

Gailey to Market Drayton July 2019

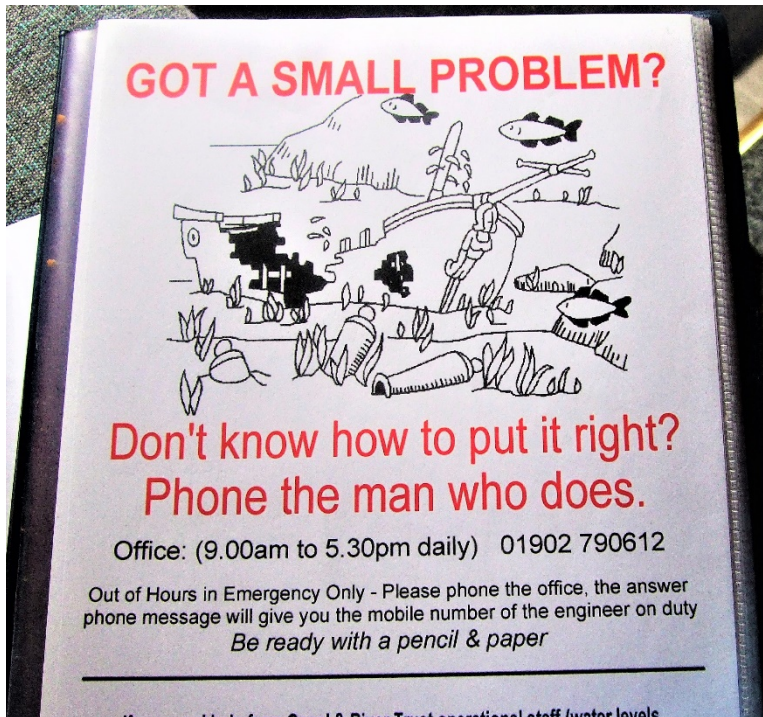
Gailey Wharf stands alongside the pretty Staffordshire & Worcestershire canal, and is a great location from which to do anything from an easy weekend's cruising for beginners to the more ambitious Four Counties Ring with its 92 locks including the 25 lock flight 'Heartbreak Hill', and the 1.5 mile long Harecastle 'Scarecastle' Tunnel.

This is my 4th year of canal cruising with my husband David; in previous years we've tried the beautiful Llangollen, the historic Bridgewater, and the scenic Monmouthshire & Brecon canal. I love to find routes with nice pubs and towns to stop at, an aqueduct and tunnel or two, and not too many locks. This year we've decided on a relaxed week cruising from Gailey to Autherley Junction and then turning right to follow the Shropshire Union canal up to Market Drayton. Just 7 locks each way, one tunnel and one aqueduct – perfect!

Day 1

We arrive at Gailey Wharf just before 3pm to be greeted by Katie at reception. After checking our plans with us she hands us over to Nigel to show us onto our boat and explain how everything works.

And what a boat! Gailey Wharf are a bit special in that their boats are hand built on the premises, and they often add their own unique touches to make them a little different. Our home for the next week is to be the House Wren, a 49ft narrowboat with a comfy double bedroom, smart bathroom, fully fitted galley, and a spacious dining area at the front of the boat. Some of the features we really like on this boat are a handy little airing cupboard at the stern for any damp clothes, LED lighting throughout operated by touch, and a shower draining switch inside the shower cubicle that we can flick on while we shower instead of draining the shower afterwards (in case you are new to boating, on a canal boat the plughole in the shower is below the canal water level, so a pump has to be used to suck the water out of the shower tray!) For reassurance in case of problems, there is a useful manual on board with loads of information about our boat. And if we need help at any time, it's just a phone call away.....



Just one phone number to remember in case of emergencies!

Our boat – the House Wren



We cast off just after 4pm in lovely warm weather, following the twists and turns of the canal towards our stop for the first night, the Anchor Inn at Cross Green. Along the way we pass a moored boat whose occupant tells us exactly where the pub is and that there isn't another one after that for over 2 hours – which is helpful and means we make a beeline for the Anchor!



Moorings at the Anchor Inn

There are plenty of good mooring spaces just along from the pub, and the towpath there is furnished with sturdy mooring rings, so we are all moored up just after 6pm and ready for the pub. After a tasty meal right next to the canal (it's warm enough to sit outside), we walk back to our boat and are amazed to find that we have all 4 main tv channels. Television reception can be patchy on the canals, especially in rural areas, so we've got used to getting either the BBC channels but not the others, or the others but not BBC. It's all part of the fun!



