

Is 5ft 6in the minimum height for a narrowboat helmswoman? I had never considered this question until Lucy took her first turn at the tiller. I'd asked two friends, Bronwyn and Lucy, if they fancied a week cruising the Llangollen Canal and they'd both said yes. As students the three of us had shared a chilly cottage near Edinburgh and over the years we have enjoyed weekends away, but this was the first time we'd negotiated a whole week.

Bronwyn and I met Lucy at Crewe off a train from Scotland. Arriving at Wrenbury Mill by mid-afternoon, we managed to stow our gear on board in the dry before Martin came over for our introductory session. He went through everything in great detail but I sensed Lucy and Bronwyn were glazing over slightly with talk about weedhatches, stern-glands and clearing the prop.

Getting underway

When we were ready to leave with our 60ft *Song Thrush* it started to rain, so on with the waterproofs and hope it gets better. There's a tight turn out of the marina and under the lift-bridge, and then we had to keep a fine course between boats moored either side. I needed to show my novice crew that they were in safe hands and I could manage 18 tonnes of steel with confidence. After what seemed a very short time, Martin asked me to pull into the bank and deftly demonstrated how to bring the boat alongside using the centre line. He wished us an enjoyable week and scuttled back to the marina before the rain got too heavy.

Straight away Lucy was game to try her hand at the tiller – which is when I remembered how short she is. She took to helming very quickly but it wasn't easy for her to see over the bow and she had to cross the boat to push the helm right over. She slid through her first bridge impressively, without touching either side.

We soon reached Marbury Lock and moored up pretty niftily for Lucy and Bronwyn's first attempt. After a quick primer course in locking I went back to bring the boat in. With our first lock behind us it was still raining, so time to settle down for supper and an evening of catching up over a glass or two. We secured the boat, switched off the engine and opened the bar – this was what it was all about. With her usual efficiency Lucy had cooked and frozen a luxurious coq au vin earlier in the week and brought it with her on the train. It was perfect.

