

USUALLY AFLOAT



by

MORTIMER BONES

also

IONA ALEXANDER

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To the memory of Boots
A noble hound

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Iona's columns in *Canal Boat Magazine*, published under the name Mortimer Bones, have been a source of delight to, well, most people, as you will see. We thought it would be fun to bring together the first two-and-a-bit years of these columns and a couple of other items too. The versions here are close to the originals Iona penned, and sometimes differ a little from the published ones.

Wild Goose was Iona's first boat. She bought *Nightingale* in 2005 and renamed it *Bones*, an allusion to her fondness for collecting animal specimens, and to a childhood pet cat which went under the name of Mortimer Bones. Not that all members of the family acknowledged a nomenclature that was felt to have something macabre about it. It became Iona's *nom de plume*.

A Note on Jameses

There are slightly too many Jameses for ease of comprehension in this compilation. Iona experimented with calling one Charles in the published articles, but soon forgot. This James is the electrical engineer who was the previous owner of *Wild Goose*. Ironically *Wild Goose* was a former hire boat under the name *Guildford Empress* on the Wey Navigation, where *Bones* was to enjoy a disastrous holiday involving its skipper breaking her thumb. The Gothic clergyman mentioned from time to time is also James. Usually it's clear from the context which James is intended. To help matters, Iona's father is another James. And a clergyman.

Thrupp Wide, November 2009



Boating Beginnings

Perhaps boating was in my genes: my father was at college with a keen sailor, and they used to take a yacht around the west coast and stop off at islands to help with the farm work. In my teens my father and his friend took me, a friend of mine, and my dad's friend's kids on a nine-man yacht around the west coast of Scotland, specifically the small isles. I vomited for most of the time. I am told all true sailors do this.

Before living aboard a boat it is advisable to do your research, spend some time looking at boats and go on a narrow boat holiday to test your compatibility with the water. Needless to say I did none of these things. Prior to living on a boat I had never been on a narrow boat holiday, and in fact had only been inside one narrow boat, my friend James's: it was his boat that became my first. I was given the keys with the strict instruction that the boat was to be floating when he returned from his two-year stint in Ethiopia with VSO. It was an ex-hire boat, 62' long, purple and a complete delight. James had done sterling work re-fitting it, and it became an exceptionally comfortable, comforting and delightful place to live. However, I was on a steep learning curve, and I think my major triumph came after lighting a fire in the potbelly stove which was so efficient it engulfed the boat, and the street I was moored along, in plumes of thick black smoke. Some passers-by even



Moving Wild Goose through Somerton Deep Lock, 2004

banged on the door to see if we were on fire! I quickly discovered that there is one thing that is essential when adapting to life aboard and that is a sense of humour; if all else fails, laugh. One cold, bitter evening I couldn't light the fire, had run out of gas, and to top it off I had run the batteries down and was without light. I sat on a chair in dismay; the whole situation was so ridiculous, I could only chuckle at the irony (I recommend star-jumps for warming oneself up as chuckling isn't quite enough). I learnt how a gentle breeze can push a narrowboat into the off-side of the bank, and that there is nothing you can do but moor up, clamber through the undergrowth and go about your usual business as if nothing has happened, until the wind dies. I also learnt quite a lot about wildlife, especially ducks. I was horrified one morning to hear splashing and distressed duck sounds so I went to investigate, to find one duck trying to drown the other. I threw some bread at them and made lion-like noises and eventually the drake gave up on his prey, wobbled up onto the bank and ran off. It was during this that I realised, to my horror, that I had just disrupted his nuptials. If that were not demoralising enough, the ducks would bounce onto the roof very early in the morning and perform some kind of mating dance/fight. It is difficult explaining the cause of this disrupted sleep to people who are concerned that you look a bit bleary-eyed and vacant. I could only say I was fine, and it was just the excitement of spring.

The two years of living on *Wild Goose* passed with many amusing mishaps and panics, but I had a wonderful set of friends who were excellent at coming out to help me, the lone boater, battle with the waterways, elements and boating. I loved it, and I think they did too. At the end of my time, the boat was floating as required, and I was coming to the end of my D-Phil in cognitive neuropsychology. I had a new job to go to after my viva, and it was time to make a decision. Did I want to continue boating and thus buy my own floating vessel, or did I want to move into rented accommodation? People often tell me that boating is not a cheaper way of life, but I did the sums and decided not only was it cheaper, but it included my own space, freedom to travel around (albeit at walking pace), and a waterside property, with a million-dollar view (albeit a 54' by 6'6" one). Next I needed to find a boat that was suitable around the price I wanted to pay: that was roughly 25K and many of the boats at that price looked distinctly unsuitable. I settled finally on a family holiday boat that seemed perfect. There were enough beds for guests, a table to sit at, a quiet engine and more importantly a well-deck that would suit two deck chairs. I failed to notice the lack of heating, and the slightly wobbly tongue-and-groove, but overall I decided this boat had exactly what I wanted – a sound hull and a sound engine – and a new boat safety certificate had been issued earlier in the year. The owners were fantastic people, and I had a super

time helping them move the boat around the Warwickshire canals and eventually on to its hull and engine survey at Calcutt boatyard. The deal was done, we both signed a contract saying that the boat was mine, and I paid a deposit. Two weeks later I picked the boat up from Banbury, which was the destination of the owner's farewell cruise, in exchange for a hefty cheque. My minimal requirements for a boat really reflected my lack of choice, but they would cause me no end of 'fun' in the months and years ahead ...

Thames Trip 1: Top Hats and Elsans

I took my new pride and joy down to Oxford where I was living. Time was tight; my final viva exam for my doctorate was looming after which I had two days before I started a new job in Surrey. I decided to take a week's holiday to move the new boat to its new moorings, during which I would revise and buff up for my viva on my return. Having lived aboard *Wild Goose* for two years, I felt I was a hardened and experienced boater, and what could be simpler than a delightful trip down the beautiful picturesque Thames to Surrey. It became clear within the first few hours of the trip that I had a lot to learn about boating and crew.

My friend James said he would assist. James is an academic-turned-trainee-clergyman with a penchant for period costume and actually something of a hazard in a delightful way. I started moving the boat down the canal but he had still failed to turn up by the time the sun was setting. Just as I was beginning to get a little cross I glimpsed through the dusk a figure pottering down the towpath. I gasped as I realised he was in his frock coat and top hat looking exceptionally pristine. In his waistcoat he usually looks suitably Victorian for canal-boating but this really was over the top. I asked him what on earth he was dressed like that for, and it transpired that while I thought he was coming to help me move the boat, he thought he was taking me off to a club night in Oxford! Gin was required – it usually is.

Eventually we did arrive in Abingdon and some time later prepared for our week of leisure moving the boat down the Thames. It would be easy. While I swotted up on my thesis, I thought I might be able to fit in some home improvements as well. I already had a good set of tools that I'd collected when tinkering with my BSA Bantam and Triumph 5TA but I didn't have any power tools so I went off to the local DIY store and bought an impressive rechargeable screwdriver-cum-drill.

It was mid-day when we set off: the sun was shining, the water was glistening and we both felt calm, tranquil and in love with boating. By the time we arrived in Wallingford a few short hours later we were both almost insensible from the heat, and in desperation moored up to find somewhere to cool down. All the shade had already been nabbed. Frantically scouring the town we spotted a branch of Waitrose and made a bee-line for it. The relief as we hit the freezer section was indescribable and we spent some time staring enraptured at bags of garden peas. Back on the boat we had another gin, really an excuse to break into the ice.

Wild Goose had had a pump-out loo, inconvenient in the sense that you had to move the entire boat with your loo to have it emptied, but at least it kept your relationship with your ordure a decently distant one. Now we had to deal with the mysteries of the porta-potti, a rather disagreeably brown and beige porta-potti at that. By the time we passed Henley neither we nor the porta-potti could take any more, so at the next available stop, at Hambleden Lock, the offending loo had to be emptied. I decreed this was no job for a lady, and still have an agreement with James not to release the photographs which record his reaction to visiting an Elsan point for the first time. As the journey went on I began mentally composing my masterpiece reference work, 'Elsans of the Southern Waterways'.

I declared the following day a day of rest, put a chair up for James on the stern in the shade and surrounded him with books and a pot of tea. As I pottered around inside I decided to have a look at my new power tool and see how effective it really was. There were some units and partitions that were not up to the job so I pointed it at them.



I hadn't realised the extent of my experimenting until James came to the doors for lunch and a refill of tea. As he stood in the doorway I looked around me and realised the majority of the boat was now dismantled and I hadn't even left a pathway to escape. He was aghast – and we couldn't even get at the gin.

Dismantling begins on NB Nightingale, eventually to be renamed Bones

Thames Trip 2: Outlawed

I moved everything onto the roof and into the front well-deck and set about building a new kitchen cupboard. Now, the boat did not have just one water tank in the bow, but several separate inflatable tanks distributed through the interior. My new cupboard was going to be positioned over one of them, so I disconnected it from the system without any trouble at all. Triumphantly I filled my spanking new cupboard with all the pottery my adorable aunt had made for me: I must be the only boater who has an entire pottery dinner service for 12 people!

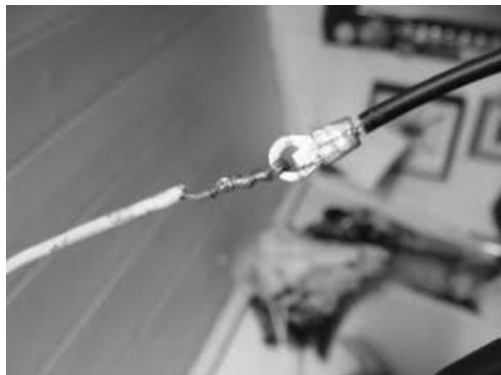
The following day we filled up with water, disposed of some of the excess plywood, and set off towards Wargrave Lock. As I entered the lock I bumped the wall and there came an almighty crash from inside the boat. 'Move along, nothing to see', I declared, and carried on regardless.

We moored up and I went in to investigate. I hadn't disconnected the water tank at all. My carefully constructed cupboard had been merely balanced on the now-inflated tank and fell off with the bump. The pottery survived, as did the cupboard, and we both laughed over my profound stupidity with another glass of gin. I think it was here that hysteria began setting in!

We continued our journey and eventually made it to our final overnight stop at Staines, the birthplace, as the town proudly proclaims, of linoleum. We had a lovely meal nearby and looked forward to setting off in the morning for a short cruise to my final mooring and then driving homewards for my viva.

What with the heat and the excitement, I still had not had a chance to look at my thesis so we decided to set off early so I could have a leisurely final day on my mooring. The engine had different ideas. It failed to start. Nothing I tried worked, and in the end I concluded we needed a new battery. Halfords was a short walk away, but in our reduced state of health neither of us welcomed the idea of manhandling a caravan battery back to the boat. Conveniently sited next to Halfords was Homebase, where we bought a trolley and assembled it on their step, being avoided by bemused customers with pots of paint and packets of screws. We cheerfully wheeled the battery back to the boat but were baffled when the engine still wouldn't start. My attempts to persuade it produced only smoke, and having no idea what to do we repaired to a café where I called the Environment Agency to see whether they could recommend someone in the area to come to our aid.

The EA, it turned out, were delighted to hear from us. We were, apparently, on the run! It seemed that I had somehow neglected to send in my boat safety certificate with my licence application, and instructions had been issued that my boat was not to move an inch further. The EA were quite pleased to learn that in its current state it wasn't going anywhere. For me, though, this was not good news at all. Not only did I not want to abandon the ship in Staines, I simply had to return to Oxford for my exam. Eventually, after much persuasion, I managed to get the number of someone to come and help.



Two chaps from a local boatyard arrived in record time and I showed them the engine. The moment they looked down the hatch, they were horrified. Had they not been sterling artisans they might well have wept. The electricians were, they assured me, the worst they had ever seen, and the boat shouldn't go anywhere at all. This again was not good news. However, the

sparkies were sporting gentlemen and lashed together a temporary fix for me. I was given strict orders not to switch the engine off until I arrived at my destination, as they couldn't guarantee it would start again, and instructions what to do if everything started smoking and sparking!

Off we set, and within a short time I was sailing into the marina in the middle of a thunderstorm, which seemed appropriate. Delighted to have arrived after a tough week's boating, I settled down for a victorious gin while James went back via train to retrieve his car, a journey he accomplished in less than an hour and a half. Despite having mere moments to look through my thesis, the examiners were kind and I successfully completed my exam: I was now officially Dr Bones. It was a triumphant end to a hectic few weeks.

Warming Up

Heating on a narrowboat is essential if you are going to survive the winter; thermals will suffice but I found my temper wearing thin without the added benefit of a stove. I had already removed the gas fire that came with the boat as it looked more like an implement of torture than a winter comfort. *Wild Goose* had had a pot-belly stove which looked stunning, but under my care I

found it inefficient and difficult to control. Not only that but it had a baffle up the chimney which, without my realising it, broke; it took me several weeks to realise why fire-lighting had become rather smoky and incompatible with daily life.

A couple of boater chums had Mørso 'Squirrel' stoves and I found them very impressive: they were efficient and looked great. I was also rather charmed by the squirrel emblazoned on the side! After much deliberation, penny-saving and supply-searching I bought my stove at Uxbridge Boat Centre for a very reasonable price with excellent service. It was heaved into the back of the car, popped onto a trolley near the boat and wheeled very carefully down the slope leading to the mooring pontoon. At the bottom of the slope the trolley stopped abruptly and the stove didn't. Thankfully it didn't fall in the water and it was still intact by the time I unpacked it.

It was several weeks before I stopped looking at the stove admiringly and actually installed it. I had spent several evenings on the boat with the ice settling around me (or around the hull), balancing the discomfort of the increasing cold against the trauma of cutting a hole in the roof. Then, one evening in November whilst my chum James was sorting out some of the electrics (I had been sitting in the dark of an evening since July), I was so cold I thought I was going to be sick. Before hypothermia decided the issue for me, I went up onto the roof armed with my drill, jigsaw and pint of water to cool the blade and set to drilling a hole - it was so cold the glass of water actually froze. The jigsaw was not up to the job, and the work was punctuated by gentle plops as blades flew off randomly into the water. I now have a jigsaw that requires the blade to be screwed in. Much safer! Left with just a drill, I put in zillions of little holes in a circle, or rather almost-circle as it was getting darker, and eventually managed to cut and file a beautiful hole. You can imagine the sounds of fury from my roof when I realised I had drawn the circle too small!!!! I can't imagine how I managed to do it, but that was it for the night. At least the effort warmed me up.

