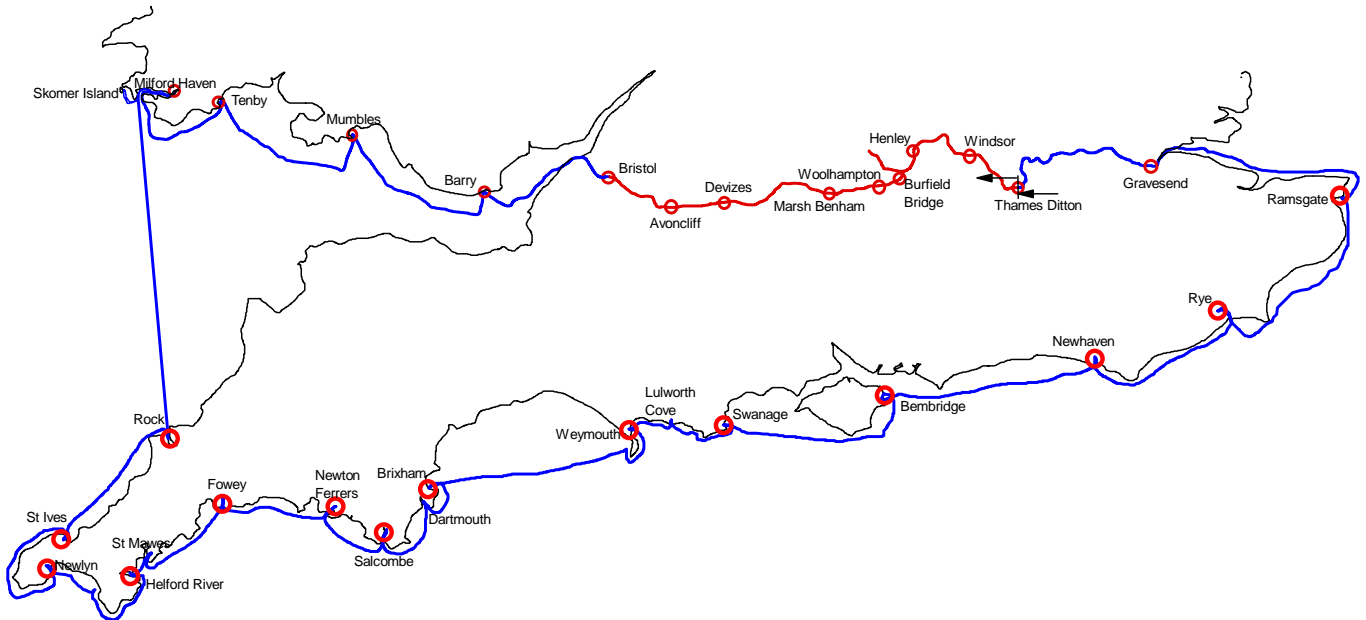


South Circular voyage of Bumble Chugger (124) - 2004 by Robin and Gillie Whittle

The south circular voyage in Bumble Chugger was planned to start and finish at Thames Ditton on the Thames. The first part of the plan was to motor, with the rig down, up the Thames to Reading and then take the Kennet and Avon canal down to Bristol. The second part was to sail from Bristol down the Avon Gorge to the Bristol Channel and then along the south coast of Wales to Milford Haven, where we would meet twenty other Shrimpers for the National Week. This would be the third part. The fourth and final part was to sail from Milford Haven down to Padstow and then on round Land's End, along the south coast to Dover and then up the Thames back to Thames Ditton.



Part 1: The Thames and the Kennet and Avon canal



We set off after lunch on Friday the 18th of June. We had launched the boat at Thames Ditton in the morning and taken the trailer back to the house. A squash friend of Gillie's had then kindly given us a lift back to the boat during her lunch break. The sun was shining and we motored happily along up the river past Hampton Court and through the locks eventually reaching Windsor by the early evening. At one lock we found a friendly heron which was fishing from the steps inside the lock. As the lock filled it walked up the steps and then down again as the water drained out. The Lock Keeper said that it had been there since the spring. We carried on until just past Eton where we picked a spot to moor by a



meadow. The view out of the cabin looked straight out at Windsor Castle dramatically lit up by the sunset.



The next day our aim was to get to Henley where we hoped to meet up with Ted Palmer and Robert Antipoff of Kittiwake fame for a meal in the evening. The river was crowded with birds and their newly hatched chicks; swans, ducks and grebes. The grebe chicks were especially pretty with their striped backs. Herons were everywhere and we spotted the occasional kingfisher. We passed under the very beautiful Brunel brick arch bridge at Maidenhead, which is still the longest brick span in the world.



Further on Cliveden House could be seen through the trees set back from the river reminding us of the Profumo scandal. As we approached Henley we found that the qualifying rounds for the regatta were in progress with the racing lanes all set up. This left a narrow channel for us to pass along. We found ourselves keeping pace with two ladies' eights battling it out. They were neck and neck until the last hundred yards and then one crew seemed to lose its puff and the race was all over. We met up with Ted and Robert and repaired to an excellent pub, the Angel, for drinks and a meal.

On Sunday morning, Tim, an old National Service friend of Rob joined us for the trip up to Reading and on to the village of Maple Durham, where he had a house close to the river. After a splendid champagne lunch there he and his wife, Hilary, came aboard and we motored back to Reading where we found the entrance to the Kennet and Avon canal. We had written to British Waterways for a visitors licence some weeks earlier, and although not cheap (£65) it was for a full year and on any canal. We also had to get a licence from the Environment Agency for the few days of motoring on the Thames. This was not such good value (£36 for a fortnight).

At the first lock in Reading, which was manned we had to buy two keys; the first was a windlass to open and close the paddles for the locks and the other was for the padlocks for the swing bridges.