Our boat ready for bed

Total cruising hours for the day = 2.

Day 2

One of the great things about canal boating is that you can set your own agenda and cruise as much or as little as you like every day. There are some great canal guidebooks available that I'd strongly suggest anyone gets if they are going on a self-drive cruise; they show you where all the towns, pubs, locks, tunnels, places of interest are etc. We have with us for this journey our trusty old Nicholson N4 guide. It cost us £17.95 but has seen us through the Llangollen canal, the Mon & Brec, and now the Staffie and Shropshire Union. Well worth the money!

We are rather leisurely boaters so after our usual breakfast of sausage sarnies cooked under the grill (with brown sauce on thick white bread – yum) we cast off at about 10.30am, heading south towards Wolverhampton. After about an hour, we reach a narrow cutting, once known as 'Pendeford Rockin'. This is a 600ft section of the Staffordshire & Worcestershire canal that was hewn out of hard sandstone. To reduce the amount of work needed, it was only made wide enough for one boat to pass through, except for a couple of passing places. Proceed with caution! We do meet a boat coming the other way but luckily, just before a passing place so we are able to pull over.

Soon after, we arrive at Autherley Junction, where we are turning right to join the Shropshire Union canal. It's quite a sharp bend, and we're pivoting perfectly until we see another boat exiting the lock which is just after the junction. So we reverse back out again!

Autherley
Junction – we're
turning right



Just after the turn is a stop lock in quite a pretty setting next to the tollhouse which once was used to collect fees for entering the canal.



Autherley Stop Lock



The old Toll House

Our Nicholson guide shows a water point just after the lock, but we can't see any sign of it – a couple in a boat passing us say they think it's by a white floating buoy, which we can see so we moor up next to it; no water point. Hmm... Since we have now stopped, we decide to drop in at the reception for Napton Narrowboats, where we buy a couple of brases and spot an enormous 'Rosie & Jim' on the wall. Rosie & Jim are lovable characters who had their own television series in the 1990's. The ragdolls which were made at the time are very popular amongst the boating community and if you travel the canals you are bound to see them peeking out of the windows of narrowboats. We got our own Rosie & Jim (from Ebay) last year and here they are, enjoying the sun!



The shop receptionist tells us that the water point is in fact one boat's length further on from the white buoy and we finally find it, not at all easy to spot as it is virtually hidden in the hedges.

After topping up our tank, we carry on cruising north, underneath the M54 and soon passing through the village of Brewood, which is an old Roman fort with buildings going back to the 14th century. It looks interesting so we think we'll stop there on our return journey. There are good visitor moorings and a pub next to the canal, so we could have stopped there for lunch, but we tend to make our own lunch on the boat when we are cruising and then treat ourselves to a meal out in the evening.

There is one aqueduct on this route, the Stretton Aqueduct, which carries the canal over the A5 – I wonder if any drivers are surprised by the sight of a boat going over the bridge above them? Built in 1832 out of cast iron, it looks in need of a little TLC as it is sadly rather rusty these days.



Approaching the
Stretton Aqueduct

...and the view from the top



Our destination for the end of the day is the village of Wheaton Aston, just past Wheaton Aston lock. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to us, the lock sill has been badly damaged with the result that water is leaking out of the lock at almost the same rate as it is being filled! It takes us nearly half an hour just to get through the lock (shortly after our trip, CRT scheduled repairs to the lock so thankfully it is now back in full working condition).

Once we escape from the lock, we find a mooring spot near Tavern Bridge 19 and are safely moored for the night by 4.30pm. Turning on the tv, we find it's the Wimbledon tennis final between Djokovic and Federer. This was an epic match, with Djokovic winning after 5 hours of play. Phew! Much easier for us watching with a cool beer....