The following morning I managed to make the hole the correct size and measured the chimney flue which I was going to need to chop down as it was too long. I eyed up the angle grinder, but James decided I wasn't quite safe enough to use it and he cut it down for me – good job as I had measured that wrong too! I positioned the stove on a 2x2 frame with a piece of 18-inch ply screwed onto it, and then placed a marble slab I had bought off someone from behind a gate for five pounds on top of that. The stove feet were secured with bolts that went through a hole in the marble and screwed into the ply board underneath. This also secured the marble. Where the flue passed through the

ceiling inside the boat I reached behind the hole (which was bigger than the flue so there was no wood touching it) and pulled out as much of the insulation as I possibly could. I posted the flue through the roof, and through a 15cm-square piece of fireboard that was going to cover the hole in the ceiling, into the stove collar and sealed the collar end with fire cement (I



replaced this later with high temperature silicon sealant). I then positioned the roof collar on the top and bolted it down through the roof, sealed the outside with the same sealant and proudly placed the chimney on top. The fire surround is fireproof board secured either to ply or mounted on a frame and then tiled. Tiling is messy and great fun; I decided (honest guv!) after much deliberation to space the tiles slightly unevenly to add character.

The stove is a complete and utter triumph. My word – I can feel the pride running through my veins as I write this; it is wonderful. And I managed it before losing any bodily extremities to the cold.

Onto the River

I firmly believe in taking things slowly, judging the river, route, and potential obstacles, and planning one's journey with care to ensure that it all goes as smoothly as possible. The problem with this is that as soon as I am behind the tiller my mind goes blank.

I was armed with confidence as I set up river yesterday to the Elsan point by Abingdon lock. I swung into a mooring space just downstream from the lock, got off the boat and then used some nifty rope work to counteract the weir stream which wanted to push the boat into the vessel moored behind me. Feeling proud of myself for having succeeded in this task without any mishaps, I strapped my loo to the trolley and meandered up the towpath feeling like a proper boater; I had even covered the cassette in a black plastic bag to add to the style. It was with triumph that I emptied the loo and gazed across the evening waters staring at the ducks swimming around as I revelled in being a boater. It was with less triumph that I realised that I was now

sporting a rather unattractive loo-emptying-induced polka dot outfit! Not only did I look bedraggled by the time I had finished the task, but I had a unique and rather unpleasant smell.

I was feeling rather sheepish as I returned to my boat looking more flustered and far less boater-like. It was time to pull the pins and head back downstream to meet some chums in a local pub. The weir stream is great for turning boats around, and I was soon cheered up by a fine manoeuvre - I pushed the bow out and hung onto the rope attached to the stern and watched as the bow swung around and pointed downstream. At the crucial moment I stepped onto the stern and roared off downriver. Getting back onto the boat at exactly the right time was critical – almost too critical, and next time I think I will stay on the boat! I'd just spent four days slogging it upstream at a snail's pace, so it was a delight to go whizzing down the river at speed. I went sailing past the mooring at the pub, but felt no concern as I knew it would be easy to turn around downstream and approach it from the opposite direction. I always prefer to moor with the bow facing upstream anyway. Taking heed of my decision earlier to stay on the boat whilst turning, I looped a rope around the mooring bollard, another victorious event as I had spent most of the journey coming up the Thames failing to throw the rope successful around any of the bollards at the locks. I then waited for the stream flow to do the rest and bring the bow around.

Unfortunately I should have let the stream take the stern around, not the bow. I came to an abrupt halt and was now attached by a rope to the land and unable to do anything else. I felt totally incapacitated and unable to decide what I was going to do. My love for boating was declining rapidly, my eyebrows were frowning uncontrollably and I was not feeling at all triumphant. Luckily three ladies were out for a stroll: when they stopped to stare at my predicament I called upon their better nature and they promptly began helping me get to the bank. Eventually I managed to moor the boat up; but it was still pointing the wrong way, I was a nervous wreck, it had all gone wrong, and not only that but the mooring spot didn't look terribly safe for an overnight stay. I wanted my mum. Swallowing my pride I telephoned my expert boater chum Steve who was only too willing to aid a damsel in distress and arrived in no time with Mike in tow. They were marvellous, and not only showed me what to do to turn the boat around, but took it upstream and moored up beautifully outside the pub. By this time I was so shaken and quivery that they decided to take me out for a drive to help calm the nerves. Had I not had to order the car to halt so I could disembark and be sick, I think the rest of the evening would have been delightful. This, my dear friends, is

how NOT to do boating. Single-handedness on the river, for me at least, requires a bit more practice.

Water

With most of the boat electrified up by James (I just had to finish a bit of the engine wiring, the bathroom, and the bedroom), and my stove fitted, life was almost comfortable aboard *Bones* and the time came to set up the water system. I had spent several months walking up to the nearby tap collecting water for onboard use, and as this wasn't conducive to modern Western life (which admittedly I am rarely accused of embracing), I decided to learn some plumbing.

I had already removed the various inflatable water tanks, and Dave Chadwick from Penton Services agreed to fabricate a steel tank, insert it under the front deck along with a pump, accumulator and the first pipe to the kitchen sink. This all went swimmingly well until it dawned on me that I needed to install the kitchen for the pipe to go to! Bursting into action I put up some cupboards, found a sink and worktop, fitted the lot and then hunted around for some taps. With the first length of pipe installed I turned my attention to the rest of the water system. The cold water was going to be easy, but the hot water connections from the calorifier to the engine were more like a spaghetti sculpture than normal plumbing. I spent several Saturdays showing some very patient people my atrocious sketches of the system and asking which bit was meant to plug in to which. I located the necessary pipes and ditched the rest. In no time I had the coil linked up to the engine and all that remained was to extend the pipework up to the calorifier via the bathroom basin and back again taking the hot water to the sink. The first step was to feed the cold water to the bathroom sink. Armed with the pipes and connectors, I grabbed my kitchen knife, and cut into the pipe. At this point I discovered the full meaning of the phrase 'water pressure', and had I had some safety specs, a towel and a saucepan to hand it would have made things much easier! Top tip: remember to switch the water off when doing plumbing.

Cold water successfully piped and spillages mopped up, it was at last time to fill the calorifier and check for leaks. I switched on the water pump, and tentatively walked up and down the boat checking the joints: all sound. Feeling rather delighted with myself, I made some tea while the hot water tank filled up. Some time later I realised the pump was still cycling. I strolled along to the rear of the boat with the gentle dawn of dread slowly rising on me, opened the door and entered not an engine room but a douche. After much

dashing, flapping of arms, and general amusement, I disconnected the calorifier and realised the pump pressure was higher than my calorifier pressure. I found what I was looking for to equalise the pressures at the plumbing shop in Ashford, plugged it all in, tested it, and declared my plumbing a triumph – despite it having taken far longer than I expected.

Before I could test whether the engine heated up the water acceptably, I had to change some of the old wiring that looked as though granny had been chewing on it, and add some new wires. Always a fan of distance-learning, I took a crash course in wiring with the help of Tony Brooks' website, the amazing alternator knowledge of Snibble from Canalworld forums, and a BMC wiring diagram from Tony Collins (also from the forum), but despite my best efforts the starter motor still wouldn't fire into action. In fact my best efforts produced sparks and smoke rather than anything useful and I finally called in my friendly car mechanic, Alex (also seen in films and on TV), who told me where to take it. Trying to get a starter motor out of a hole that's too small and undo bolts that one can't see is not conducive to good humour. Eventually I had to lift the engine a small amount to slide it out, and took it straight down to a firm in Charlton. Two days later it was done. I installed it, and the engine roared into life. Boating is full of triumphs! Nevertheless, using the bathroom and bedroom by torchlight wasn't quite up to my expectations of salubrious life aboard – so it was time to tackle those electrics.

Wired

James, the electrical engineer, did a sterling job installing the electrics onto the boat, but he didn't have time to do the bedroom or the bathroom light; and, as the batteries in my torch started to fail, I decided it was about time I tackled the remaining electrics. It took me quite some time to work out how I might do this, but in a spurt of enthusiasm I set to one afternoon with wire cutters, crimpers, connectors and wires – all of them ready to hand on the bed. Doing DIY on narrowboats is often amusing, and that afternoon was just one example. After much huffing, puffing and stretching I successfully wired a light into the bedroom, a job I started in daylight and finished in the dark. It was only when I returned jubilantly down the boat that I realised the bedroom was the only place I now had any lights was in. For some reason all the other lights had decided not to co-operate with the light switches. More amused than annoyed, I re-commissioned the torch and after close inspection realised that I had managed to undo a connection further down the circuit, in the bathroom. This was quickly amended, and while there I thought I might as well wire up the bathroom light (this was much easier than the bedroom now I

knew what I was doing!). I checked all the connections throughout the boat by tugging on the wires and making sure they didn't come apart, and sat down (rather triumphantly) to decide whether to install solar panels or a wind generator to charge the batteries, so that I could actually turn the lights on without worrying about my milk going off.

The previous boat I was on, *Wild Goose*, had a Rutland wind generator and I rather liked it: I never had to run the engine and the batteries were nicely charged. The problem with the windmill, however, comes when the wind begins to howl: it whizzes at a tremendous pace and if left to its own devices something technical happens and it doesn't charge the batteries again until a soldering iron is put to a piece of wire on another technical thing. On one particular occasion I decided to take the windmill out of danger and put it in its resting position. I donned my shoes and (new) umbrella and emerged from the boat in a rather chaotic fashion (putting up umbrellas indoors may not be unlucky, but it's very impractical when 'indoors' means a boat), and promptly discovered that the wind is not conducive to stylish umbrella holding. As it whipped away (but was, I felt, elegantly caught) I was drenched.

So I decided I would try something new: the solar panel. I lit some candles and sat down to do some calculations to work out my electrical consumption, realised a solar calculator is not the best tool in the dark, and re-oiled my mental arithmetic with the aid of a nice cream cake.

Following a recommendation from Carrie I sourced my panels from Rumi of Sustainable Systems and discussed my requirements. Rumi was exceptionally helpful both by email and telephone, and we decided an 85w panel would be ideal along with a Stecca charger controller. They arrived promptly and the moment came to tackle the wiring.

Sean, the lock boy, was visiting for the weekend and it seemed an ideal time to wire everything together. This time I decided the kitchen was to be my electrical empire, and once again I spread out all my tools and connectors and we set to. It seemed a breeze. I screwed the waterproof back of the solar panel down and installed the panel onto the roof and fed the wires through to the charger controller and the batteries. It was then I realised I had put the wire in the wrong place, and needed to unscrew the backing on the solar panel and put the wire in the right place. For some reason I simply couldn't undo the screw; I must have cross-threaded it in the excitement. Not only was this infuriating, but the solar controller was frowning at me – even *that* knew I had messed up and made its feelings known. After a couple of days I drilled out

the screw head, replaced the wire and in a rather ‘you-dare-frown-at-me’ fashion I plugged in the controller... and you know what – it smiled.

I was really impressed with the panel and how easy it was to install – now, I realise I didn’t get it quite right to start off with, but I was being rather stupid! I still miss the Rutland, and maybe I will get one of those in time as well. There’s something quite romantic about having a windmill whizzing away over the roof. Just as long as you’re not required to step out in the wind and rain and fix it.

Gas

Bones had electricity, and water, but the gas system seemed to leak, and the cooker I had was a hazard. A 1950s three-ring period piece was fine for a museum of domestic life, but not even I wanted to live in one of those. With no cooker I had adopted a nearby picnic bench as my dining room and used my petrol burner to cook come rain or shine. As the world around revived in Spring, the burner gave up, and my diet readjusted accordingly to comprise tinned tuna, salad and cereal. There is a limit to the amount of tinned tuna even I can eat, and I gradually made my way through various kinds of tinned fish. This was all very well, but my friend James was coming on a boating holiday and insisted a cooker was necessary, if only for tea in the morning. It was time to raid my ever-depleting savings and I took a trip to Uxbridge Boat Centre to buy a new cooker. I have learnt many things whilst renovating my boat, but the lesson I seem to have to learn over and over again is don’t rely on anything old. I plugged in my new cooker and it failed its gas test – no surprise there (at least I didn’t blow the boat up in the process!).

How the previous cooker passed is beyond me! The current system had too many joints, not all of which were classed as accessible, and generally it would be stamped with a fail mark. As a result, I need to rip the whole lot out and start again. Why didn’t I just do this in the first place? I probably thought I would give the existing system the benefit of the doubt. That was an odd decision. Given that the electric and water systems seemed to have been installed by Laurel & Hardy supervised by Salvador Dali, why did I think that the gas system would be ok? Just because gas is dangerous it doesn’t mean it has been treated with respect in the past! The professionals were called in, and during one morning my friendly gasfitter installed a lovely new line and passed the system.

The boat – now a palace of pure luxury apart from the slight lack of bathroom – was ready for its maiden cruise on the Thames (at least since being renamed). The previous venture, on Easter Monday, had come to grief after we nearly demolished a row of cruisers while reversing out (I blame the other marina residents who put me off by watching), and then spent ten minutes being blown backwards by the wind. That convinced me discretion was the better part of valour and *Bones* retired to its mooring for another three months. Now, all was different. I had a new fridge, new cooker and I was set to combine domestic goddess with queen of the waterways for the entire week.



'Fine for a museum of domestic life'

I was rather nervous as we set off, not least because the last time James came on the boat he was a complete hazard, and had a habit of falling in the water – the most notable time being between the bank and the boat when we were mooring up. Given the state of the bathroom occasional dips were not a bad idea, but I preferred to have him alive even if his rope-work would have disgraced an absent-minded halibut.

Unfortunately the batteries were reluctant to charge up, which meant the fridge rapidly grew warmer than the cabin and within a day or two we were reduced to candlelight.

Fortunately we going to be meeting some Canalworld forum members at a 'Boaters' Banter', and Allan from *Keeping Up* offered to resolve my engine wiring issues. Perfect!

It didn't take long for him to spot my incorrect connections on the starter motor, and in no time at all the batteries were guzzling juice and the fridge (and lights) sprung into action. We had a lovely evening 'bantering' at the Anglers Arms in Walton, but I managed to finish it off with crushing and breaking my thumb in the sliding mechanism of the rear hatch. I am famed for my high pain threshold, but this event instantly rendered my speech unladylike in the extreme. Instead of exploring the River Wey for the rest of our holidays I spent far too much time in the health centre, the hospital and with my arm in a sling groaning. So much for a relaxing maiden voyage: the boat worked and I didn't.

I was beginning to find boating a complete and utter irritation. My plans for the much-needed bathroom indicated that it was going to be a tough job, and

the fact that the boat was looking tired and unkempt wasn't helping. The perfect solution, at least in the medium term, was a lick of paint.

