

Cherry Pye Goes West by Coast and Canal

“You may use my mooring once it’s been checked and provided you’re away by the end of August” offered Paul McNeil as we dined together in the Onich Hotel. It was the last Friday in February 2005 at the AGM of the Dunbeg Boat Owners Association, which administers the moorings in Bishops Bay, North Ballachulish, Loch Leven in Lochaber.

“Man you’re a gent”.

After a satisfactory AGM, I set sail with Alex Agnew on his Contessa 26, Celtic Mist, for a superb winter weekend taking in: a night sail on Loch Linnhie; followed on Saturday by a splendid sleigh ride down the sound of Kerrera to Puilodorabhain and a long slog back to Bishops Bay on the engine in flat calm on Sunday.

The following weekend, back home on the Forth, I moved Cherry Pye from Port Edgar up to Kelvin Marine’s yard at Grangemouth in order to prepare her for West Highland Yachting Week. Since the VC Tar that I had put on the keel two years earlier had manifestly failed to do what is said on the tin, I had arranged for Steve Kelvin to grit blast the keel and use a water setting high zinc content resin, Zinga, to coat the keel prior to priming and fairing it myself. The workscope increased, as it does, so it was not until June that I was ready to brave the rigours of the Forth & Clyde (F&C) Canal and head West. On Friday 3rd Steve re-launched Cherry Pye into a strong flood tide with Andy Carnduff and myself on board. The launching process is perfectly safe, if a trifle unconventional, culminating with starting the engine whilst attached to both the crane and the downstream refuge pile in the Carron Estuary, quickly slipping both lines and accelerating to give steerage way over the flood tide up towards the Kerse Road Bridge. Get it right and it’s fine but don’t dither, otherwise you could end up with slings or mooring warp (you’re hanging by your stern pointing upstream) inexorably wrapped around the propeller. It’s not for the faint hearted I can tell you. Also there’s not a lot of air draft under the Kerse, not water under the keel, so timing and mast stowage are of the essence. Take my advice and listen very carefully to Steve Kelvin or Andy Carnduff or Donald or Alex the British Waterways (BW) sealock keepers, or better still take one of them with you. They’ve done it many times and all know what they’re about.

We locked in to the F&C canal’s Grangemouth sea lock about tea time and were treated like royalty, being ushered to a berth suitable for me to complete the fitting of new masthead lights and windex from the comfort of a pontoon berth. Saturday was, however, cold, wet, windy and downright miserable when Kevin Powling arrived as crew to help me complete the electrical work and head off along the canal by 09:00. In fact it was blowing about 30 kn from the west which was not what the doctor had ordered at all! I had wanted a quiet stress free weekend!

Well, we made it to Bowling OK by 15:30 on the Sunday with the ever-ready support of the BW bank crew, having had possibly one of the most bizarre

breakfasts I have ever had. We had spent the night on the summit pound at the Stables Inn which is just west of Kirkintilloch. An early start at 06:00 meant that we were at the top lock in Maryhill at 08:00 where we had an hour's wait for the BW bank crew. Now, you may disagree but there is something quite strange about being on board a small yacht in the middle of one of the less salubrious areas of Glasgow early on a Sunday morning. There were many people wandering home from what had obviously been a heavy all night session somewhere in the city and they too, obviously found it bizarre for a small bright red yacht (did I forget to mention the new paint job?) to be moored alongside a convenient pub, which is sadly disused at present. Kevin, however, thought nothing of it and being a city lad set off in search of a pre-cooked takeaway breakfast at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning. I was sceptical but sure enough, fifteen minutes later the boy reappeared with bacon and egg rolls all round, as well as all the latest gossip about Maryhill, which lack of space here precludes recitation. Suffice to say he now assists Strathclyde Police in their enquiries on a regular basis – eat your heart out Robbie Coltrane!