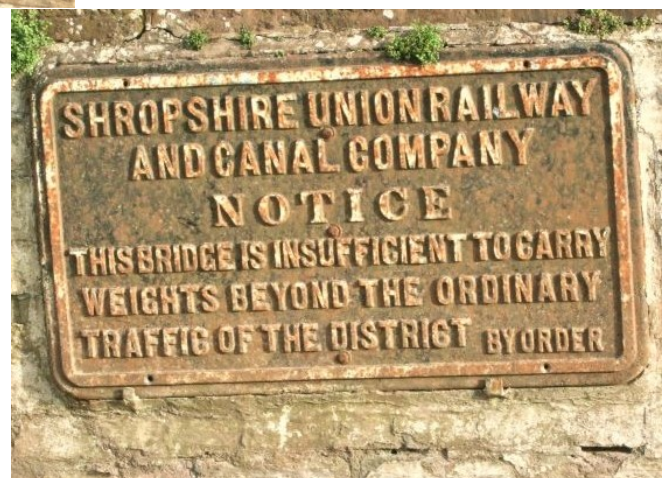
We decide to cross the bridge and visit the Hartley Arms for our evening meal. This attractive pub is canalside, right by the Tavern Bridge. It's Sunday evening so a Sunday Roast is in order!



Moorings at Wheaton Aston

Coming back over the bridge later, we see a sign on it which reads 'This bridge is insufficient to carry weights beyond the ordinary traffic of the district'.

Wonder what 'the ordinary traffic' is?
Probably a lot heavier than when this sign was put up!



Total cruising hours for the day = 5.5.

Day 3

Casting off at 10am, we know we've got lock-free cruising almost all the way to Market Drayton, so we decide to go for it! We are treated to a long section of wide and almost straight canal with views over gently rolling countryside – lovely and relaxing. After a couple of hours we reach Cowley tunnel, which doesn't look much like a tunnel at all, more like a natural phenomenon of the rock face. Apparently it was originally planned to be much longer, but after the first 74 metres the ground was unstable so they stopped and opened the tunnel out into a wide cutting instead. I found it quite atmospheric and other-worldly, with greenery and trees surrounding us around and above the rock.

Lovely neat brick-built tunnel entrance...



Rough-hewn exit

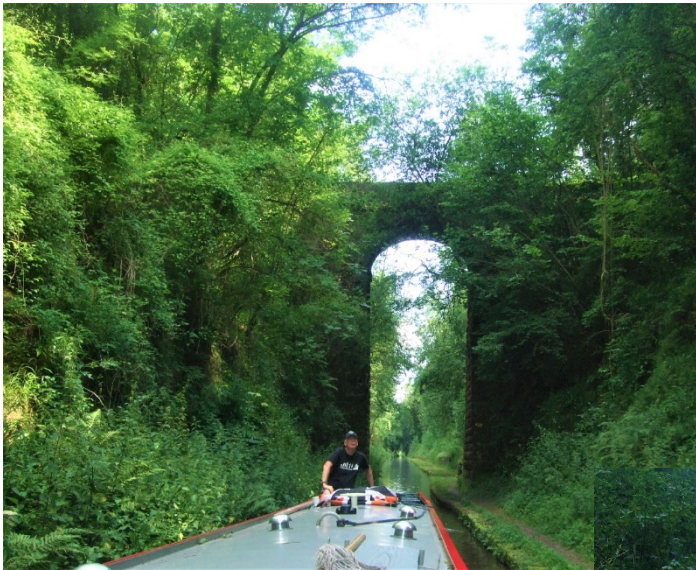
The next stretch of the canal is dotted with lots of cute private moorings with their own sheds/outhouses. We pass the village of Gnosall which has good moorings and several water points just after Gnosall Bridge.



Approach to Gnosall Bridge

The next main stopping point on this part of the canal is Norbury, but just before you get there you cruise over the mile-long Shelmore Embankment, which was the cause of much grief and expense to the canal builders in the 19th century. Contractors had to move huge amounts of earth to build the embankment, but every time they tried to complete it, the bank slipped and collapsed. By 1834 it was the only unfinished section of the whole canal, and by the time it was finally finished in 1835, Thomas Telford, who had designed it, had passed away. It remained quite unstable for a long time and there are flood gates at either end in case of a breach. Don't be nervous about crossing it though, it's now lined with mature trees and their roots help to stabilise it. We felt perfectly safe!

Carrying on past Norbury Junction (of which more later), we find ourselves in an almost magical part of the canal with lovely countryside, plenty of handy pubs, and several unusual and imposing high bridges.



Distinctive tall bridge.....

....and another



Lovely greenery all around us

A little later, I make lunch for us both and we eat 'on the move' with one of us manning (or womanning?) the tiller while the other takes a break. I'm sitting at the dining table when I notice that we are heading over to the righthand side of the canal. We must be having to make way for another boat I think, but

looking out of the window, there's nothing there. Odd....I soon realise that we are actually on a collision course with the side of the canal and I dash through the boat in a panic as we run aground, convinced that David has collapsed at the tiller; rushing up the stern steps, I find him looking embarrassed and saying 'I was thinking of something else – sorry!'

