

BURNT OAK

I put the phone down. Oh no I was hoisted by my own petard.

My friend Leyton had just invited me to join him and his family for a week on a narrow boat barge on the Oxford canal. He knew I was free the second week of April because we worked together and I'd bemoaned the fact that my holiday in Waterloo in Belgium had been cancelled because I'd broken up with my fiancé Dollis Hill, who was actually one of Seven Sisters.. So I had nothing planned and Leyton knew it.

Me and my big mendacious mouth. We had been out drinking a few weeks before and he'd asked me how I'd spent my late teenage summers. Being embarrassed at the fact I'd worked stacking shelves in Sainsbury's every holiday, just to make ends meet I told him my family used to hire a luxury Narrowboat every summer and accompanied them. My job was to open the lock gates at each lock when not steering the 70 ft long converted barge. You see I was fixated with the adventures of Robbie Cumming in his Canal Boat Diaries TV series. And now I had just committed to helping Leyton his wife and 2 young children to navigate the Oxford Canal from Oxford to Banbury, a 53 mile stretch which actually had 38 locks to negotiate. I had seen Robbie struggle with some of the locks on that stretch of the canal on TV but that's of course no substitute for actually piloting a canal boat through the locks.

Me and my big mouth. On 8th April I set off from Marylebone to Oxford then found my way to the Oxfordshire Boatyard in Lower Heyford where I met up with Leyton's family and we boarded the Narrowboat named Burnt Oak. I was full of trepidation. In preparation I'd spent the previous week reading all I could about piloting narrowboats and watched all 7 series of Canal Boat Diaries and even some Great Canal Journeys with Timmothy West and Prunella Scales. The boatyard owner Mr Colindale showed us to the boat named Burnt Oak which was a typical 70ft by 7ft Narrowboat. He offered to show us the ropes but Leyton shouted No need we have an expert pilot on board and pointed behind me. I turned around to be confronted with my reflection in a full length mirror. The last thing the Mr Colindale said was to warn us not to overload the wood burner then he left. Leyton's wife Angel shepherded 6 year old Kenton and 8 year old Victoria on board. The kids ran around familiarising themselves with the rooms on the boat and the interesting paraphernalia. Leyton took all the luggage on board and started unpacking and Angel checked out the kitchen. I went to check the steering mechanism.

The narrowboat steering system consists of a simple robust tiller connected via a swan neck to a steel rudder blade acting directly in the propellers water flow. It functions in reverse pushing the tiller right moves the bow left and vice versa the boat pivots from its centre requiring anticipation of a delay in response. The tiller is at the back of the boat so a long 70 foot away from the front. Luckily the starter button is by the tiller but to stop it you have to reduce your throttle to idle, shift into neutral, and then use short, controlled bursts of reverse gear to counteract forward momentum, as boats have no brakes and need significant stopping distance. The stern will likely veer to one side when reversing, so its important to use the tiller to correct this and anticipate hazards early. I read this online and had seen Robbie doing it But realised doing it would be a different kettle of fish.

I set of with the utmost trepidation. I told Leyton it was years since I'd piloted a narrow boat so enlisted his help as an extra set of eyes as I steered, following the right bank, making sure I didn't get too close to avoid the overgrowth and shallows. We had 7 miles before the 1st lock which I was dreading. Suddenly without any warning a heavy mist descended and within minutes I had lost a clear sight line. Neither of us could see more than a few feet ahead. I looked desperately for a space and a cleat or post where I could moor the boat.

The thunderous crash followed by the fire and smoke was as sudden as it was unexpected. Angel and the children started crying and Leyton was panicking but I felt strangely composed as I threw the mooring rope over to a Narrowboat just to our right. I managed to pull them over adjacent to the Burnt Oak and then threw them another rope to anchor the bow.

We managed to rescue the old couple Fred and Felicity Farrington from the Maida Vale then extinguish their fire. I realised how it could so easily have been us. You see the Maida Vale had hit the right bank hard and badly damaged the bow, it had started to list and if I hadn't acted so swiftly it could have sunk and they couldn't swim.

Jeremy Hosea

PS 12 tube stations