Apart from a trivial stone throwing incident through Clydebank we arrived uneventfully at Bowling at 15:30, half an hour too late to have access to the crane to re-step the mast. Now, that seemed an odd rule for the canal management? Never mind, it would just have to wait until the following weekend when I returned with Andy Carnduff for the three day trip though to Bishops Bay via the Clyde, Crinan Canal and Argyle Coast. Constrained by the obligation to work for a living, which does interfere with optimum timing to suit sailing, tides and canal operating hours, we duly arrived about 20:00 on the Friday night, wined and dined ourselves nicely on board, enjoyed the craik with the resident Bowling skippers and retired before midnight. Early morning saw us underneath the crane ready for action and it became apparent to BW's lock keeper that Andy and I knew more about stepping masts using hand cranes than they did. We were left on our own to accomplish the task in what seemed like no time at all, to be ready for the first locking out at 11:00. As the water level in the sea lock dropped, Andy, who was already rummaging inside the chart table piped up "Where's the Clyde charts?"

"Inside the table, should be near the top of the pile."

"Well I can't find them." Then it dawned on me I had committed the cardinal sin in navigation and forgotten to bring the relevant charts for transit of the Clyde, the river, estuary and firth!

Not wanting to sound alarmed I brazened it out "That's because they are the new style ones. They're all the same scale, in an A3 sized book with AA on the front. They contain quite a lot of useful detail about the land too, just in case we need to get a bus or train." Andy was less than amused, but he has passed this way before, being an Ayrshire man, and had confidence that the Gantocks Rocks would still be where they were before, and the narrows at the Burnt Isles just as easy to gauge the tides, provided they had not been adjusted by HM Government to suit the G8 conference.

And so Cherry Pye set off doon the water navigated by memory and an AA Road Atlas, albeit an up to date one. I just hoped that the weather wouldn't deteriorate or we might be in trouble if we had to go into some port neither of us had ever visited before. Well, we managed it including the Kyles of Bute against the tide at the narrows, a minor navigational hic-up (this time on Andy's part), up Loch Fyne and duly arrived at Ardrishaig about 22:00. The AA may produce wonderful road maps but they are neither intended nor recommended for marine navigation. I assure you dear reader I would not recommend it to anyone. There were no less than three MayDay calls on the VHF that day and the weather was warm, the visibility good and there was less than 12 kn of wind. I was relieved that there wasn't a fourth call.

Sunday morning saw us entering the Crinan canal sea lock and our transit fee paid by 08:30. Andy, good egg, had volunteered to work the locks so as Cherry Pye's un-silenced engine awoke the entire basin, Andy trotted off up to the first set of lock gates, perhaps seeking silence?

"You are going now?" came the heavily accented cry from "Al Naïr", a magnificent alloy French forty footer across the basin.

"Oui, certainment" came my reply. The rest of the exchange was lost, since I was asked to leave the French O grade class back in '67 before I disgraced the school by attempting the examination paper. I surmised, however that monsieur et madam wished to accompany us through the canal, so we slowed down to allow them to change from their pyjamas into something a little more modest. Three minutes later they nosed ahead into lock #2 with Cherry Pye snuggling in underneath their starboard quarter just like one of my recently hatched chickens under their surrogate mother hen. We continued in this fashion as we worked our way through the locks with Andy now fully engaged in madam's technique at the gates, but at each one it was clear that monsieur was becoming increasingly perturbed by the experience. By the time we reached the penultimate top lock he was not a happy man having dinged his beautiful boat off several features of the canal during the morning hours. Andy and madam were well ahead when it became obvious that a large dose of tranquiliser would soon be needed if our Celtic companion was ever to reach Crinan under the power of his own heart. The only thing I could think of was to pop down below and find a beer. Andy had left us with just the one but this was clearly no time to stand on ceremony. In the interest of the Auld Alliance monsieur's need was manifestly greater than my own, not to mention Andy's, who was by now beginning to perspire with all the lock work. So taking a quick swig out of the bottle I darted back up the companionway, pulled alongside and in my very best Franglaise "Monsieur, un bier, n'cest pas?"

"Alhors, vous est un hero" he cried and quickly downed the bottle of (to my mind) somewhat inferior American larger. The effect was almost miraculous for as we entered the summit lock Al Naïr slid in smoothly and expertly as if the skipper had been born to the task. With both exhausted gate crews aboard, we cruised the summit pound effortlessly. Just before the descent down into Strath Add, we were waved into a pontoon by frantic gesticulations

by monsieur. "Looks like a problem" I commented. "Och, not at all, I've chust agreed we join them for a spot of lunch."

