

F & C Canal Passage 29 – 30th Oct 2002 by “Point Blank” and “Snowfinch”, with update on Carron entry by “Odin” and “Silver Gare” 13th Nov 2002 (rev2)

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At the end of the 2002 season, the BW (S) saltwater group which seeks to promote the quality of service BWS offers to salt-water canal customers, organized a passage by two typical modern yachts through the Forth and Clyde canal on the 29th and 30th October 2002, accompanied by a BW(S) hospitality barge—load of interested representatives of the boating community, to assess the success of the work done by BW(S) in bringing the canal back into practical service for passage-making, recreational vessels. Point Blank is a Dufour 28, 1.7m draft, home port Aberdour; Snowfinch of Port Edgar, a Sadler 32, 1.5m draft. A fortnight later, Odin of Grangemouth YC, a ferro cement sloop, 7.6m x 2.9m x 1.35m with 2.4m air draft to the top of the mast gallows, and Silver Gare, a beautiful Silveretta motor yacht, built – you’ve guessed - by Silvers on the Gareloch in 1934, about 11m x 3.0m x 1.1m draft and 2.65 air draft, both ran a couple of times from the Carron sealock basin under the Glensburgh (or Kerse) arched low bridge, to demonstrate and photograph the characteristics of that irksome entry from the Forth.

The trips were successful. **The conclusion is that at end of 2002, safe and reliable passage of the F & C can be made, in two days, by vessels under 20m o/a length, 5.2m (plus fenders) beam, less than 2.9m air draft, and critically, not greater than 1.7m fresh water draft.**

The canal generally is more than 2.0m deep and soft bottomed, but short sections are currently barely 1.7m and as is always to be expected in inland navigations, there are occasional, isolated obstructions caused by old waterlogged timber, shopping trolleys or residual detritus. BW(S) have a programme of dredging and clearing currently operating, together with progressive installation of landing/mooring jetties, domestic facilities, gate and lock maintenance, bollard installation and more, supported by two high tech weed harvesters (which also collect floating debris and identify the water depth physically and by transponder), by the contract hire of a large plow dredger, and most significantly, by their hand-held (backpack) GPS-based data recording system which is updated by all recorded events which currently shows all known shallows, hazards, repairs, features, cables etc and is the effective working tool which defines the priority areas for the maintenance teams.

BW(S) have demonstrated a determination to overcome the extensive difficulties of recommissioning the canal, by securing appropriate equipment and personnel to make it work. They have taken the constructive advice of their prospective customers seriously. Their efforts are bringing success; there is no doubt this will ensure continued improvement in depth of navigable water, sea access and shore facilities. Passage making can be recommended to any vessel within BW’s stated scantlings, allowing for sensible clearances of 100 mm on both draft and air draft, for fendering and for overhang of mast, radio whip and furling gear.

The emergency services now use a National Grid - based coordination and location map, issued to all license holders, but the need has not been evident as no occurrences of vandalism to transit yachts or calls for fire service or ambulance aid have arisen this year. Nonetheless, sensible precautions to avoid such risks are always recommended.

In return, yachters should use this great asset; learn how to make best and safest use; take friends as additional crew for the inland passage for interest and for working support (realistically it will take 4 crew for a swift working passage when all 36 inland locks are boater-operated); carry the necessary inland equipment (a foot-mat to control grit from the tow-path, 4 m punting pole (extend the whisker pole with a bit of plastic gas pipe), 5 big fenders, reliable engine with accessible cooling water filters (for weed removal), a camera with flash, mobile phone, map and guidebook as well as the more obvious things like mooring cleats and lines, and mast support designed to give access and headroom.

Both the entrances are tidal and need careful planning and navigation. Critically, measure and know the actual dimensions of your vessel in current transit trim;- length o/a including the masthead light and jib furling clevis, beam, air height and fresh water draft. The yachts which have experienced difficulties have all disregarded the advice given in the East Coast Pilot and by BW(S) lock keepers! Be warned; do it right!

It is a different kind of boating experience, leading to unfamiliar locations with different potential for enjoyment, or for the unwary, for disappointment.

Proper preparation by the saltwater skipper will ensure an interesting, trouble-free and enjoyable experience of sailing at 48m above CD...and you can sail from Ardrishaig to Aberdour, in under three days if you really try, or around the Cairngorms in a fortnight!