Paint

I am not an avid painter of large things. Indeed, looking through my past, my experience amounts to painting a shed door pink, and badly, and creating some A3 canvas masterpieces (in my own mind at least) of skeletons and trees. I therefore have no idea what possessed me to think I could paint a 54ft narrow boat. At least by choosing battleship-grey, the most forgiving colour I could imagine, it might just look as though it had actually been in a battle and increase my reputation as pirate queen of the waterways.

Known for my forward planning and inability to be put off by lack of talent, I rushed off to the DIY shop and armed myself with a chisel and some sandpaper, whizzed home and donned my rough clothes. It didn't take me long to realise there was a reason why sanding by hand was a thing of the past, so I stopped that, and started getting the rough bits off with a 1cm chisel. I hadn't gone too far into this other equally ineffective method of paint preparation before Chris went past and offered me the use of his most amazing paint stripping tool – it worked wonders. Thankfully the sun went in before I could do too much damage and I retired for the evening. Overnight I recalled the power of paint stripper and decided to try that the following day. It took all of 5 minutes for me to realise this was another bad decision and rather longer to clear up the resulting mess! Not to be discouraged, I did what all normal people would have done in the first place and bought a sander. Armed with another useful electrical tool I booked myself into the 'craning area' and wielded the sander for a full 12 hours. I went through endless sandpaper, cups of tea and calming conversations with Steve the Crane Chap (full of cheer and advice), and finally got to a point where I could put some undercoat on. When I finally turned in for the evening I could barely walk, my hands were still vibrating, and the fresh undercoat had become a graveyard for suicidal flies. I awoke the following morning suffering from a complete lack of enthusiasm for painting the boat, and I wasn't even halfway through. I couldn't bear to look at the sandpaper for a second longer, paint brushes made me feel unwell and I still had paint in my eyebrows. I was delighted to see it was raining and took the boat back to its moorings.

Always keen to finish something I have started, the following weekend I arose with the sunshine and chugged off to Laleham to battle with the first top coat before the flies decided to get up. I spent a glorious morning smiling and

chatting to passers-by, and making excellent progress on the boat. I marvelled most of the day at my popularity until I went inside and realised I had a huge, rather too revealing, tear in the derriere of my trousers. Work continued the following day with more appropriate dress. Most of the boat was coated, even more than I was. I could now have the first formal viewing of my masterpiece and enthusiastically telephoned James who whizzed over to share my joy. Despite spearing his car on a spike cunningly concealed by mud in the lane, he dutifully admired the boat (in between glowering at the spike and waiting for the AA man to arrive). Amazingly it really was looking MUCH better. Unable to decide what colour to do the doors, I asked some passing children their opinion. ‘Danny’ helpfully suggested *multi*-coloured, so I gave James (who had foolishly offered to help) a mixing tray, a paintbrush and suggested a polka dot arrangement. James, the gothic clergyman, was aghast at this plan but set to on what he considered to be the most appalling design job he had ever done. In no time there were whirls and circles of colour (though not *many* colours, with only red, blue, black and grey to work with) and naturally I loved it.

With only the roof yet to do I decided to spur myself on by mooring up, some time later, in a tranquil setting. I found a field in the middle of nowhere with cows munching away. It was not until I started painting that I realised I’d chosen the windiest day since records began! Otherwise it would have been a huge success. As it is, when summer comes I will be seen re-painting several areas where the palette of roof paint flew away from me and emptied itself on the side of the boat. A few more coats wouldn’t go amiss either – and the name written on the side to make it look a bit less ‘rogue’!

Bathroom

No boater, not, surprisingly enough, even me, can do without a bathroom. I *had* a bathroom, but I was so horrified by the pink plastic sink and brown loo that I was unable to use it for anything other than storage, and the hipbath proved to be an ideal place for wood and debris. It took some time for me to give into external pressures (mainly visitors who increasingly called attention to their *internal* pressures) but I eventually realised that resistance is futile. As an act of encouragement towards my enterprise my parents bought me a shiny new lavatory, and Tony sold me his sink. Spurred on I emptied the bathroom, took down the fake pink cardboard-like tiles, and admired the steelwork behind the insulation (I had expected there to be none of the latter, and appalling rust on the former). I felt most proud as I stood back and admired

the 4ft-nothing space that was to become the palace of ablutions. First I had to renew the walls. I made it to the timber yard and picked up some 9mm ply which I banged, shoved, squeezed, swore at and prayed over as I used my ultimate knowledge of DIY, brute force and ignorance, to position it below the gunwale; positioning the pieces *above* the gunwale was a little more hazardous as I tried to avoid dropping the boards on my head, but an unsuspecting passer by lent a pair of hands.

Next came the wall covering. I decided to use the easiest option and purchased some vinyl flooring on holiday; it took quite a while to persuade the shopkeeper that he wanted me to pay less for it. Eventually we came to an agreement and I skipped out of the store with a roll of white vinyl. I have one top tip when doing this – always make sure that what you buy can fit in the car, especially when you are 100 miles away from home. It did go in, but I had to coil around it and convince my friend (who was driving) that it was a very comfortable position. If you have ever tried to fit vinyl you will understand the complete and utter pickle James and I then got into. Having no idea how to do it, we decided the best plan was to drag the roll into the bathroom and gently unroll it onto the walls cutting it into shape as we went along. The vinyl had other ideas. It unrolled immediately and the two of us, James impeccably dressed in a waistcoat and jacket, and me in my scruffs, were enveloped in a sort of small, stiff plastic teepee. Putting vinyl up is not so much a two-man job as a family day out. We spent what seemed like several hours trying to get it, and not us, stuck to the wall; it took us all day and several near misses from a falling Stanley knife. At last we stood back in pride – it actually looked really good! Not only that but it didn't come unpeeled or fall down, and we hadn't mislaid each other between the vinyl and the wall. It was an absolute triumph, although the vinyl wasn't *quite* the same as I remembered it; rather than being a stylish cosmopolitan white, it was beige. Never mind, I knew that beige would become the new black in no time, or even the new white.



I strolled back through to the rest of the boat with my torn trousers and sat rather uncomfortably on the sofa piled high with wood and tools, pencil poised. Those moments with a cuppa after a successfully completed project can be danger time, as, buoyed with enthusiasm, I am tempted to start another one. True to form, I was now hit by an ingenious idea – not my first either. I had spent some time struggling to get the hipbath out of the bathroom and failed. I was either going to have to take down the bulkheads, and I wasn't going to do that, or saw it up into tiny pieces and throw it away. I couldn't bring myself to do that either so I decided I would re-model it into a new shower tray. If you have ever tried to saw through fibreglass with a battery powered saw whilst wearing a mask and goggles that steam up you will understand why it took me so long. The results however are fantastic – I am now the proud owner of a funky (NOT wonky) shower tray. I have seen people dissolve into giggles at my creation, but I am not broken, I am an artist and designer, an innovator in the onboard bathroom world, and I am triumphant. (I am so pleased I don't have to publish photographs with this article!).

The Crew

Being a competent boater is not something I am renowned for. Indeed no-one seems convinced that getting stuck on mud flats, being lodged in bushes and going sideways is part of the ultimate boating experience. To be fair, my crew are no better. Mention to people that you have a narrowboat, and everyone wants to come and lend a hand. However, that very often tends to mean sitting in the bow pursuing some activity almost, but not quite, entirely unrelated to the business of propelling the boat forward or assuring its safe arrival. Sometimes that's the safest place for them.

Over the years on my old boat I acquired two 'regulars'. Hannah the Goth teenager could be relied on to turn up, persuaded she was sufficiently annoyed with family and friends. James, the trainee clergyman with a penchant for period dress, was useful in inverse proportion to his decorativeness. Hannah helped me drive the boat into a bush on our one venture onto the storm-lashed waters of the Thames, while it sometimes seemed that James preferred the water to the boat itself.

When I bought my current boat I went for a trial run with the owner, and he suggested I bought some crew with me so the numerous locks were not left to us. I did tell him my only available crew were hopeless, but he insisted.

Actually, I was pleased for the company and valued their opinion of my possible new home. Hannah sat on the front deck doing her GCSE revision, most uncharacteristically, and James decided to do the locks. I am not sure what he thought ‘doing the locks’ meant, but as far as I could gather it involved disappearing into bushes, balancing precariously on bridges, and peering into awkward spaces to take photographs. Were it not for the fact that the owner had bought his own crew I imagine we would still be moored up in Warwickshire.

James eventually mastered the locks, and moved onto other front deck duties. He took quite a shine to my boat pole, reasoning that standing about ready to spring into action with it was a way of being helpful while not running the risk of actually doing very much. Once when we were trying to negotiate a tight turn in Thrupp Wide on the Oxford he saw his moment. While trying to manoeuvre the boat to a more favourable position he caught one end of the pole under the cabin lip, and the other on the bank. With no other option available, he stood back and marvelled at how much an ash pole bends before it breaks. In order to redeem himself James promoted himself to mooring expert. He stood on the bow of the boat and jumped off at just the right time, my delight quickly turned to despair when I realised he hadn’t taken the rope with him. Back he leapt, picked up the rope, and just when I thought it couldn’t get worse he threw the rope and forgot to get off the boat! Realising bow duties were not his forte, I thought the stern might be more his style and decided to train him up as skipper. He listened intently, took firm hold of the tiller, and turned around to face the direction we had just been. We drove elegantly, much to his surprise, into the bank.



At Coxes Lock on the Wey Navigation

Clearly my ability to train my crew was on par with my ability to steer the boat. I spent many a happy day in strange boating predicaments, and the many friends who assisted me were nothing short of patient – and always produced a cup of tea at just the right time. My boating trips have always been full of humour. There was one time I completely messed up turning around, and having dislodged us AGAIN from another rendezvous with the bank and its foliage, I despaired and handed the tiller to Phil who seemed to know what he was talking about. I sat at the front revelling in the quiet, and off we went. Nicely done I thought, and as I got into my comfort zone I was really beginning to look forward to doing the lock. Suddenly there was a crash and a bang as another of my colleagues arrived at the front with a message from Phil... perhaps I would like to take over, he'd never driven a boat before and wasn't sure about making it into the lock. Oh boy did I run! Phil clearly forgave me plunging him at the deep end, and often came to the rescue.

Lucy on the other hand may never have forgiven me. She took position as chief tea drinker in the bow. Unfortunately things rapidly went wrong, and as she says in her own words, 'It isn't every day that you're nearly blown up and repeatedly groped by a waterborne poet' – but that's another story!

Mort on Loan

It's not often that I have the chance to try out somebody else's boat. I think more people should have the opportunity to experience my expert guidance, but somehow the news of my triumphs has not spread. Or perhaps it has, and it's my unconquerable naturalist instincts that are the problem. If my floating palace caught fire, it would be my bone collection I would save.

Maffi invited me to help direct *Milly M* along the Kennet & Avon. I was slightly apprehensive, not least because of the last encounter I had had with him. This was last year when everyone on the Oxford was moored up waiting for our boats to be washed away in the floods: I jumped at the chance to help Maffi with 'a few locks' on the K&A. A couple of locks, a pub lunch and a couple more – barely an hour's work but an entire day on a different canal, a delight, as I told NB *Gypsy Rover*; they asked me the name of the locks, and took it upon themselves to educate me by showing me a picture of my destination. As I gazed at the sheer scale of the Caen Hill Flight I could feel the colour draining from my face and my jaw bump on the floor. I am NOT a lock person (actually, I sometimes wonder if I am a boat person, but it's a bit late for that). This is where the boating community really comes up trumps. I posted a desperate plea on the Canalboat Forum for assistance, and Keith

turned up. Keith is excellent crew – highly motivated and very keen on locks. As it turned out there were several of us for the trip, but Kim, Jim and Keith did most of the hard work. Not that I am lazy, heaven forbid, I just hadn't quite recovered from the shock. I did however manage to provide some assistance, and stretched out making lunch for everyone until we were almost at the bottom of the Caen Flight. It was only when Maffi appeared off the tiller and asked where I got the bread for the sandwiches that I realised I had used the mouldy bread reserved for the ducks.

I obviously made some impression, because Maffi invited me to join him, Kim and Jim for a few days during my holidays to experience a bit more of the K&A. Having established this would not involve any locks with the word Hill or Flight in the name, I eagerly accepted. So, decked in summer hols gear - new sandals, baby-pink three-quarter-length trousers and a strappy top (Sloane Square punk chic, I like to think) – I stylishly strolled down the Devizes towpath watching Kim and Jim bicycle into view with Maffi following in the distance on *Milly M*. I was slightly curious that Kim and Jim weren't on the boat, but the mystery was solved as the boat drew closer and was preceded by a curious odour. I suddenly remembered everything. Maffi had been boating some weeks before and spotted a dead heron in the canal; knowing my penchant for skeletons he'd called to ask whether I wanted it, which of course I did. I didn't have a heron. So, the corpse had been carefully wrapped in a plastic bag, and then another, and another as the stench increased, rather like the preparation for a particularly unkind game of pass the parcel. I was told in no uncertain terms that I had to deal with the offending article, but not so keen myself I pretended I couldn't smell a thing, muttered something about 'later', and leapt aboard. The holiday began. I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to avoid being downwind of the scent, and was only too pleased when we arrived at Honey Street for our first night. Seeing my opportunity I rocketed off the boat to 'check the pub menu', but was promptly caught, and handed the heron, a bucket, some tools, some rubber gloves and an order to not return until I had dealt with it. Well, that was fun, in a field, in my pink holiday finery, extracting bones.

The rest of the holiday went beautifully and I thoroughly enjoyed my time on the K&A. I was impressed with Kim and Maffi's knowledge of wild flowers, and had a great time in the evenings tramping through fields picking sloes and damsons for gin. We arrived in Hungerford, my time on *Milly M* was over and I was off to a friend's for the evening. I was slightly embarrassed at the prospect of taking the bucket of heron relics onto the train, but that quickly turned into delight when a particularly obnoxious businessman sat opposite

me – I pushed the bucket under his seat and watched his nose twitch all the way to Surrey.

Boaters

I am often asked what I like about boating. Quite apart from the delights of spending much of one's life up to the armpits in oil, bilge water, or a combination of the two, and finding screws and washers turning up mysteriously in one's ablutions bag, all I can say is that I like the sense of community, and if your neighbours don't appeal to you, you can untie them and watch them float away! Of course floating away oneself is less antisocial.

I have met some wonderful people along the waterways, and not all of them were boaters! Once I moved to a new mooring, which was only a bridge away. Naturally it turned into disaster, and I found myself lodged between a garden and the shallow banks of the Oxford Canal. The garden's owners took pity on my predicament, and suggested I loaded the roof up with their spare wood. I did, and wondered whether they would help me moor up on the opposite side of the bank. With the added benefit of these enthusiastic "landlubbers" we managed to re-float the boat, and after a struggle manhandled the boat into a mooring on the opposite side of the bank. As I hammered the pins in, I caught my knuckle between the pin and hammer and sprayed blood everywhere. I have no idea what they thought of me as they disembarked to return home (I was a fuming bloody mess by this point!), but they did invite me over later for a 'drink'. I did go, and found myself as the guest of an impromptu dinner party. I've kept in touch with them.