We try all sorts of tactics to get ourselves afloat again; trying to reverse off the bottom, standing on the side of the boat, pushing ourselves away from the bank with the boat pole. We do eventually manage to get the boat free and carry on with my husband looking suitably chastened and keeping his eyes firmly on the canal!

Just before the locks that lead down to Market Drayton, we pass through the beautiful Woodseaves Cutting, a very deep rock cutting which was made entirely by men without any powered machinery, and, emerging from the cutting, we find ourselves approaching Tyrley Wharf, where there is a winding hole (where you can turn your boat) and good mooring space.

Plenty of space here!



Now we have a choice; we could go down the 5 Tyrley locks and moor in Market Drayton itself, or we could moor up at Tyrley Wharf and then walk into Market Drayton along the towpath. Tackling the locks and on to Market Drayton takes approximately 1 hour 20 minutes, walking there along the towpath takes less than half an hour. Guess what we decided to do?

Having decided not to bother with the locks (we are so lazy), we turn our boat and moor up at the visitor moorings. Tyrley Wharf is very attractive, with the old stables and wharf buildings beside the top lock.



Beautiful Tyrley Top Lock. You can just see our boat moored up in the distance.

It's about 5pm, so we decide to leave our exploration of Market Drayton till the following morning. Our Nicholson Guide tells us there is a pub, the 'Four Alls', only 10 minutes' walk from our moorings. The guide also hints that the pub has a 'thought provoking' pub sign, so we are looking forward to seeing it!

Passing huge cornfields, we find the pub at the end of the road. I take a picture of the sign, but it is rather faded and it was dusk so I'm afraid it didn't come out. But to describe it, there's a painting of 4 different characters with a quote from each:

A king – 'I rule for all'

A minister – 'I pray for all'

A soldier – 'I fight for all'

A farmer – 'I pay for all'.

Hmmm..... anyway, it's good pub grub and a restful downhill walk back to the boat.

Total cruising hours for the day = 6.5.

Day 4

We wake to a beautiful warm summer's day. It's funny, the beds on a narrowboat are not particularly wide (the clue's in the name!), but it is so quiet and still at night on the canals that we always sleep really well. We live in a medium sized town, and it's so blissful to be free of the background hum of traffic that we are barely aware of until it isn't there anymore! Make sure you put your fenders down though, otherwise you are likely to spend the night gently knocking against the towpath and getting very little sleep. This is the voice of experience! Oh, and there was that night years ago when we moored up next to a road by accident which was a bit of a nightmare (literally). Most designated visitor moorings on countryside routes are wonderfully quiet though and the ones at Tyrley Wharf were no exception.

We set off at about 10am to walk along the towpath to Market Drayton. I thoroughly recommend this walk; the towpath is in good condition and the scenery is just spellbinding.



The walk down to Market Drayton past the Tyrley locks.

We soon come a helpful signpost to the town, and make our way there, being careful not to disturb any frogs or toads.



Market Drayton is a traditional old market town, with several timber framed buildings. One of its claims to fame is as the home of gingerbread so we go on a gingerbread hunt which I'm happy to say is successful! If you

call at the Tourist Information Centre there is a town trail to follow which takes in the old marketplace, pubs, church and Tudor houses. We wander into the Buttercross café which is in the heart of the town, and we are lucky enough to arrive in time to buy the most delicious gingerbread men straight from the oven, still warm and a little bit squidgy. There are some army barracks nearby and we meet a charming Padre from the Royal Irish regiment. He can't tell us where he has been on duty lately, just that it was 'somewhere hot and not very nice'.

The Buttercross –
19th century
marketplace.





The Buttercross café



Yum!

Eventually we tear ourselves away from the café and walk back to our boat in glorious sunshine. We get back in time to have lunch afloat, and then cast off at about 1.15pm. We want to stop at an historic pub called the Anchor Inn at High Offley, which was built around 1830 to serve the canal and sounds fascinating. See this link from CAMRA's website:

<https://pubheritage.camra.org.uk/pubs/307>



The Anchor Inn at High Offley

We get there at about 4.15pm, but they aren't opening until about 7pm and we don't think we want to hang around that long so cast off again and continue our journey. If you do this route and get to go into the pub, let me know what it's like!

