Brecon Cathedral in its lovely walled close.

Narrowboat refresher course

We chugged away from Brecon on an idyllic afternoon
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and moored for the night at a sleepy quay just across Brynich Aqueduct. There was another early start the next day, as we'd arranged to meet my old university friend Bronwyn at Llangynidr locks. Two years ago Bronwyn had joined me for a trip on the Llangollen Canal (WW October 2014). She lives near Hereford and would have only an hour's drive to Llangynidr, but it would take us three hours to cover the 6 miles to meet her!

Bronwyn appeared as I was emptying the top lock and she was soon back into the rhythm of paddles and gates. After the third lock we chatted in the bow while Peter helmed down to Cwm Crawnon, where a team of volunteers very kindly worked the lock for us. Maldwyn then came along and asked if we were continuing straight through the bottom lock. If so, he'd go and set it for us – an offer we couldn't refuse. We had a totally relaxing passage down through the flight.

Bronwyn helmed after lunch and hadn't lost her touch, though we were distracted by a brood of tiny ducklings and ended up on a patch of mud. However, it was a perfect May afternoon and hard to imagine a nicer way to spend it. We eventually nudged into the bank to say goodbye to Bronwyn and she trekked back to her car. Peter and I carried on to a peaceful mooring above the Dardy, with stunning views over Crickhowell and the Black Mountains.

Retracing our steps

On our last full day we threaded the wooded section past Llangattock and topped up with water at Gilwern quay. At Govilon we strolled down to the village shop and Tafarn y Bont pub next to Govilon Brook – we remembered this more prosaically as the Bridgend Inn. As the canal snakes round over the brook, a leafy old dry dock makes an excellent mooring.

We negotiated the devilish Tod's Turn in textbook fashion and I managed Ochram Turn without getting stuck. Soon we met several boats just starting their exploration of the timeless Mon & Brec, and I was quite envious. A week isn't really long enough to spend on this magical waterway which leads gently there and back, relaxing you thoroughly.

Top left: Pen y Fan peaking over Ty-newydd No 1 Bridge.

Top right: The canal basin in Brecon.

Above left: Moored at the Dardy with Crickhowell below and the Sugar Loaf in the distance.

Above: Early morning in the Brecon Beacons.