On another occasion, I found myself near the Kennett and Avon canal and decided to surprise a friend with a visit. I started walking along the K&A towpath; the novelty of such exercise quickly wore off and I sat at a lock and waited. After a short time a lovely couple came along in their boat NB *Spirit of Gizmo* and we got chatting. They invited me to cruise with them until we bumped into my friend. They were a lovely couple too – and full of interesting stories! It wasn't long before I saw my friend come into view, and I was deposited accordingly: they went their way, and I went mine. A completely spontaneous happening that turned into a lovely encounter.

When I moved to Surrey, I left the boating community in Oxford behind, and felt rather isolated as the weeks passed, partly because I was moored in a marina and kept myself to myself. My friend James decided he would cheer me up, and suggested we spent the evening making boating

friends. There was a pleasant pub nearby, he said, with lots of boats moored outside, that looked the ideal place to begin. My intrigue quickly turned to fear as we drove through a forbidding industrial estate, and parked near a pub that to my untrained eye looked like a murder scene. James told me this must be where the boaters hung out, and pointed to the line of narrowboats as proof. I countered that obviously nobody was living on those boats, though it was possible people might have died on them, and in fact still be there. It took some persuading to get me through the pub door, and I exited within moments. I just didn't feel like making friends that night; perhaps it was the screaming coming from behind a warehouse that put me off.

I decided I should make the effort myself. As there were a few boaters on the Canal World Forum I thought we should have a "boaters' banter", and suggested a time and place. I was astounded when people turned up! It was like meeting old friends, and we had a fantastic evening. It was the first Boaters' Banter, but it wasn't the last! Despite breaking my thumb at one, and ripping my ligaments at another, they've been wonderful opportunities to meet both chums and strangers. You don't even have to be a boat owner!

Boaters work on their own time, and if you want to meet up, you can't always guarantee that you will, nor how long it will be for. The last Banter was organised for a Monday. Some people arrived on the Friday, I arrived on the Saturday, and others on the Sunday and the Monday. Some even came by car for a drink on the Monday afternoon and the pub kept open for an extra hour! Boaters are so friendly, that by the time we sat down for our meal, we had two extra people who just happened to be admiring one of the boat engines at the time. It took us 4 days to arrive, and one day to leave – if you want a flash mob, you know where to come!



Taking Responsibility

For some time now, I have been thinking about getting a pet. The problem has been deciding what sort. As a child I had a woefully short attention span for anything living, yet we had a vast number of pets. I think the ones which feature most in my memory are from the time Mother went through an 'earthy' phase. That meant that the whole family went through an 'earthy' phase, and we kept goats, which produced more goats and so forth. I gave serious thought to a goat, but decided it would eat everything, and besides I don't like goat's milk. Next I thought of a sheep. My sister had a lovely sheep that travelled with various names - Flower, or MintSauce as she was often known - and liked Frosties and coffee; a rather civilised pet. Perfect! The eruption of giggling from my office as I ran the concept past my colleagues put an end to that idea. I thought of ferrets, but they would eat my electric wires if they had free run; cats make me sneeze; puppies grow up; stick insects wobble menacingly and I would lose all my friends were I to keep a bunny and eat it when I got bored. So, that was that, no pet for me.

I was rather disappointed, to say the least. It was when I was wintering in Thrupp this year trying to deal with my dejection that a fellow boater (probably fed up of my wailing) suggested I got a fish. Ingenious! I thought about this for some time, and decided it was absolutely ideal. I did worry, at first, that it wouldn't like travelling, but realised there was no need to worry - fish travel all the time! Next I needed to make sure I had some space for it. With no appropriate shelves I decided the tank could sit on the dining room table. Not only would I be able to sit communing with my fish as I worked in the evenings, or sat reading a book, but I would benefit from its relaxing vibes and become laid back and chilled out. It could become the centrepiece of my dining table. Perfect. My fantasies extended to not one but two goldfish, and selecting potential names. 'Baudelaire' and 'Betty' struck me as ideal, especially naming a fish after a decadent French poet and then pairing it up with what sounded like a Coronation Street resident.

Setting up an aquarium is not to be taken lightly, especially with my talent for decision-making. I borrowed some books, visited the fish shop, and did plenty of research before I embraced the first step, buying the tank. I was happy with the tank at first; so happy I thought I wouldn't bother with the fish, and just keep the tank. Experience revealed that this was hard to explain, so it wasn't long before I washed down the gravel, filled the tank and sat back for two weeks to make sure the water had become the perfect environment for a goldfish. I was particularly careful about the preparations as I would be oxygenating the water with plants rather than electric pumps, and I wouldn't

have a filter due to my lack of electricity for such things. I was a little concerned about the absence of a filter, but perhaps I could build a solar-powered one when I worked out how. Thus giving myself the green light I set off to the swanky pet shop near my mooring to find some special paper to test the water and ensure it was safe for the fish. It would be, I thought, a matter of days before the doors of *Bones* would be flung open, the red carpet rolled out and the fish would take residence, though with a little reflection I realised the carpet was a bit unnecessary for a fish. I spoke to the sales assistant who was stunningly helpful, and finally, seizing the moment I said I needed some ‘stuff’ to check the water, and if all went well I would return for the goldfish, one at a time.

I left the shop without a goldfish. In fact, and I am almost ashamed to admit it, the shop refused to sell me a goldfish. I am not considered to be a suitable owner of such a pet because the tank doesn’t have a filter on it and my planned filter system (swishing a net around several times a day) is not deemed to be ‘filtering’ in the goldfish world. My disappointment was obvious, and the lady suggested I had a hamster instead. I was rather baffled that they would let me drown a hamster, but not keep a fish. I left with four aquatic plants and a small model hippo skull that floats. It’s an ill wind. Dr Bones is now an avid botanist.

Engine Room

Having spent a long time watching my short-legged friends, and listening to their protests at the inaccessibility of my engine room, and the complex technique required to enter and exit the boat that way, I decided I would pay heed, and amend the design. The original room was actually quite good, unless you wanted to get to the engine, so I ripped that out a couple of years ago, and built a quick frame-like stopgap. This has been sufficient, but admittedly, it does help that I have long legs and can twist into awkward shapes; and it would be good to have some extra storage space for tools. After all, it isn’t really appropriate for a stylish young lass like myself to stow paint and tools in the wardrobe or sandpaper and brushes in the kitchen drawers! No, all these things should by rights be kept in the engine room.

I spent much of winter doing ‘engine room’ research, scanning the internet, and asking people what theirs looks like. Curiously, narrowboaters will talk about lavatories and bodily functions forever, but ask them about their engine room and you find yourself in the midst of a stunned silence. Not only that, but the attitude is catching, so much so that when my friends express their

disdain at my current engine design, I feel as if they're discussing my frilly knickers with strangers. The research was forced to take a much less public aspect, and I turned into a desperate peeping-tom peering around steerers' legs into the bowels of their boat.

At long last I concluded my prototype was actually quite good, and it was time to make some modifications for the pre-production model. The timing was perfect, a gloriously sunny weekend in Abingdon apt for sawing. As I had a neighbour for the weekend, I thought I would practice my managerial foreman's skills and let my limited talents for DIY take a back seat instead. I think my friend felt he got the short straw when he realised he would not be spending the weekend not cruising, but sawing. We agreed (!) to a division of labour: I was in charge of measuring and he took on the practical carpentry. Over several cups of coffee we made some measurements. Despite sticking the ruler in my eye and failing to maintain my balance when taking a particularly tricky measurement which resulted in a rather inelegant slide into the bilges, we produced a plan and set off to the DIY store to collect the wood. Normally I would have spent weeks scouring the skips of Oxfordshire looking for suitable wood (and asking the owners for it), but this weekend I felt like splashing out. I have a top tip when buying wood: make sure the pieces fit in the car. I wish I had thought about this before I was lugging sheets of ply and posts through the DIY store car park. Annoyingly my boot neither locks nor shuts very easily so I hadn't actually used it in a long time; so long, in fact, that I couldn't remember what was in it. I *did* remember it'd taken me an hour to shut it last time, and I wasn't looking forward to what this occasion might bring. With a reluctant sigh I opened the boot, and was presented with



the prospect of a huge bag of washing. At least I now knew where several items of clothing that I'd just presumed were lost in the dark inner reaches of a cupboard actually were! We managed to slide the wood in the gaps, and after much stress shut the boot with a slide-and-push technique and set off.

Back at the boat, we loaded the wood onto the roof and started to measure it up, or rather I measured and my friend did the sawing. To look as though I was actually doing something during the latter part of the day, I promoted myself to chief painter and started coating the big bits on

the front deck to protect them from the elements during the years that would elapse before I got around to using them. No sooner had I finished the last coat than it started raining. Carrying huge pieces of freshly painted wood into the engine room from the bow is an interesting task, but I think blue hands and hair rather suited me. I must be getting good at this DIY malarkey because I managed that without turning the majority of the boat blue! Apart from mis-measuring a few bits, it all went very smoothly. After two days of enthusiasm and hard work my engine room, stage 1, looks fantastic. Unfortunately I got so carried away with the step levels and the floor I completely forgot about the cupboards for the tools, so my socks will have to put up with their company awhile longer.

Into the Bilges

My engine room, as readers will remember, now looks fabulous. With that fixed, I have concluded it is time to ensure that the engine itself is up to scratch.

Looking around the bilges I noticed that my aggrowhatsit (come on, you know: the clever gadget that separates the water from the diesel) had not only a glass bowl, but also a plastic drain plug. Boat Safety inspectors tend to object to this sort of thing. Not only that, but the diesel pipes were far from secure, and the exhaust pipe had finally given up the ghost. I've spent many hours on the back of my boat convincing myself the exhaust is fine. But I finally had to admit I was giving myself carbon monoxide poisoning. I gazed into the bilges in despair: I had neither the time nor wherewithal to do the work necessary. With visions of impending disaster I decided it was high time to get a man in, and as Tooley's boatyard had just done a leaflet drop I telephoned them and out came Matt. He did a quick look around the bilges, shook his head, assessed the situation and later sent me a very reasonable quote.

We agreed that I would take the boat up to Banbury to have the work done, and set a date for a fortnight later. After all, the diesel system had got me through two years of boating, so surely it would last a bit longer? The boat, though, had other ideas. Three days later, while I was trying to fix my car, and juggle a very hectic work week, I thought I would indulge myself with a hot shower. I started the engine, then turned my attention back to the car. Ten minutes later, I came back to find the engine had stalled, and wouldn't restart. I peered into the abyss and saw my bilges were full of diesel; the glass bowl had chosen its moment to break. I was not amused. Indeed, I was so far from being amused my eyebrows levelled out.

That was the end of my shower. I grabbed the nearest funnel, pipework and buckets and started to bail. Most of it, I think, went down my trousers, so I gave it up as a bad job and retired to my neighbour's boat for a shower and a sulk. My neighbour, Maffi, took pity on me, and while I went to work he hunted out jerry cans and bailed the contents of the bilges into them: all 150 litres of it.

The time to go to Banbury loomed near. I realised I would need to fill up with diesel and secure the system, so Matt came down and did a temporary fix, and I punted the boat up to the nearest diesel supplier. One week later I set off on a grand trip to Banbury. It was a while since I had been out on the boat and I was exhausted – AND recovering from an operation on my hand. Thankfully I made it, with the kind assistance of my friend Steve, and Tooley's sorted out the problems. I was amused when Matt showed me the remnants of the exhaust – for remnants they were! As I prepared to set off, Matt noticed the batteries weren't charging and further investigation revealed a defunct alternator. All credit to Tooley's: they sourced and fitted a new one within 12 hours!

The engine fixed, I carried on boating and enjoying the new system. But all was not well. This time, it was the lift pump that began leaking, so I ordered a 'fix your lift pump' kit. It seemed a nice simple job, and as some chums were visiting for the weekend, I planned we would cruise to a lovely location where I could whip the old one off, service it and look exceptionally cool while everyone else set up a barbecue. Sadly, the spare bits were for a different lift pump, and I looked very uncool indeed. To add insult to injury, the following day as we all headed home, the engine started to rattle, and once again I had to moor up and investigate. Thankfully it turned out to be nothing worse than four loose bolts, whereas by this stage I wouldn't have been surprised if it had been an infestation of bilge-dwelling gerbils. I really had had enough of the engine.

The engine, however, had not had enough of me. The seal on the aggravator decided to leak, the stop cable decided to seize up and to top it all off, an injector pipe decided to spurt fuel everywhere. It was time for diversion techniques. I started to think about sign writing. Of which more next month.

Paint 2

Last year I painted my boat grey. Since then I have had numerous people

asking me what colour I am going to paint it. In return for my usual explanation that I have, and that the grey is gloss and not, as they seem to think, undercoat, I get a look which clearly indicates they are of the opinion that I have lost the plot! So to rectify the situation I decided I would give my darling vessel another coat of grey, but this time I would add some dark grey flashes on the front and back. Besides, it really was about time I had the name written on the sides instead of the home-made crumpled paper sign in the window which was getting more miserable, light-blasted and illegible as the months went by.

I moved the boat onto a seven-day mooring on the Oxford canal, purchased all the gear in the local shops (unproblematically for a change) and headed home to start the preparation. There were a few bits of rust to be treated along the way, and with a cup of tea in one hand, sandpaper in the other, I stepped out into the glorious sunshine and started rubbing down. This is a thankless task at the best of times so I decided I would do the boat in sections. Having finished sandpapering the bow and uncovering all the bits that needed treatment, I dipped the paintbrush into the tin. As if prompted by a mysterious signal, the heavens opened and the rain poured down. It's a technique that should be marketed to drought-stricken nations.



Actually, I was quite relieved – I hate painting. Indeed, it rained for the whole weekend, the week, and the weekend after. I have never been so delighted! I could sit there in my comfortable chair doing absolutely nothing explaining to people I couldn't do the job I needed to do because it was raining. Needless to

say other jobs inside the boat would be pointed out to me, but I could say 'I am meant to be painting': I couldn't tidy the boat in case the sun came out. After about two weeks of relentless dampness my avoidance was rumbled and I was frogmarched to the nearest bridge to embark upon the task in hand. Maffi drove his boat along to keep an eye on me. However, not only had time now blunted the excitement of painting, but the sun chose its moment to re-emerge. So, there I was stuck under a bridge in the dark like a demented troll, and the sunshine was blazing away. Two days of rubbing down, and two days of painting later, I had managed to almost finish one whole side. The third day I did the dark grey trim, and the panels, and that is when Tyson came to visit. Tyson decided that my freshly-painted gunwales were perfect for his feline imprints and took a stroll along them to inspect; more rubbing down and more painting.