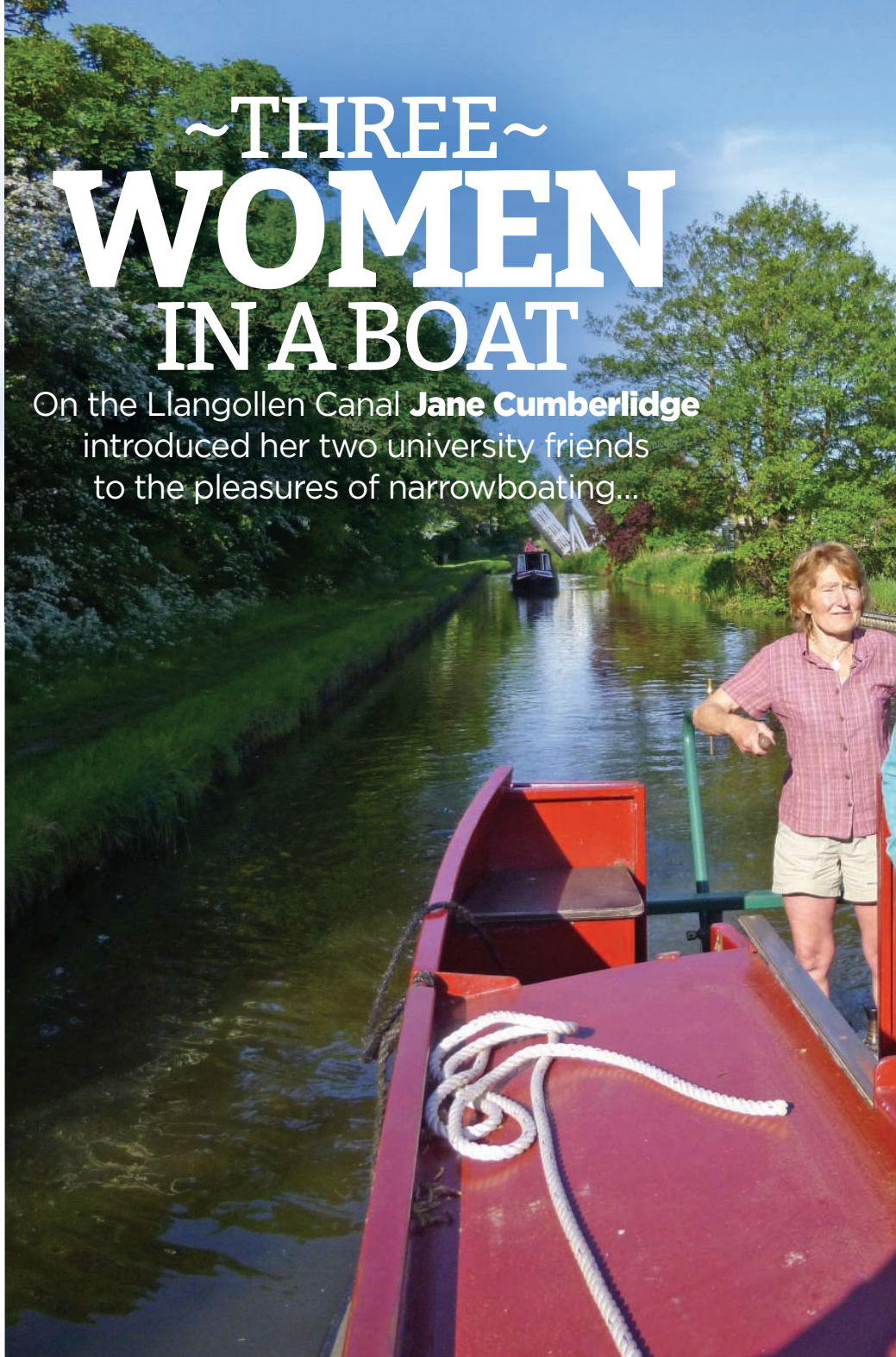
Locking practice

Waking to the drumming of rain I began to wonder if it was going to do this *all* week. When it eased a bit we decided to get underway but we were soon back in full waterproofs, heading for Quoisley Lock. Bron and Lucy were ready to hop ashore

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~THREE~ WOMEN IN A BOAT

On the Llangollen Canal **Jane Cumberlidge** introduced her two university friends to the pleasures of narrowboating...



as we approached the bottom gates, but someone was waving us on. This was Ken, who told us he was in a good mood that day and would work the lock for us. As the boat rose we saw Ken's stall of vegetables, eggs and kindling, so we bought some enormous onions which lasted the whole week.

Above Povey's I suggested Bronwyn tried her hand at the tiller. All would have been fine if the rain hadn't chosen that moment to pour down torrentially with strong gusts of wind across the canal. As Bron was pulling her hood up, the wind caught our bow and we were soon among the thorn bushes on the bank. Taking over the helm I found the current was holding us firmly in and it took some brisk manoeuvring to extricate ourselves, with

friendly shouted instructions from a boater moored by the towpath. Women drivers!

My crew were now slick lock operators so we passed up the flight of three without fuss and then moored to wait our turn in Grindley staircase. With one boat ahead of us, the volunteer on duty called us in and we worked up the three-rise with his help. At the top we stopped to fill up with water and had our long-overdue morning coffee.

Approaching Whitchurch, Bronwyn became chief bridge operator while Lucy took the helm again around the sharp bends towards Fenn's Bank and the famous mosses. We wondered what life must have been like in the lonely looking canal house at the junction with the old Prees Branch.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Chief bridge operator; Our rescuers; This is the engine.

Worse things happen at sea

The next day I woke to rain rattling on the roof again so decided there was no hurry to get going. After a relaxed breakfast I phoned home for an informed update on the weather and my husband told me that the front should clear by lunchtime. As the rain seemed to be easing we got going at about 11 from our mooring near Bettisfield. Lucy was honing her skills at helming and negotiating bridges as we entered a reach with rather shallow edges and stones either side. Just as I was suggesting she should stay a little further off the bank, Lucy reported that the tiller wouldn't move... and then the engine cut out!

I turned the key off as we drifted into another thorn bush. Once I had the floor up

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and the weedhatch open I could see we had something rather nasty around the prop. Then I started pulling out vast quantities of white fibre. Obviously a duvet had found its way into the canal by fair means or foul, and once waterlogged had sunk and become invisible. Lucy edged down the side of the boat to bring me a black bin bag for the debris. A passing narrowboat asked if we needed any help – “Oh, yes please!” They towed us to a good section of bank before Andy, from *Centurion*, came aboard to help clear the prop and then check the engine. We filled four black bin bags with the soggy duvet.

Thanking our rescuers, we decided to stay put for lunch and hope the sun came out. So much for fronts passing through. Not only

did the rain not stop, but it was so hard once we started again that I could barely see a boat on the other side of a bridge. Then we had a cracking hailstorm. Things could only get better.

Bilge pump problems

After our eventful day the sun did appear and we spent a quiet evening below New Marton locks. I woke in the dark and thought I could hear an engine. Bronwyn and Lucy were talking slightly anxiously. Had I left the keys in and was someone trying to steal the boat? No, we weren't moving. Had I left the heating on? No, it was quite chilly. By now I'd joined the confab in the aft cabin and Bronwyn reported hearing running water. As I groped my way outside

BRONWYN'S VIEW

Our leader faced seven days of near-misses with other canal boats, entanglements in canal vegetation and the task of teaching the rudiments of canal etiquette.