We are aiming to moor up for the night at Norbury Junction, and we arrive there at about 6pm. Again, there are good visitor moorings here after you go under the bridge. Norbury Junction used to be where the Shrewsbury & Newport canal joined the Shropshire Union with Shrewsbury, but nowadays there is a just a small section left with a dry dock at the end, run by Norbury Wharf Ltd.

Norbury boatyard and dry dock



It's a busy little junction, with a hire fleet, private moorings, chandlery,

gift shop, boat sales, tearoom, and of course a pub going by the name of the Junction Inn (what else)? We visit the pub for our evening meal, and by the time we come out again the ducks are getting ready for bed on the grass.



Total cruising hours for the day = 4.

Day 5

Today we are aiming to meet up with David's brother and sister-in-law in the village of Brewood (pronounced Brood), so we set off at 9.30am to make sure we have plenty of time to get there and get a good mooring spot. Soon after starting out, we come across a group of people aboard a dayboat who are veering all over the canal and laughing that they don't know what they're doing. We manage to get past them without hitting them and carry on, but then hear a crash behind us – they've reversed into another narrowboat that was trying to get past! Soon afterwards we moor up at the water point in Gnosall and the boat that was hit came past us. I call to the helmsman 'are you ok?' and he laughs and said that they've managed to escape from the 'crazy gang'. Well, we've all got to learn....

Gnosall is a small village with a handful of pubs, a 15th century church, and in 2019, an inaugural Canal Festival which ran from July 19th to July 21st. While we are there, boats are arriving to take part in the festival, including historic boats on display and other boats selling arts & crafts, coffee, pizzas, and even a blacksmith with an on-board forge. We chat to a man who has been making intricate rope fenders for over 20 years – quite an art. The two canalside pubs are providing food, drink and entertainments, there's a Gin & Cider festival, a guided walk, and finally a canal quiz in the Boat Inn.

Having topped up our water, we carry on, back through the Cowley tunnel, back through the Wheaton Aston lock (waiting for it to fill was like watching paint drying), over the Stretton Aqueduct, and we arrive at Brewood just after 2pm. The visitor moorings are just after Brewood Bridge, and as we go under it a boat pulls off leaving us a space – perfect!

It's another lovely afternoon, so we take a walk around this fascinating village. There are lots of historic pubs to see, and I just have to pay a visit to the traditional sweet shop for some goodies.



Sweet Retreat, Brewood

At around 7pm we meet up with our relatives in the Bridge Inn where a very tasty curry is on offer for just £6. They then join us on our cosy little boat for a few cocktails (apart from Sharon, who's driving. Sorry Sharon 😞). It's a late night for us, but we knew we had a very easy day coming up so we could have a good lie-in.



Bridge Inn at Brewood



Welcome refreshments!

Total cruising hours for the day = 4.5.

Day 6

We don't cast off until about 10.45am, and after 2 hours are back at the Atherley Stop Lock. When you go through this lock heading east, the junction is just after the lock, so you need to pick up your lock handler immediately as there is no towpath on the left and you are turning left.

I'd noticed in this part of the country that a lot of private boats have been named after Tolkein's 'Middle Earth' characters. We saw the Earl of Rohan, Rivendell and Smaug, amongst other more whimsical names like The Flying Pig, Hedgepig (what's with all the pigs?) and Narrow Minded.



We meander back up the Staffie canal with the M54 above us reminding us of the fast pace of modern life that we had left behind for a while, and moor up back at the Anchor Inn for our final night afloat. After a bit of tv watching it's off to the pub for a meal and to plan our next boating adventure!

Total cruising hours for the day = 3.



Day 7

Time to take the House Wren back home. She's been a marvellous boat and we are sad to leave her. Unfortunately for us, the heavens decide to cry about it too and our final 2 hours of cruising are accomplished in torrential rain. All the ABC hire boats come with 2 sets of waterproofs that would fit anyone apart from a giant, so we take it in turns to stand in the rain on the tiller with our wet weather gear on and the rain dripping off our noses!

Back at Gailey Wharf and the end of a fantastic week. I'd thoroughly recommend this route to anyone looking for either a relaxing week or a slightly more energetic 4 night holiday.

Total cruising hours for the day = 2.



The Shropshire Union canal - water, nature, and blue, blue skies.