I then turned the boat around to do the other side. This really is very demoralising: after all that work, the finished side ends up out of view and one has to start all over again. Not only that, but solar panels don't work under bridges, so my electrical capabilities (which are minimal at the best of times) were floundering. Normally this wouldn't be a problem as I could run the engine to charge the batteries, but the fan belt screamed and the engine died. It took two days to work out my injector pipe needed replacing, to order it, and to discover I didn't need it after all and it was just water in the fuel. The engine roared into life, the batteries charged, and I decided to award myself a day 'off'. Embracing diversion techniques to the full I visited an art gallery in London, and to top it off, my nephew was born that afternoon! As the bus bore me away from the excitement along the M40 I realised I had two days left of my fourteen-day mooring with half the work yet to do! I slunk down the towpath towards the great ship. You can imagine my surprise and delight when I saw Maffi armed with paint brushes standing back and looking at MY boat! He had spent the day finishing off the side, and now *Bones* stood gloriously painted like a completely new, shiny boat. Promptly promoting Maffi to hero of the year, I swung him around in delight and then immediately demoted him when I noticed he had found the bright red paint and I had two unexpected panels... They were soon rectified and we sat down to a celebratory dinner.

With the sun shining I set off onto the canal to do the sign writing. It has rained ever since.

Great Trip North

This was an extra-length feature article Iona was asked to write by Canal Boat.

It was an innocent-enough-looking postcard picture, really, nothing more than a canal running through the countryside with hills rising up each side. However, it must have caught my eye when I was particularly frazzled, because it looked so peaceful, so glorious and so relaxing that it captivated my mind. I finally gave in and decided that I needed to find out where it was, and go and visit it for myself. The picture was of the Rochdale Canal, and I awarded myself a holiday. A chum had recommended a boat-hire company called Shire Cruisers and after a phone call I had organised to take Narrowboat *Sussex* out for a week.

I had a boat, now I needed a crew. Maffi didn't so much agree to come as discover he *was* coming. Knowing Janet and RJ had covered more ground than was considered possible when on their annual hire boat holidays, we thought we would ask them along, and, as I had met them before (albeit briefly) I liked the idea of getting to know them better. Both accepted, and Maffi and I were delighted to be embarking upon our first hire boat holiday with a hand-picked crew. The four of us started to plan our trip, aided by Shire's superb customer service. The owners and staff are friendly and helpful, and more than willing to liaise about possible routes and expectations. They even send out a pre-cruise pack (including a CD!) full of useful information, so by the time we were ready to take the boat out, we were familiar with how to do things, where to go, and what to see.

It was only when we were fully committed that Janet broke the news that I had chosen the most heavily locked canal in the country. Bones does not do locks. Actually, I am not entirely sure that Bones does boats, but it was a bit late to consider such matters! The Rochdale canal opened in 1804 and closed commercially in 1952 by which time it had acquired no fewer than 92 locks. When it was re-opened in 2002, two locks were merged into one, making it the deepest broad lock in the country, but the canal still crams 91 of the things into its 33 miles. Once I had regained my composure and come to reluctant terms with this we decided to head away from the hire base at Sowerby Bridge over the summit, down the other side through Rochdale and on to the vertical lift bridge at Chadderton Bridge where we would wind and make our return journey home. This was an ambitious journey, especially as it is recommended that boats go from Sowerby Bridge to the summit and back

again, or do a one way trip. We really want to see both sides, so we decided to see how far we could get.

On arrival we were given a tour around the boat by Becky, a member of Shire's staff. Their narrowboats are gorgeous, and having had a guided tour of their workshops I can see why. Each boat is built with attention to detail; they build their own and are constantly improving on their design. No wonder their boats are an absolute pleasure to stay on - indeed, I just wish I could have bought our hire boat home with me! Becky even accompanied us through the first three locks to make sure we were OK (had she read any of my previous columns?), and to answer any questions that came up. Finally left to our own devices, we began to relax and, as the sun began to set while we cruised gently through lines of boats at Hebden Bridge, the evening light crept over the historic buildings along the way and the peace of boating was beginning to settle in. I just knew I would love this waterway. We moored past the mill houses at Rawden Mill for a barbeque and relaxed as the sun went down and dark embraced us. Our first day was complete.

The following morning, after a stroll to look at the wildlife along the towpath we set off to Todmorden where we met our first ever Guillotine Lock, followed by the so-called Great Wall of Todmorden said to be made from 5 million bricks, where I displayed a fine example of my boating skills and bumped into the wall three times (the last time was for luck). Finally around the corner we were met with by the towering Gothic Bridge. By this time the Pennines were really beginning to engulf us and the sense-shredding scenery the guide books had told us about really became apparent. We made our way up to the summit with wild flowers swaying in the breeze, walkers out for an afternoon stroll & canoeists out for a trip; beeping the horn soon cleared the way and we continued onwards and upwards. The pre-summit pound was so low on water that the boats moored there weren't wet at all! We moored in the pound below that (which wasn't much better) then settled into our chairs and toasted the setting sun with a gin.

Our journey over the Summit marked our third day aboard *Sussex* and the beginning of our descent down the other side and through Rochdale. Many people have said the Rochdale side of the Pennines is a mess. The locks have a very bad reputation of being hard to use and difficult to manage but we found very little difference between either side of the summit. The waterway has anti-vandal gear throughout though even that has been vandalised in some places! It wasn't unusual to find half the paddle gear missing, or the gates wobbling, but as this didn't hinder the locks working, we were still able to make progress. We had expected to have trouble, but instead we were greeted

along our journey by people fishing or walking along the tow path. There were some hooded youths standing on a bridge, and some old-age pensioners a bit further on, which only demonstrates that the canal is appreciated by all ages. I preferred the rise up to the Summit but RJ preferred the other side, not least because of the views across rolling countryside.

A friend, Colin, joined us for the long day and worked wonders keeping us amused as we shared the work of locking us through or, alternatively, the less strenuous contribution of walking along the towpath. The stark contrast between the rise to the summit and the drop down to Rochdale and on towards Manchester is striking. The hills recede into the distance and the industrial North takes over as mills and warehouses line the canal. The towpath and waterway deterioration appeared greater as we made our way down towards Rochdale; there is certainly more rubbish in the canal, and something needs to be done to ensure that it remains navigable in the coming years. Colin left us at Rochdale, and we carried on to Lock 53 where the notorious farmer Jones impeded navigation of the canal by causing a breach, and sawing off the balance beams on the lock. This had stopped RJ and Janet going through on a previous boat trip so this time we skipped a rigadoon on the balance beams as we locked through to celebrate the reign of peace and our successful passage (those not skilled at rigadoons should stick to macaroons, as we probably should have). We moored just beyond the lock near a sign offering hens for sale. The following morning another local friend, Martin Clark, joined us for a day out. It was a real treat having Martin on board because it enabled us to gather some local knowledge and history about the Rochdale Canal; not only that but he managed to ground *Sussex* on a bend, enabling Janet to rescue a spinner for her fishing kit (but don't tell him I told you, as he was rather embarrassed!).

There was so much weed where we turned, we decided on a damage-limitation exercise, and resorted to the pole to avoid fouling the prop. Unfortunately we were just around the corner on our return journey when the engine ground to a halt; the prop had fouled but not on weed! It took 2 hours to remove an anorak from the shaft through the weed hatch. With the chaps occupied we girls took advantage of the quiet and watched water boatmen and forget-me-nots as well as insects feeding on the towpath. It really was glorious for a while, but finally boredom set in and I began punting the boat with the pole; a few minutes later the engine roared into life and we were off again. Twenty minutes later we were grounded on the edge, but a bit more pole work got us going back to Lock 53 and mooring up for another barbeque, this time in the rain, but none the worse for that.

On our return to the Summit the Pennines began to appear again, but as we worked our way up several pounds were low on water and progress was very slow - we even got stuck on the cill coming out of one lock! Travelling with little water and without going aground can be annoying, or it can be fun; we saw it as a challenge. On reaching the summit, we breathed a sigh of relief and RJ took me to the pub for my first ever game of darts. We both stopped dead at the road and marvelled at the passing cars, rather like refugees who had been hidden away from civilisation for many months, except we were just three days into a week-long trip. We didn't see many boaters on our trip, but as we had approached the summit, a boat had passed us and the skipper told me to write about the canal's problems – so I have.

On Thursday morning we crossed the Summit, and Ray the lock keeper told me about the history of the canal, its restoration and its problems. The Rochdale canal was not only the first means of transport that managed to cross the Pennines, but the only method that managed to do it without building tunnels. If this doesn't make it a national treasure, the scenery certainly does. Restoring a waterway like the Rochdale canal is a mammoth task, and the fact it has re-opened is a testimony to the determination of the locals, the Rochdale Canal Society, and the local councils. The contribution to our national heritage is stunning - no wonder this canal has been restored. All waterways have their problems, and the Rochdale canal is no exception, but the enthusiasm of those that use it, work it, and live near it is outstanding, and the ongoing activities to keep it open, raise its profile and encourage its navigation is something everyone can get involved in. The return trip home was as thrilling as the outgoing trip; we had a stroll around Todmorden with its cobbled streets and antique shops followed by a short stop in Littleborough where I had planned to visit the parish church, but we were distracted by a heron and spent our visiting time sitting and watching it. Further on I climbed onto the roof of the boat to take a closer look at Clegg Hall, a ruined house of mystery and fun that has been restored as a family home. At Lock 28 I jumped off to visit the church, which was shut, and take a photograph of the blue plaque on a house around the corner indicating the location where the atom was split.

On our last day we stopped in Hebden Bridge for cakes and coffee, and then took the bus up to Heptonstall. Heptonstall is definitely worth a visit it is a medieval village with its narrow winding roads, an octagon Methodist hall, a ruined church, and a set of stocks behind some iron railings. Janet and RJ took the boat on to the Halifax arm where we met up with more chums, including those who had met us along the way, to share a meal and celebrate the 128 locks and epic journey. We were exhausted and satisfied, and nothing

very significant had gone wrong! I would definitely do this trip again, and I would definitely use Shire Cruisers again: they and the waterway are outstanding.

This is a waterway where you can look at the pictures, read the books, listen to the tales, but you really do have to see it for yourself to experience its pure glory.

Manoeuvres

After an intense week in Durham learning to be a programming genius I was delighted to get home on Friday night to familiar territory and home ground. On Saturday morning Hannah arrived in time for breakfast, shortly followed by Keith, a.k.a. NB *Jelunga*, whereupon we did a car shuffle and started the day's activities of bringing my boat up from Abingdon Marina onto the Oxford Canal, an annual ritual whereby I move further north to hibernate for the winter.

I rather like it when I have visitors, not least because it gives the opportunity to show off my boating skills. The first stage of the proceedings involved reversing out of the mooring, doing a three point turn and entering onto the Thames. I used to struggle when manoeuvring *Bones* backwards, but I discovered that the key to a good reversal is to ensure the weight on the boat is distributed appropriately to counterbalance the general trend for the bow to swing to the right. With this in mind, I positioned the crew accordingly, and as we untied the ropes and set off I was revelling in the opportunity to shine – particularly as the wind had really picked up and was howling, highlighting my abilities even more. We were soon reversing elegantly in a straight line and then around a curve safely avoiding the plastic boats. We lined up for the grand finale and the exit out, going past the plastic boats again (but forwards this time) and onwards to Abingdon Lock.

Unfortunately the grand finale was a bit more grand and final than I had hoped, and at that crucial moment, as I put it into forward gear, the engine died. I was suddenly eager to deploy my anchor as soon as possible and thus avoid a close encounter with the plastic boats and the large insurance claim against me that would surely follow. I looked down the line of sight along the roof preparing to issue orders commanding the crew to embark on anchor-dropping, life-saving, insurance-limitation exercises - or I would have done had the anchor not been sitting nonchalantly on the roof sun bathing. Ooops. There we were, 54foot of steel narrowboat caught by the wind, being blown

nearer and nearer to the moored boats. I shot down the gunwale and grabbed the anchor, and as I tried to attach said article to the boat it seemed that every plastic boat had an owner looking on in panic at the scene that was unfolding behind them. As I struggled to do my bit they whizzed around deploying fenders, and more fenders, and then enormously large fenders that were so deliciously large I was stunned. Thankfully they did the job and when we hit them no damage was done. Mercilessly taken by the wind we slid along the line of boats narrowly missing them all as we came to rest in the trees and mud. That bit was exactly what I had planned – honestly! Unable to convince the crowd this was where we were planning to stop for the week, I had no other option but to go into that dreaded engine room and work out the problem.

It wasn't long before I discovered an awful lot of water in the aggrowhatsit, emptied it, bled the system and sat back as the engine roared to life. There is something very proud-making about fixing the engine, regardless of the problem. I was particularly proud that I had two chaps looking on as I wielded my spanners and expertise, until I realized the rather strappy top I had on wasn't completely suitable for dignified engine fixing. At least that'll encourage me to wash my overalls and have them to hand as soon as possible! Closer investigation suggested that the seats on the back of the stern, which I'd always thought were dangerous anyway, go through a hole, and rest directly on the diesel tank – another mad design, as the seat poles are penetrating the tank! They will be welded over as soon as possible: perhaps I should go on a welding course?

The rest of the trip went smoothly, apart from a brief encounter with a boater at Abingdon Lock who had turned the lock against us. A closer look revealed the boater was actually a canoeist! When he got into a pickle with the lock controls he asked my advice on how best to operate them. I told him in no uncertain terms that the best way to tackle the Thames locks, for him, was to pick up his canoe and walk around. I did offer to do this for him, but I was dragged away from the scene before it got messy. The great ship *Bones* is now at peace on the canals ready for whatever the winter throws at us – I hope!!!

The Ship in Winter

I love winter: it is a time to settle down, batten down the hatches and do all the jobs that I should have been doing through the summer, but was too busy having fun to do. Over the weekend I was revelling in the delights of the winter evenings as I stoked the fire and served up roast lamb to two friends for

an evening of banter and relaxation. This night of delight reached sheer perfection when the gentle tapping of rain on the roof began. There is something wonderful about sharing good food with good company around a good fire with the elements drumming on the roof trying to get in.