I remember Chirk Aqueduct for a nail-biting yet exhilarating stint at the helm, but the sheer scale, height and chutzpah of the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct was breathtaking. We all seemed to hold our breath when crossing, hardly daring to glance at the River Dee 125ft below. It was no less alarming to walk across, despite the railings along the towpath side.

Late-night towpath strollers passing *Song Thrush* may have been unnerved to hear middle-aged karaoke singers accompanying *Mama Mia* on DVD! As old friends, we talked over student lives, now rather dimly recalled, but during our week on the beautiful Llangollen Canal new memories were created... which, after all, are the really precious things in life. Oh, and photos, to aid retrieval of those memories!

By our final evening we felt that a good start had been made in learning to handle a narrowboat, and also understanding how canals combine a fascinating industrial past with an amazing leisure industry present.

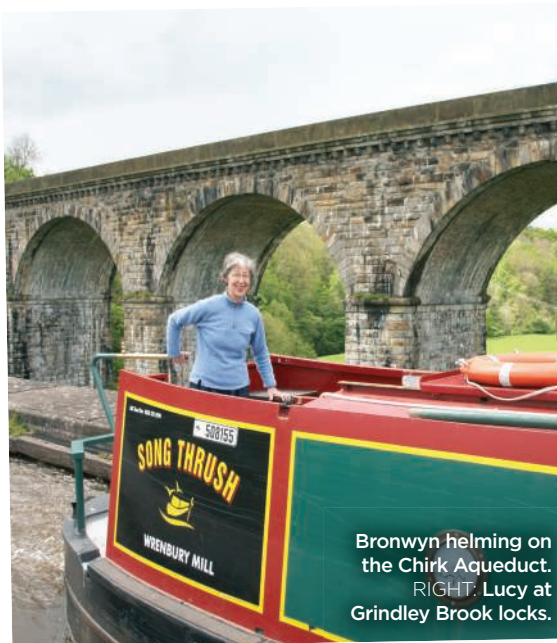
LUCY'S VIEW

Canal boats, well this one, seem very well equipped. All home comforts were provided and the mattresses were great.

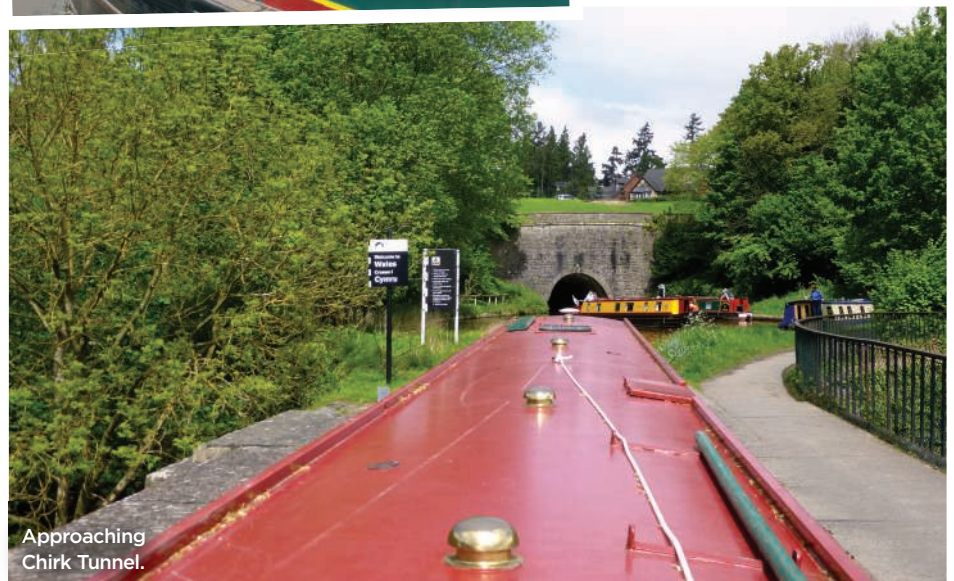
As we woke only to the sound of birds, the ship's rule of not setting off too early was very pleasant. Beautiful countryside, the May and lilac blossom was visually and fragrantly splendid. The abundance of colourful cottage gardens alongside was completely unexpected.

Would I recommend a canal holiday? Yes, especially with friends. Great fun and plenty to do, or not. Interesting places to moor for shopping and all very peaceful and relaxing, except when you are helming... then you earn your pint. The most enjoyable experience was being able to moor away from the bustle of human intervention – no traffic noise or even farm animals where we stopped – just peace, perfect peace.