We moored astern and went onboard for one of the most memorable lunches for many a year, in wonderful surroundings. Pasta salad by a French cook in a Scottish canal! Madam produced a superb meal seemingly out of nothing. Her granddaughter was Italian and she was determined to master the cuisine! All I could offer was the remains of the whiskey bottle from the previous night while Andy introduced the visitors to the national delicacy of the jeely piece. Monsieur provided first one then two bottles of wine to die for and finally admitted that he was somewhat handicapped by a back injury. This of course explained his problems in the locks, if one's personal manoeuvrability is compromised it can be hellish to have to leap around the deck of a forty footer fitting and adjusting mooring lines. There is no doubt that an en extra pair of hands, or two, can make the rigors of a canal passage more enjoyable – in many ways!

Fully fed, we locked down towards Crinan during the afternoon without incident, and just had time to chat to the BW lock keeper before slipping into the bar of the hotel for a light refreshment or two.

"05:00 is first locking although it's just for the fishing boats. 08:00 is the norm", quoth the first female (and charming!) lock keeper I had ever met.

"That's fine, fits the tide going west through the Dorus Mor". Easy, Agreed

Once inside the bar we met the ubiquitous local fisherman who insisted that we take the 05:00 and go through the Dorus Mor against the tide. That way, we could make reasonable time against the ebb in the more gentle tide up Loch Shuna to Loch Melfort, and catch the first of the flood through Cuan Sound into the Firth of Lorn, winning three hours on our passage. This was serious navigation; we had the charts, the local knowledge, and the goal of a single day's passage from Crinan to Ballachulish! Now I had been there a couple of times before and was somewhat sceptical that Cherry Pye, with her 8 HP engine, would be able to make any headway against the tide in the "big doorway", which the pilot advises may run at 7 kts. "Keep well in to the north shore, like no more than 25 m offshore and you'll catch the eddy going north. As you get through turn right immediately and keep just a few meters off the rock and you'll be fine, until the tide gets you about half a mile north."

We did and he was quite right; but it took some smart chat from myself to get the lassie to lock us out with the fishing boats by 06:00. I think she thought that we were mad trying against the tide but it worked and is well worth remembering. Mind you it should only be attempted with the confidence of a reliable engine and in calm conditions - we had no wind at all; and I was by now becoming increasingly grateful for Cherry Pye's 65 litre fuel tank, which so far had brought us all the way from Grangemouth.

"Once through Cuan we'll call in to Oban and pick up fuel and water before the Firth and under the Bridge". Andy just nodded. Maybe he couldn't hear over the din of the engine, or maybe he knew the fuel point on the south pier

is 10m above LW, the vertical piling is designed for fishing boats and ferries, with no fendering or accessible mooring bollards and there is no shelter from any westerly breeze or wake from the passing ferries, but the Celtic leprechauns arranged for a sympathetic fellow yachtsman to bide a while after he had fuelled before us and offer us his bulwarks as a pontoon for which we were most grateful as we loaded. The fishmonger on the south pier, just up from the Calmac terminal, sells the most delicious crab sandwiches! So within half an hour, duly fortified, fully fuelled and watered, we headed out past Kerrera, up the Lynn of Lorne into Appin and Lochaber.

The rest of the journey went without incident and at 18:00, twelve hours after leaving Crinan we passed under the Ballachulish bridge and turned left into Bishops Bay on the top of the tide. Celtic Mist was already there disembarking crew and taking photos, so we drew alongside and accepted the mugs of tea gratefully.



As you can see from the photograph (thanks, Alex) there was not a lot of wind, not a lot at all!

And so that was it, the end of a five day journey from Grangemouth on the East Coast to Loch Leven on the West, via the F&C and Crinan canals. It was a most pleasant and memorable journey, made possible in part by the reopening of the F&C as part of the Scottish Millenium celebrations. The refurbishment of the canal cost about £85M. The tent in Greenwich cost around £1,000M. I know who got the better value for money!

Chris Hall, Cherry Pye {a Hustler 25, 1.45m draft, fin keel, conventional drive}