It is, however, essential that the rain continues to fail to gain entry. As I sat there luxuriating in the delight that had wound its way around me I noticed from the corner of my eye a rather steady drip. The memory gently resurfaced that one of the omitted summer jobs was to re-seal the leaking parts of the boat, to re-align windows and doorframes that were going for the new 'not quite attached' look, and to repair the leaking roof vents. After distributing my saucepans around the place, and struggling with various contraptions on the roof, I managed to persuade the rain to stay on the outside. As I sat back it dawned on me that some jobs are better done in the summer, when the days are drier and the nights are shorter. Oh well, too late now – winter is here, and the jobs are too, and I just know they will be big and messy, as the wall lining needs re-doing and with the leaks the metalwork will need a good scrub down. For some reason I always picture my winter tasks with romantic tinted glasses. It seems such fun spending the long dark evenings fiddling and pottering around the boat doing the little jobs. Funnily enough they are never easy, never fun and always very cross-making – I can't seem to learn.

I have been thinking about sorting out the very wobbly lining in the boat for some time. It all came to a head when I hung up my deer-head hat-stand on the dining room wall. It stayed up for a few seconds, and then the wall started to loom towards me with such menace I removed the deer, made a note that the problem really did need resolving, and promptly ignored it by embracing summer fun instead. Having poked around I *think* the battens supporting the lining have been glued, not screwed, into place, which was all very well in the 80s, but 20 years later the glue needs to retire.

As the bedroom has remained untouched so far I have decided to start there. The bedroom is always a good room to begin with because no-one sees it and I spend most of my time in there in the dark. I am dreading the job as I know there will be some unpleasant surprises on the metalwork as the roof vent has been leaking for some time. With the ceiling needing a good scrub, I expect the walls will too. I think I shall need shares in wire brushes over the next few months; I will be walking around like a rusted zombie. Having peered under the bed I know half the floor is missing, there is very little lining below the gunwale and the water pipes aren't secured at all; there is a hole where a pipe used to run between the bedroom and the engine room, and it ought to be sealed up. The cluster of spiders that have been living in the roof seem to have

moved out, but there is a rather textured rusty layer on the metal and the battens are either attached to the metalwork, or the ceiling panels, but not, sadly, both. The curtain rail is propped up by the open window and the window leaks. It may all take a while.

As I lay in my chambers on Saturday morning I wondered how hard it would be to dismantle the wardrobe balanced above the foot of my bed, so I took my long handled screwdriver and had a go. This was another idea long in the ruminating. Surprisingly enough the screws emerged rather easily. The wardrobe is no longer there, but it turns out it was holding up rather a lot of the ceiling. The bedroom project has therefore begun. I have decided to model my 6'3" long bedroom on NB Lucky Duck's equivalent which has a desk, a chest of drawers AND a top loading wardrobe underneath the mattress which raises up on gas struts to allow access. To say I am excited is an understatement but I have no idea whether I am capable of such a technical feat; it will be great fun trying!

Bed

As soon as I start any major work in the boat, the whole thing from stern to bow becomes a workshop, and the only way of getting from one end to the other is by a Highland fling walk to avoid the obstacles of wood and tools! On Saturday morning I started my bedroom re-fit by removing everything, including the bed, out of the bedroom and into the storage area known as the rest of the boat. Although this means there is nowhere to sit or stand (unless standing on one leg is deemed comfortable), it isn't quite as disastrous as it could be, because the lights aren't working so I can't see the mess and, besides, I am too busy to sit down.

I was amazed to discover that one corner of the bed frame was resting on 4mm hardboard, and none of the rest was screwed to anything at all. How it had defied gravity for so long makes my mind boggle! I removed the framework and braced myself for removing the lining on the walls and ceiling. I thought this would take some time, but quickly discovered that it wouldn't. To assess the situation I tweaked a ceiling panel and this led to a loud clatter, a few bangs, and the whole thing fell down around me. I passed the debris out of the side hatch onto the bank and my very loyal friends distributed the remains in the bonfire, recycling bin or skip. The walls came down just as easily, and that left me with the floor to pull up – the only firmly-positioned component of the entire room! The steelwork above the floor was in surprisingly good condition, and only needed a quick scrub to remove the loose bits of rust. I

removed the concrete ballast from the floor, and suddenly realised that my drain holes on the front of the boat, which are normally only just above the water line, had promptly gone under water – not too drastically, but enough to necessitate a quick re-shuffle of the ballast to the back end again. The floor looked rather forlorn and needed some serious scraping, so I decided to break for a nice cup of tea. Over tea I wondered whether I really needed to do anything to my bedroom, and whether I could just put the bed back and settle with the rustic no-lining look. I did broach the subject with my chums, but they took my cup away from me and sent me straight back inside with a scraper, shovel, wire brush and rubbish sack. I stood looking at the job for a while, and deliberated how I could postpone the scraping; at that point a friend peered through the window and seemed impressed that the bilges weren't 'that bad'. The encouragement snapped me out of my avoidance techniques and I engaged myself to the job in hand. Actually, I rather like repetitive messy work and I found that scrabbling around in the bilges is my new favourite sport: it didn't take too long either! With the dirty bit done, I retrieved my pots of Vactan, and was about to start painting it on, when I read that it needs to be applied at a temperature of no less than 10 degrees; the bedroom was at 1. I lit the fire and concluded the day's work. It took two days to get the bedroom up to the right temperature, after which I accidentally sat on the thermometer and broke it.



During that time I realised I had absolutely no idea how to build my new bedroom. I had the plans and the pictures, but applying theory to practice wasn't something I had actually thought of. Indeed, for the first time I understood why so many projects get started, and never finished. Knowing where to start is rather daunting, and demolishing is so much easier than creating. I found it all so overwhelming I was looking forward to returning to work on Monday morning and burying my head in my research. I do have some pride though, and I just couldn't bring myself to leave the bedroom as it

was, so I sloshed the Vactan around and bitumened the floor; the results were extremely rewarding. Overall it didn't take too long, especially with the help of my friends. There is nothing quite so relaxing as sitting down with a nice cold gin and tonic after a heavy day in the bilges of a boat. I was feeling vaguely triumphant as I sit immersed in the delightful smells of bitumen as they wafted up the boat to my delicate nose covered in rust dust. I was very proud of myself for wearing my new rubber gloves so my hands were delightfully clean. Unfortunately they weren't gauntlets and my arms were covered! It took days to get the ingrained grime out of my flesh.

A New Opening

This was another 'commissioned' article in which Iona's dream of a new side hatch and Canal Boat's desire for a proper DIY feature about side hatches neatly coincided. The Bones column itself has no brief, but in this case the published version differed rather considerably from the draft one, in the editor's attempt to make it vaguely informative to anyone actually thinking about installing a side hatch.

When Martin Hody of Kedian Engineering suggested I might like a side hatch, I was rather surprised to hear that such a thing existed and that it was something I could do without any special gear. My friends fell about laughing at the prospect of me cutting a hole in the side of the boat and claimed it was



destined for failure – how wrong they were! Always prepared to research things for at least five minutes, I asked around and found nobody knew very much about side hatches, but one boater chum, Baldock, had fitted one and according to him it was 'dead simple'. Well, that was all the encouragement I needed.

Martin told me all about the frame system the hatch is made from and it sounded just the ticket, but the first decision I had to make was where to put it. These prefabricated hatches can be fitted in place of current windows, or a new hole can

be cut in the side of the boat and the hatch bolted in. Each hatch is made to measure, and takes just two weeks to fabricate. I chose to cut a new hole in the side of the boat, where no window previously existed, in order to let more light into my bedroom (and I wanted to know just how easy it was to cut a hole in the side of the boat). The hatches come in various states of finish, but I went for the completed version with two side doors lined with oak. I was amazed: it had an excellent finish, and the structure was so well made it would actually strengthen the side of the boat. Cutting through existing bearers is no problem as the frame restores the strength to the metalwork.

You don't have to remove any of the inside lining of the boat first, as the cutting tool can be adjusted to cut through the steel and then the inside lining leaving a perfect hole to slot the hatch into without causing any damage to the lining. However, the lining in my bedroom had long since had a disagreement with the hull, so I took the opportunity to rip it all down anyway. The next job was to measure up the location of the hatch on the inside, then mark it on the outside of the boat. This is, theoretically, a simple job. I measured from a window and the rear of the boat, and we were ready to go.

Before doing any work like this you must wear the appropriate protective clothing – sadly this does not mean a bowler hat and a tweed jacket, but a visor, goggles, and a hard hat. Martin started the cutting and then it was my turn. It is easy to get carried away with the excitement of the sparks flying as the diamond-tipped circular saw slides down the side of the boat cutting through the steel like butter. I managed to restrain myself (just), and once the hole was cut I was delighted to see that the hatch fitted perfectly, despite the slightly wobbly lines I had cut; the generous framework of this hatch means there is room to make mistakes. My hole wasn't perfect, but with the hatch in place, the box frame on the inside covered all the gaps and the fit was perfect.

With the difficult bit over I removed the hatch, surrounded the hole with clear mastic, and replaced the hatch. The next job was to secure it, and it even comes with pre-drilled holes. Armed with an electric screwdriver and some self-drill/tap screws I discovered that this was again like drilling into butter. In no time the hatch was secure. Not only that, but the frame visibly pulled the steel sheet back into shape so it really did reinforce the panel. I added some more mastic around the outside edge and stood back amazed at the results. The finishing touches involved screwing a strip of trim onto the oak panels inside the doors for the bolts and a lick of varnish to protect the wood from the weather.

It really was that simple. Martin helped me fit the hatch, yet although it was good to have him there to explain it all, his presence wasn't necessary as the fitting was exceptionally simple. He not only does side hatches, but front and rear doors, pigeon boxes, Houdini hatches, and, if you want to change your windows into port holes he can do that too! The hatch comes as a comprehensive kit, but you can buy it at any stage; painted, lined, unlined – you name it, you can have it. Not only that, but they are made from scrap metal and proceeds go to charity. Now, that is what I call fantastic!

I know what you're thinking. You've read this whole column waiting for some unlikely disaster to occur. But it all went worryingly well. Something can't be right!

Bed Again

I have absolutely no idea what it was that possessed me to think that re-doing my bedroom was a winter job. It isn't. One really wants a comfortable bed in the winter: even the divan in the drawing room isn't quite up to scratch. Nevertheless, having stripped the bedroom to bare metal, it was time to start rebuilding it, and the first job was taking off the doors so they could be re-hung to open the other way. I knew my rear doors were draughty, but I hadn't quite anticipated the howling gale that would sweep through the boat without the engine room door on to stop it. I could have stopped the project there and



then and sorted the doors out, but I wasn't quite sure how, so I put them in the shed for another day.

*'An interesting
sort of snowstorm
effect builds up'*

Having stripped everything out, treated the metal and laid a new floor, it was time to put the polystyrene insulation back. There is something very satisfying about shoving polystyrene into spaces as bits fall off, and before long an interesting sort of snowstorm effect builds up. Not only

that, but the room actually got warmer as I did it – my faith in polystyrene has been restored. Armed with my saw, electric drill and screws I started to batten out. It is very easy to get carried away with battens and I had visions of going through the cabin top with them, but I didn't, so I must be improving. Next came lining out. Thankfully I am currently moored opposite a rather fine timber merchant who delivers for free. So I ordered several 8x4 ft sheets of ply, and then realised they needed to be stored indoors to protect them from the rain. Any romantic notions I had of sleeping on the sofa by the roaring winter fire were dashed. The whole boat became a workshop and my sofa was littered with off-cuts and tools which are not the most comfortable of bed companions! The wind whistled through the boat so it was not terribly warm, and the ice began to settle on the water outside. No, fitting out is definitely not a winter job.

Heaving about bits of ply and sawing them up isn't as easy as it sounds, especially in the freezing cold, in the dark, after work. As you can imagine, I didn't do anything of the kind! Much to my delight, my neighbour, Maffi, took rather a shine to my wood pile, so I could exercise my delegation skills. While I was at work pushing back the frontiers of Science he spent his days sawing and fitting the lining. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, like having a simply ghastly job done for you, and done well.

I was delighted, but then the Christmas holidays came, Science had to fend for itself and I had no good reason not to start helping. The problem with two people doing a job is that they will have different ideas about it, and after a "breakdown in communication" I decided to allocate myself to creating the best Christmas Lunch in Christendom. It would have been, too, had I taken the giblets out!

With Christmas over, the lining was complete and looked absolutely fantastic. It was time for me to make the under-bed storage and wardrobe. I hauled a lovely piece of wood down the towpath, balanced it on the front deck and started sawing. Concerned that I was going to saw into the boat, I leant over to check. The shift in weight distribution flipped up the board and catapulted me onto the towpath. This did not deflect me from my task. Next, the bed-box. After a couple of hours' work, I and Maffi had constructed a wonderful 4ft by 6ft 4in box, with added trim. It turned out that the beautiful trim made it *slightly* smaller inside than the mattress. However, mattresses must be treated firmly. We fitted the bed-box, bullied the mattress into place, and stood back to admire our handiwork. The bedroom really was beginning to come along beautifully. I decided to varnish instead of paint the walls; the

result looked distinctly orange to me, but I was assured (by a half-blind man in torchlight) that this is the “natural wood” look – perfect!

It was time for my first night in my new elevated bed. Something I hadn’t considered when I decided to copy the bedroom of NB *Lucky Duck* was that the current owners of said ship are sprightly young things that can leap like gazelles. To say my bedroom is not for the infirm sums it up beautifully! I do however like it, and after the gas struts are fitted to lift the bed out of the way when it is not in use I will *love* it. I’m sure I will. Now, where did I put the doors again?

Completely Rudderless

The problem with being ill is that DIY comes to a halt and I am surrounded by unfinished projects; a wardrobe that can’t open, a chest of drawers that looks more like a toolbox and, to top it off, my recent electrical works have left me with cables and sockets everywhere, not to mention the new bathroom basin I purchased on impulse that remains half-installed in the corner. Overall, I am losing sight of the floor. This, combined with being ill, has left me fed up. So on my first weekend of health I decided to resolve the situation by going boating. I needed to know the boat would still move, and besides, I was getting itchy feet having been in one place for too long.

PJ on NB *Ocelot* decided he would like a trip out too, so I kidnapped Maffi to be a lock-wheeler and we set off. *Ocelot* took the lead cracking through the thin layer of ice that lay over the water while *Bones* followed on behind. It was a simply glorious morning with the water flowing under the keel, the ice breaking around us and the blue heavens above, one of those days that make all the grey skies a distant memory.

We had decided to stop in the Plough at Wolvercote which does a fantastic ostrich steak and has a library bar. Wolvercote lies between two turning points, one beyond the Plough at the bottom of the Oxford Canal involving a trip out to the Thames, and the other at Duke’s Cut. Not wanting to go all the way down into the city, or brave the Thames which was on red boards, we had a bright idea. We would tie our boats stern-to-stern, rather like a ‘push-me-pull-you’ in the *Doctor Dolittle* film. I’d tow *Ocelot* down to Wolvercote, and the following day it would be facing the right direction to tow me back. I had been itching to try this out ever since I saw some boaters doing it when I was visiting NB *Alnwick* the previous week.