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Bronwyn helming on the Chirk Aqueduct. RIGHT: Lucy at Grindley Brook locks.



Approaching Chirk Tunnel.

and Lucy brought a torch we heard the automatic bilge pump squirting over the side.

Up came the hatch again and we peered in. I couldn't see any water coming in by the stern-gland, but gave the greaser a few turns to be on the safe side. As Lucy and I returned to the cabin, Bron was consulting the large folder which came with the boat. If all else fails, read the instructions. Just as we were wondering if the duvet had done serious damage, the pump stopped. Peace and quiet again. After waiting a while to see if it restarted we turned in. For the rest of the trip Bronwyn became chief bilge pump operator, checking it each time we tied up, but we never had any more problems.

Aqueducts

This was more like it. We woke to a bright sunny morning and set off in good time. Bronwyn soon tried helming again and got the measure quickly. I sounded the horn as we approached a tight bridge and a peacock in a garden responded by displaying his magnificent tail. Like naughty schoolgirls we hooted the horn a couple more times to see

him do it again. With her confidence renewed, Bronwyn steered us over the River Ceiriog on the Chirk Aqueduct and we crossed into Wales. Several boats were hovering between the aqueduct and the tunnel, so we joined the merry throng before taking our turn through.

We'd stowed the waterproofs and were now searching for suntan cream as we came out of the cutting and passed Chirk Marina. Lucy tried her hand at the next tunnel and then Bron hopped off for bridge-opening duties at Froncysyllte. Heading down the cut we were soon on what is probably the most famous structure on the British inland waterways.

Not keen on heights, Lucy contemplated going below to cross the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct but with our deep cockpit she was happy sitting on the towpath side. Bronwyn took photos and I teetered at the stern on the helm. While I've always been good at heights, this was distinctly nerve-racking – you really feel as if you are standing over the edge without a safety harness.

Up to Llangollen

On the Trevor side of the aqueduct there



Crossing Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Jane helming; Hurleston Junction; The Alvechurch base at Wrenbury Mill.



was much activity and a fleet of boats packed into the basin. This obscured the way through to the pretty berth under the old stone bridge. A coach load of Japanese tourists had just disgorged and they were trekking across the aqueduct towpath taking selfies and photos of each other.

At Llangollen we only had sufficient time to visit the town or go up to Horseshoe Falls. The shops and tearooms won the day. We nearly came back laden with books from the amazing second-hand bookshop above one of the main street cafés, but instead we splashed out on goodies from two of the tempting delis.

Homeward bound

Fortunately the return trip to Wrenbury was less eventful than the outward one, though not without incident. Arriving at New Marton locks just after six in the evening, Bron started to close the top gate behind the boat but it stuck fast. Lucy walked round the lock to give her a hand but it still only moved through a short arc before jamming. With *Song Thrush* safely in the lock I stepped off to help as well. Downloaded by Jane Cumberlidge from waterwaysworld.com

but to no avail. I had visions of spending the night in the lock or just above it, as I doubted we'd get assistance anytime soon.

Another boat was between the two locks waiting to come up and one of the couples walked up to help with the gates. In true manly fashion the husband said "Just hand me the pole", which I duly did. He fished around by the gate and sill, swung the gate back and forth – and it stuck. Soon their friend came up to join the show. After much prodding with the pole, swishing of the gate and general muttering, something must have shifted as the gate finally shut. Almost an hour after arriving we passed down the lock.

Next day we stopped at Ellesmere and enjoyed a stroll around the colourful town, visiting Vermeulen's deli to buy wonderful bread and pies for lunch. We met up with *Centurion* again briefly – were they perhaps a bit edgy because they thought we might ask for help again?

Back at base, we packed up the boat quite early on the Saturday and drove to Hurleston Junction so that Lucy and Bronwyn could see

the start of the canal. It was a busy, sunny morning with plenty of boat activity and lots of walkers and cyclists on the towpath – a good place to end an action-packed trip. I'd had a great week and enjoyed a rare opportunity to share my enthusiasm for the waterways with good friends. And at the end of the cruise neither of my gallant crew proclaimed: 'Well, I wouldn't do that again.'

FACT FILE

We chose our comfortable *Song Thrush* from the excellent Alvechurch base at Wrenbury Mill Marina. The 60ft Thrush-class was easy for three to handle with the advantage of two bathrooms. The team at Wrenbury were friendly and welcoming and *Song Thrush* was ready and immaculate when we arrived. Martin gave us a clear and thorough instruction session and was very helpful when we phoned about our duvet problem.

Contact: Wrenbury Mill Marina, 01270 780544, Central booking: 0330 3330 590, www.everythingcanalboats.com