We set off with a plate of cheese and a lovely cup of coffee. Maffi told me how easy it was as he'd done it earlier in the week – apparently the boat being towed backwards goes 'straight as a die'. He then went down to lift the first of the bridges. Maffi wasn't wrong – *Ocelot* did go straight as a die ... in the wrong direction and any way it wanted to. This was not ideal. The Oxford is notoriously shallow and, as *Ocelot* draws three feet, it is less of a narrowboat and more of a dredger carving its own channel as it moves along the cut. Having *Bones* tow it was rather like a mini towing a juggernaut. One tiny distraction and loss of attention on my part, and the good ship *Ocelot* would veer into the bushes and so would *Bones*. The only problem was that *Ocelot* never made it into the bushes due to aforementioned draft. *Bones* however did. If I tried to stop to straighten up, *Ocelot* would just keep on going straight past me, taking my boat with it. Eventually PJ looked at me with an exasperated sigh and suggested things might go a bit smoother if he held the tiller straight to try to reduce the effect of *Ocelot*'s rather oversized rudder plate.

Things did improve rapidly until the negative action of *Bones*'s prop-wash caught *Ocelot*'s rudder plate. It flung the tiller to the side with PJ firmly attached (whilst taking a sip of his coffee). He span out over the water with barely a foot on the stern and, just when I thought he would fall in, he sacrificed his coffee (and mug) to the gods of the river, grabbed the tiller with the other arm and swung back onto the stern, where thankfully he recovered his balance and resumed position. I say thankfully because it hadn't even occurred to me to pull my engine stop button, so it would have been rather messy had he in fact fallen in. PJ declared, rather self-centredly I thought, that he wouldn't be holding the tiller anymore and we continued on our journey – straight into the bank, where *Bones* got rather firmly stuck on the mud.

PJ decided *Ocelot* would come to the rescue – his boat has a fabulous engine and a very large propeller – and pulled us off: I only noticed after the event that I was still going flat out in forward gear! Eventually, we managed to straighten up and passed under the lift bridge Maffi had been so patiently holding up.

The return journey the next morning was so much easier. *Ocelot* powered back unhampered by *Bones* tied to its stern. I can only conclude that having equally weighted boats is crucial to a tow, and it helps if the boat being towed is actually able to float.

Back on the Circuit

James the electrical engineer's 2005 wiring job on *Bones* had been an emergency repair as nothing worked at all at that point, but it needed a more permanent solution. One of the things I have noticed about my boat is the distinct lack of 12-volt electricity. Electricians have always provided a mental block for me, so you can imagine how my brain ached as I began the steep learning curve of engine electrics, starter motors and alternators, not to mention ignition keys, isolator switches and fuse holders. I decided I wouldn't bother with cabin electrics but things got a bit desperate and as I simply couldn't bear gin and tonic without ice, or warm melting cheese, any longer, I rectified the situation and wired-in the fridge (with its crucial ice cube box). I was frightfully proud of myself because I found a gadget that would run the 12-volt fridge off mains hook-up (a.k.a. long extension cable) or 12-volt supply without adjustments. The electricity bug caught me, and when I was given a lovely cassette radio so I could listen to the news, I enthusiastically wired that in. I declared myself electrically advanced and planned to put my tools away.

However, in a moment of inspiration last year I had made the wiring simpler. A laudable aim, but the unexpected result was that I could only listen to the radio if the fridge was on. This wasn't a problem in summer, but come winter it was nothing short of annoying. Now, I could have scabbled behind my kitchen units AGAIN and rectified the situation, but I couldn't face it; besides I thought it was about time the good ship *Bones* lurched into the 20th century and had a full run of electrics from stern to bow with junction boxes and sockets galore. I am not sure what prompted me to do this, but it may have had something to do with the endless conversations with friends who wanted to charge their electrical gadgets aboard the boat and couldn't understand that listening to the radio or looking at the fridge was as electrical as we could get. Or perhaps it was the four bargain boat-batteries (a mere £25 each) and the swanky 6-volt radio alarm I'd bought?

In all honesty, I think I'd realised my need of electricity aboard the good ship when I tried to replace my locks 18 months ago. It was a glorious summer's day, so I collected all the things needed to put in a Yale lock in my front door. I fished out my hand drill and set to drilling a 32mm hole in my 2-inch wooden door. If you have ever done this, you will realise it isn't the quickest job; after an unfeasibly long period of fevered activity produced merely an interesting pattern of scratches and dimples, it dawned on me that my temperament wasn't designed for drilling by hand and it was time to use the power tools. Unfortunately I didn't have enough electricity to charge them

up, so I went out to dinner accompanied by my friend James and my batteries. I plugged the tools in the restaurant and we proceeded to eat our way through the menu until the batteries were charged. Three courses later we made our way home and my power drill went through the 2-inch wooden door in seconds.

Unfortunately the memory of this experience faded, and 18 months later my hand drill was dusted down and prepared for action. Armed with my arctic cable, crimpers, connections and a lovely cup of tea (a necessity for home improvements) I sat myself down next to the steel bulkhead with my hand drill and bits. I had been offered an electric drill and power supply from a neighbouring boat, but I was going through an independent, self-sufficient earthy phase, and there was no telling me! I made myself comfortable and started drilling a hole. An hour later I wasn't making huge progress and the sun was going down and, as there isn't any light in my engine room, I grabbed a torch, a new cup of tea and a bun, and carried on. Two hours later I was barely halfway through, my jaw ached from holding the torch in my teeth and I was amazed that I had, for once, shown such a fine and completely out-of-character display of patience (or is that characteristic stubbornness?!).

The following day I sheepishly took my neighbour up on his offer and drilled through the bulkhead in minutes. I fashioned a new grommet from rubber and chased the cable down the length of the boat. It took no time at all to secure it with clips, add the sockets, fuses and connectors.

Sitting proudly on my sofa, beaming at my triumphant work, I plugged in and switched on my new clock radio and it promptly blew up. Always, always change the voltage of your reducer from 12-volt to 6-volt when using such appliances.

Hate Male

This letter appeared in the issue of Canal Boat for June 2009.

I have burnt gallons of midnight oil, read and re-read and tried to find any useful information, anything of interest or entertainment value in Mortimer Bones' contributions ... and failed.

Due to a total lack of planning or forethought her DIY efforts have generally been some sort of failure. Her offering in April was a typical case of useless information and disaster tales. How can anyone imagine that the readers can have any interest in the fact that she'd been ill and was crazy

enough to get out on the waterway in an unfinished boat with half-finished electrics?

Her mindset is typical of highly-educated smugly superior academics. The statement 'I am surrounded by unfinished projects' is what defines her as belonging to the Nutty Professor Club.

Saying that it hadn't occurred to her to pull the stop button when a colleague was in danger of falling in between their boats is both an admission of incompetence and being guilty of having her brain in neutral. Then to admit that she left it in forward when being towed backwards is unbelievably arrogant. If a licence were needed to steer a narrowboat she'd have six points in half an hour.

In spite of her education she is too stupid to be in charge of a narrowboat and her prattling has no place in an otherwise splendid magazine.

Naturally this letter provoked a gratifying expression of support for the Mortimer Bones column from Canal Boat readers. Iona cut it out and put it on her wall.

Safety First

The boat safety certificate (BSC) on the good ship *Bones* runs out at the end of May. Fortunately the boat safety scheme (BSS) allows one to have the boat checked up to two months in advance, which gives plenty of time to sort out any necessary jobs. It should be relatively straightforward, but the certificate is valid for four years; in that time changes in the law can make your existing systems obsolete, or perhaps they just wear out. Alternatively you can be like me. Three years ago I looked at my boat, at the boat safety certificate issued with it when I bought it, and finally at the legislation, and then wondered how on earth *Bones* had a certificate at all. The gas system, with its picturesque 1950s cooker, was more like spaghetti junction; it had more joints than you can find on your average DIY stall, and the whole system leaked. On top of that the engine electrics were prone to smoking, and the cabin wiring loom wasn't ideal. Needless to say something was done about it, and the entire gas system was replaced; the electrics were tidied up; the batteries were remounted, rogue connections dismantled, proper components used, and the whole thing made safe. The BCS required a secure base for my new solid fuel stove (which had already survived an unplanned somersault off the trolley and down the jetty), so I had fixings going right through the marble hearth into an 18mm ply base. Super.

The engine electrics were only tidied up rather than replaced, and on my long list of things to do was making a new wiring loom for the engine. Of course, I

never *quite* got around to doing this, and I was rather panicky about everything else I hadn't *quite* got around to doing it by the time Mark Paris the boat safety examiner was booked for the following week. I decided to wait for Mark to do the examination then work through the checklist of things I had to do to pass. I was frightfully laid back about it all until the end of that day whereupon I printed off another copy of the BSS and paced up and down the boat checking bits off, worrying, and lunging at spanners and connections just to make sure everything was OK. Really, the checklist for the BSS is quite simple, and trying to pre-empt an examiner's assessment is pointless, but when casting around a hypothetical examining eye one tends to be a bit more critical about things that aren't even on the list. I knew the gas system was OK because it was fitted by a professional – but as for everything else, well, I wasn't sure at all!

Mark came, and the BSS really wasn't as bad as I had expected – nor was it as bad as several of my friends expected. I came away with a modest list of jobs. One of the engine wires needed replacing; a couple of extra clips around the gas joints were required; a bulkhead fitting for the cabin electrics was missing; low level ventilation needed upping (but that's a recommendation rather than an essential); the gas locker was too rusty and needed a jolly good clean out; and the rogue generator in a metal box on the front deck had to be vented... but it is so old and loud and impractical I think it ought to go altogether. All in all, it really wasn't that bad.

Armed with my list of jobs to do, I set off on a week's holiday and planned to do a little cruising during the day followed by some DIY to ensure I did get a new BSC on my return. In fact, because the list wasn't as long as I'd thought, I had a leisurely cruise up to Cropredy and back taking ten days to do something most people manage in four, and spent the time relaxing and catching up with friends. I spent rather longer than planned catching up with friends in Cropredy, as I ran out of diesel. In my defence my measuring stick said I had 15 gallons in the tank, so I was rather puzzled until closer inspection showed the diesel outlet pipe to be a good foot off the bottom of the tank! This was a shame because the measuring stick was almost the only thing I inherited with the boat which I thought actually worked. After being congratulated for my helmsmanship during a tricking reversing manoeuvre followed by getting through a rather tight gap (the exact words were "bloomin' eck – women CAN drive boats" followed by a round of applause) I made a new wiring loom enclosed in an oil- and diesel-resistant cable sleeve and by the time I'd labelled the wires I thought it looked quite professional – far more professional than nearly sinking the boat at Kings Sutton.

I Hate Ikea

I HATE Ikea; I find there is so much to look at you get brain-overload and come away feeling exhausted and as if the grey matter has been in a tumble drier, or squeezed through a wormhole in reality, especially if you have the temerity to deviate from the standard route round and end up going past the candles five times thinking you were going in a straight line. It takes ages to recover. The advantages of Ikea, however, are that it is full of really useful things you never knew you needed, it isn't over-priced, many of the products are real wood, and you can pick them up straight away. PJ, Maffi and I decided it was time to go there to get a chest of drawers for me, and a kitchen cupboard for PJ. Maffi came to ensure we stayed sane through the process and came out with what we needed and nothing else. Needless to say Maffi's brain instantly overloaded on entry into the palace of delights and he couldn't think of anything but the kitchen section and his sudden urge to buy a whisk. As he disappeared in one direction PJ vanished in the other and I found myself sampling the sofas and having a nice sit down. This gave me the chance to recuperate. Eventually a chest of drawers caught my eye and I whizzed over, only to find it was far too big. I felt quite disheartened; indeed they were all not quite right so I gave up. Still, PJ had identified a cupboard so we set about finding out where to collect it from, but discovered he had to have it delivered. Not to worry: he decided he would like a bathroom cabinet as well so we headed off into the ablutions section. None of the cabinets were quite right, and we were just about to leave when I noticed the most heavenly, knee-bendingly gorgeous bathroom basin, with cabinet. Not only was it boat-size, but it wasn't dis-similar from a smaller, lighter version of a butler's sink (which I adore, even when they don't come supplied with free butler). The Ikea urge hit me, and I simply had to buy it. In fact, the trip was a complete success as I found a perfect chest of drawers on the way out! We filled up PJ's boot and drove home.

Once home I unpacked my pride and joy and started to put it together but it became instantly apparent that the bathroom was going to need to be redesigned to fit it. Not only that, but I realised I should have purchased the taps from Ikea too as the ones from the shop down the road didn't quite fit which I presume is the difference between Swedish and UK plumbing. With no idea what to do about it I shoved the cabinet and basin into a corner of the sitting room. Unfortunately one can't really hide anything in a corner on a narrowboat; the corners aren't far enough away so it usually ends up projecting out into the centre of the room. This was nothing short of inconvenient, but the prominence of the problem led to lots of discussion and before long the taps were re-positioned onto the basin successfully. A bit of

wood and a lump hammer are not usual plumbing accessories, but in this instance they came in handy.

With all systems go, I took the old basin and cupboard out of the bathroom and slid the new one in place. Unfortunately none of the pipes fitted so I had endless trips to the plumbing store over the road trying to find adapters, that turned out not to work. Eventually I took my whole system over to them, laid it on the counter and they gave me what I needed: if only I had done that in the first place! Having rigged up something that worked, I positioned the basin, plumbed it all up and stood back to admire the handiwork. All I have to do now is fill in the gaps around the basin so it fits properly, re-attach a new side to the shower, and finalise the plumbing. NB *Matilda Rose* very kindly gave me some shower panels for the job and some flexible pipe for the plumbing, so there is no excuse not to get it done. The problem is I just can't face it! I know it has to be done because the shower doesn't empty properly, my toothbrush keeps falling down the side and the towel store needs rebuilding. I am not entirely convinced it is sensible to fit one's bathroom around a new basin; perhaps one should really ensure the basin fits the bathroom before embarking on such projects. Blame it on the black magic of Ikea.

Oh, and the good ship *Bones* has a new inhabitant – a *dog*, but that will have to wait for another time!

Boots Arrives

The community here comes alive in summer and transforms from a sleepy country hamlet with roaring fires, thick soups and evenings of banter, to a thriving canalside village bought alive by visitors, boaters and walkers alike. This year has been particularly exciting because the British Waterways yard has been leased out and refurbished to encompass a new tea room with cakes freshly baked every day. The threat of home-made cakes, afternoon teas and expanding waistlines has led me to re-assess the pet situation aboard the good ship *Bones*. You may remember that my previous attempts at choosing a pet were vetoed by the fish shop (I will spare you the heartbreaking details), so when a friend told me she might not be able to cope with her dog and asked whether I might like to take it on board, a light bulb went off in my head. Owning a dog would mean exercise, structure and responsibility, and the idea of having one about the place grew on me. As it happens my friend decided to keep her dog, and I set about finding out whether I would be a good dog owner. I discovered to my surprise (and other people's) that I could indeed be

suitable to care for an animal. The rescue centre came and did a boat check, deemed me and my lifestyle appropriate and within two weeks I was driving over to Milton Keynes to visit Boots – a 15-month old lurcher looking for a quiet life after recovering from having been savaged by other dogs. In no time he was living with me. Now, we all know having a dog transforms one's life, but the greatest revelation for me was discovering that I live in the country! I ventured a stile further than I normally do and encountered fields, woods and several large deer, not to mention the meadowlands' fantastic insect life and plethora of wild flowers. I am rapidly becoming the kind of person who dons wellingtons at every possible moment and goes for a stroll. Good job as the Tea Room's Bara Brith, a particular favourite of mine, is divine.

As owners tend to take after their dogs, you might expect me to have a shaggy baggy hairy dog. I do not. My dog is handsome, leggy, intelligent and fast, and despite what all my friends say, very much like his owner – except in one department: his potent flatulence. I met some lovely boaters from Cornwall one evening in our local hostelry and even they commented on this problem, but the less said about it the better! Another way Boots is like his owner is that he rather likes DIY. During my week off work to help him settle in, I left the pooch in charge of the good ship while I went to the shops for some supplies. On my return I discovered he wasn't so keen on the window frame and had taken it down. This would normally be OK, but in the process he realised that the wall isn't firmly attached to the boat and is made entirely of sticks. He likes chewing sticks. To be fair, he did stop before too much damage was done. Boots not only likes sticks, he likes blinds, and spent an hour redesigning one when I was out on another trip; he liked the shredding effect. I was wondering if there was anything Boots didn't like until he made his feelings quite clear about the sofa. The sofa is a solid construction, but the cushions, which make it more of a sofa than a bed, are not. I came home after another break to find the sofa 're-arranged'. I took the hint, dismantled it and got the camp chairs out. Boots doesn't particularly like the green plastic chair, and nor do I. One other problem with removing the sofa is that it was also the spare bed, and with visitors threatening to arrive for the weekend, something has to be done! I think it is time to replace the table and chairs in the dining room and make a dinette that doubles up as a bed. I've been talking about this for at least two years, but who'd have predicted it would need a dog to make me take any positive steps.

I am making it sound as though Boots has been destructive, but he hasn't really. The work he has done on the inside of the boat is work that needed doing (apart from the curtain, but then I never was into the fabric side of things), and he has settled in very well. Boots loves people, he loves other

dogs, and best of all he loves boating. He sits on the roof as we cruise along dividing his time between snoozing and strolling up and down the roof. Obviously much less trouble than a goldfish.



A Splendid Plan

This DIY malarkey is pretty relentless, but I only have myself to blame. When I started out I knew a tiny bit about engines, but nothing about DIY; unfortunately my engine was fine, and it was the rest of the boat that needed fitting out. I told myself right at the very beginning that I would do everything three times. The first time would be to learn about the tools, the materials and what works in the space available; the second to build templates from salvaged plywood and the third would be the final product in good quality wood. I haven't done anything three times, and have only done a few things twice, but something I haven't even attempted is the dinette I have been talking about constructing almost since I tore out the original one. Indeed, after Boots the beloved pooch elegantly dismantled my sofa, the need for a dinette, ideally doubling up as a spare bed, was becoming increasingly pressing. Not least because visitors were arriving for the weekend and we had nowhere for us all to sit down let alone sleep! Besides, I do like to eat at a table – largely because my hand-eye co-ordination seems to be in the off-mode at dinner time which can lead to wearing one's dinner rather than eating it, something I find neither filling nor fun.

I'm often criticised for not planning things properly, or more to the point not working to drawings, so I decided this time I would do things everyone else's way. I was given some plans for an L-shaped dinette which I studied extensively before setting out to build it. I couldn't find any salvaged ply so I

went off to the DIY shop, but clearly chose the wrong shop and couldn't find any. I returned home sulking. On the drive home a delicious sight out of the corner of my eye attracted my attention: a skip full of wood. Eventually I found the owner who was all too delighted for me to help myself, so I dashed home to get a saw, cut it all up into car-shaped pieces, and headed home. I made my measurements and did a few adjustments to ensure it all fitted, and got on with more sawing. Swiftly the seating area was put together. I filled up the seating with all sorts of goodies, including a bottle space in the raised floor for people to rest their feet on. How splendid to have a wine cellar. I poured myself a lovely gin and sat on my pride and joy marvelling at the work so far. I was still not convinced why one has to have plans to make seating, or to do any DIY for that matter; the only benefit to me was that the people around me made the right kinds of noises as I moved the papers around, held them up in a studious manner, and referred to them frequently while armed with a pencil, saw and tape measure.

I decided to put the tools away for a few days until I could carry on with the rest of the work. Unfortunately the rest of the work has not taken place. It would appear that although it looked as if the plans would be perfect for the space I had available, I'd failed to notice they were lacking a table. Regardless of which direction I look at it from, I simply cannot get the table into the space available and still get out from one end of the dining room to the rest of the boat. The ship just isn't large enough to declare one end of it the servants' quarters and never go in there myself. I am still wondering whether to suspend the table from the ceiling, or perhaps change the shape of the dinette into something a little more user-friendly and incorporate a drop-down bed in the sitting room. The other option of course is to swap round the kitchen and the dinette. Not only would this give me more room, but it would mean the dining room is further away from the bathroom: I would find this pleasing, but whether I find it *more* pleasing than having the kitchen next to the bathroom is under debate. Alternatively I could make my sitting room into a spare bedroom. So many considerations.

The problem with any DIY aboard the good ship *Bones* is that it leads to a cascade of ideas and re-designing. Of course, my friends are probably quite proud of the fact that I worked from plans, but they have been surprisingly quiet about the lack of table in my dining room. Indeed, they put their heads in their hands whenever I come up with a solution to the problem. I still don't know what to do with it, but I have decided something; it hasn't failed...it's just going through a redesign. This means I can ignore it and do something else for at *least* a year.

Space

After the dinette proved to be a disaster, or rather suffered a temporary glitch when the table wouldn't fit, I was rather demoralised. I am still working on a permanent solution to my dining room issues but for now I have settled with a rather splendid temporary solution – a drop leaf table! I popped into the charity shop in the hope of finding one, but they didn't have any. What they did have was a small book in which they write down your requests for furniture and then ring you when it comes in. They made a note of what I was looking for, and three days later I had the call. I went in to inspect the table, found it to be perfect and promptly purchased it, plus a new bureau that was sitting in the corner simply begging me to take it home.



*'A 6ft10" by 13ft
space already
jam-packed
with stuff'*

Now, I don't know about you, but when I am looking at potential furniture purchases I always imagine the space I am going to put them in, but the mental vision is never quite the same size as the reality. In my mind's eye I see what resembles a penthouse suite of minimalistic qualities rather than a 6ft 10" by 13ft space already jam-packed with stuff. After I had paid for my goods I went home to relax, and as I sat around I realised there wasn't really space for both my new purchases. There still isn't, but with some judicious, not to say ingenious re-organisation I have managed to wedge them into my sitting room. I still have to decide what to do with the dining room, which has inadvertently become a spare bedroom, and in the meantime I am continuing to come to terms with the fact that I am never going to be a minimalist.

Life on a boat isn't all about DIY, and there are times when it's simply magical: for me the last few weeks have been just that. I used to spend my summers messing about on the Thames, but this year I decided to stick to the

canals and remind myself why I like them so much. It's not only because it's so much more difficult to come to watery grief. A couple of weeks ago, with two weekends free, I packed away my tools, pulled the pins and set sail for Lower Heyford. The following weekend took me to Banbury and finally to Cropredy for the music festival. It is a glorious trip, and I was reminded once again that the Oxford Canal really is very beautiful; the vegetation is flourishing, the flowers blooming and the wildlife stunning. I saw several kingfishers on a stretch I hadn't seen them before, nine ducklings (which I nearly crushed between the bank and the boat when mooring up) and not so happily mink. Although I don't like what mink are doing to our wildlife I can't help but be curious about them; they are fast, inquisitive and shy as they dart around the canal, but not only that, they get mistaken for otters!

Having two forms of transport, a car and a motorbike, is a real blessing, or I thought it was. The plan was to boat at the weekend, and work during the week. I intended to drive the dog to the dog-sitter, pick up the motorbike and head into work. A great plan, but on day two of the grand commute the car started making the strangest noises. Being the mechanic I am, I cured the problem by turning up the radio. This temporary fix lasted one day whereupon there was an even louder noise and fourth gear stopped working altogether. To top it off I lost my motorbike keys – no problem, there was a spare set, but the spare set didn't come with a spare petrol tank key and I had very little petrol. This is where the canal is good: the trains follow the canal and there are several places I could moor up and commute. One mustn't take advantage of the sick, but when Maffi fell over and snapped his Achilles tendon I invited him to come and join me on my trip for a change of scenery which he gratefully accepted. Now with a dog-sitter on board life commuting to work became a breeze. Actually, the boating community are really a kind bunch. Maffi is rather 'prone to controversy' but since hurting himself people have been kind in helping him out – even people he has upset! I do hope that element of boating never disappears. There are times when boating is romantic, idealistic and picturesque but overall it is a difficult life, and that's why, when all things come together despite adversity, it can be magical. To top it off I awoke this morning to the sound of a curlew – it seemed to make everything worthwhile.

Rubbish

There is so much stuff on my boat I could barely get from one end of it to the other, so it was time for a clear out. Some say it was time months ago, but I think that would have been premature as the boat wasn't full then. The first

step would be to clear my extraordinarily cluttered roof. The first time I did it I took everything off the roof, and then put it all back again. The second time no-one noticed any difference, and the third time someone helped but still thought the final result was cluttered. So it was time to embark upon a de-cluttering enterprise, and as I had some time left at the end of my holiday I pulled the pins and set off down the Thames skipwards. Once I arrived I was ruthless. The roof emptied, the inside was cleared and the skip filled up. I puffed and panted and my dog wondered at the cause of all this activity; at least he'd helped by chewing a number of items leaving me no choice but to dispose of them. At the end of a very productive thirty minutes I walked through the boat just to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Nothing had changed. Overall I couldn't see a difference at all, anywhere. Stupidly I'd told everyone I was clearing out the boat and taking the opportunity to embrace minimalism, that the good ship would be a changed place following my skip encounter. It isn't so I haven't gone home yet. Hopefully, by the time I return, they will have forgotten why I went. Arguing that the boat *feels* less cluttered, and that's the important thing, honest, just doesn't wash.

But my quest had rewarded me with a wonderful journey. Compared to the canal, the river lives and breathes. The lock keepers are also a great asset: they're actually helpful as well as having a wicked sense of humour and a marvellous outlook on life. On my way down I met Mr Dust who is normally at Pinkhill Lock. Then at Iffley I was given some very valuable rope tricks for single-handed boating, and at Abingdon Lock when I was beginning to get exhausted Roger appeared. Roger is in a class of his own and makes me giggle non-stop: indeed he completely puts me off my rope throwing!

I never could throw a rope until someone showed me how; then I kissed goodbye to the days of drifting sideways across the fibreglass cruisers. Or so I thought.

Some time ago my father came boating, and I gave him a rope-throwing tutorial before heading off. I told him to try again if he missed, but suggested that he should do it in slow motion as the stress of missing and watching 17 tonnes of steel veering off into a cruiser in the lock could induce compete paralysis. Now with my fully trained crew I pulled the pins and headed for Oxford. We approached Sandford Lock and slid down the right hand side alongside the cruisers. For once I managed to loop my rope around the bollard, but dad missed his. I then watched as he took his time coiling the rope again. I instantly regretted my slow-motion suggestion; never ever tell the most laid-back person on the planet to consciously do something slowly. The front of the boat where my father stood was veering dangerously close to

the river cruisers and as he did his slow-mo stuff my blood pressure was having apoplexy. I remember the event fondly every time I miss a bollard, which is annoyingly often.

After my skip adventure I took some friends back down through Abingdon Lock. I had already given Mo a quick tutorial on rope-throwing before we set off. I was trying to show off, but Roger the lock-keeper spotted me and strolled along to assist. By the time he had made it round I had let go of my end of the rope and looped it around the dolly, but it came off the boat, missed entirely and was I just about to throw it again when Roger arrived. Mo the novice got it first time. Next morning I set off to Oxford and negotiated Abingdon Lock again successfully (before Roger made it around to me). By Sandford I was fully prepared, but the lockie watched me getting it wrong, and then having to move to the other side of the lock as those bollards became closer. After my poor show he delayed his lunch and did it all for me. At Iffley I had the rope taken off me before I could do any damage and when I got to Osney, Ray, the lock-keeper there, said he'd been expecting me as everyone had been phoning ahead. I didn't know whether to believe him or not! Good job I don't suffer from pride.



This small piece was nothing to do with the Bones column. However it seemed too good, and too true, to leave out. It's not entirely disconnected from what actually happened.

Today's Argument

I have just been up to the nuthouse, where the inhabitants hang upside down from the rafters during the daylight hours and prey on the poor unsuspecting public who are periodically summoned for a session of arguing about irrelevant matters.

- MB I am on 75mg Venlofaxine. I would like not to be.
Dr I see no point in that.
MB You take them then.
Dr If you are feeling better then we have reached the right dose.
MB If I'm feeling better I don't need the pills.
Dr How long have you been taking them?
MB Why don't I come back when you've read my notes.
Dr We could reduce your dosage to 37.5mg. Take the pill in the evening.
MB But one of the side-effects is insomnia. When I was on a higher dose I used to take pills to make me sleep as well.
Dr That's all right, this dose is much lower. You can sleep through the side-effects.
MB Of insomnia!?!?!?

Dr Bones never planned to be a boater. Some might say it shows.

In 2004 an unsuspecting psychology doctoral student found herself living on board a narrowboat. It was an experience that would not be without its trials, both for her and the boat. As she got used to boating life and negotiated her way around the cut (and the occasional river) in NB Wild Goose and subsequently NB Bones, she also managed to entertain the readers of Canal Boat magazine with accounts of her doings and undoings. This book contains versions of the first couple of years of those columns.