Once through this lock we would be on our own, fully responsible for getting through the next hundred and six locks and two hundred and fifty bridges leaving the locks in the right state, either full or empty (depending on the written instructions at each lock). We were then out into the countryside and after negotiating three locks, we tied up to the bank outside The Cunning Man pub as it was quite late in the evening by now. We were going to offer soup on board, but it was too cold to sit in the cockpit so we had our soup and drinks in the pub and warmed up. Tim ordered a taxi to run them home. We waived goodbye and wandered back to "Bumble Chugger" for the night.

The next day, Monday 21 June, started grey and drizzly, but this cleared and the sun came out. It was slow progress through all the locks and bridges, but we got quite a good system going. Throughout the canal there were several different kinds of winders for the paddles, and swing and lifting bridges had to be negotiated. The magic key we'd bought set some of the bridges in motion: clanging bells, lowering barriers and moving the bridge. Sometimes the barriers had to be done by hand, and the key just did the swinging or lifting. Small footpath bridges were swung open by hand, but locked with the handle or the key in a padlock.

All was going well, and we were on schedule to meet friends of Gillie for an evening meal. We'd got to lock No.100, Sulhamstead, when disaster struck. The skipper of a narrow boat moored before the lock said he was not going through and was going to turn back. He'd heard that Heale's Lock (No.93) was closed. One of the gates had been rammed and broken on Saturday, and British Waterways did not expect it would be mended for 7-10 days. This was really shattering news for all our plans!

After a long pause we got the maps out and spent some time pondering all the options. We could find a slipway, leave "Bumble Chugger" and take a train -which ran all along the canal so we could get to a station quite easily - pick up the car and trailer from home, drive back, get 'BC' out of the canal and drive on to a slipway beyond Lock 93 (problem then with the car and trailer). Or we could forget about Shrimper week in Milford Haven, and just continue down to Land's End from Bristol. After a call to British Waterways we decided to continue and check at the lock how long the delay was likely to be.

The next problem occurred as soon as we tried to start the motor. The starter rope cog broke on the first pull. We had a spare so Rob settled down to replace it. The initial replacement went all right, but the rope was not retracting smoothly, so Rob started to remove bits until suddenly a ten foot long steel spring sprang across the boat! The spring had a mind of its own. We finally tamed it on the fourth attempt with black cotton wound round it. It took a little while to work out how to connect the ends and the final encasement had to be done blind. However at last it was all together again and it worked! We had a calming beer and lunch, and chugged on to Woolhampton Lock which was the lock before the broken one. We tied up against a pleasant grassy bank at the end of the Row Barge pub garden.

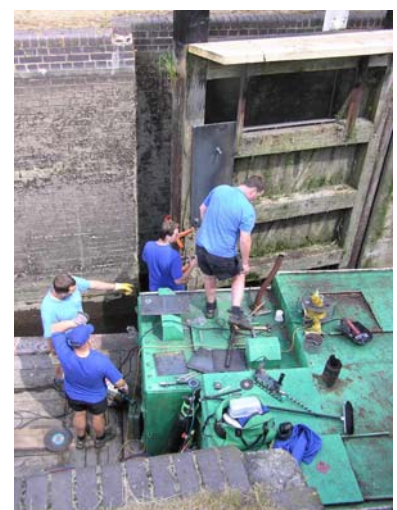


It was time to review the situation and another call to the lady at British Waterways provided good news for us this time. They were temporarily mending the gates with steel plates and they were hopeful of getting the lock operational by Tuesday evening. This news convinced us that we could continue the journey, but it meant rearranging a number of the meetings with friends and relations. We had fortunately planned this part of the journey with a day to spare which we would now need.

Gillie rearranged to meet her friends at the Row Barge for supper. It meant that they had to drive an extra 20 miles but it turned out to be a very good evening in spite of the rain that had set in.

Tuesday morning brought better weather and we walked the half mile into the village to get petrol. We had hoped to stock up on stores, but found the village shop closed. The Post Office was there still, but only just, and we had a long wait to get a post card, with the post mistress having trouble explaining the new pension system to a rather deaf little old lady.

Another call to British Waterways indicated that they were now hopeful that the work would be done by 4 o'clock. We also contacted an engineering friend of Rob's from Bristol to explain our revised timings. He said he would like to meet us at Avoncliff on Saturday morning and come aboard for the final part of our trip to Bristol. We then walked along the tow path to Heale's Lock, about half a mile further on, to see what was going on. A large repair barge was in place and four British Waterway's men were busy cutting huge steel plates, and drilling them, and bolting them onto one of the gates. They expected to be finished before 2pm. We returned to the Row Barge for a drink and then moved on board for lunch.



At 1.15pm we set off for the dreaded lock, and soon after we arrived there the workmen started testing the gate and pronounced it OK. So by 2.15, ahead of the new schedule, we were first through and on our way again!

We had left the arrangements to meet Rob and Clare (a 505 friend and his wife), fairly open, as we hadn't known how far we would get by the evening. They had very kindly invited us to stay the night with them in Marlborough. We rang them and arranged to meet at Hampstead Lock in Marsh Benham just past Newbury. The rain started during the afternoon, and got heavier and heavier, becoming a steady downpour. We took longer over the locks than we'd estimated as the last few had to be left empty, involving an extra process. Eventually, half an hour later than intended, we met them walking along the towpath to meet us. They got aboard and we chugged the last half mile to the road where they'd parked their car and where we could moor the boat for the night.

We were two drowned rats squelching into their car and then slopping into their clean, tidy house. Fortunately, being sailors, they were used to such problems. We then had the most fantastic hot showers and changed into dry clothes, and our dirty clothes were popped into the washing machine. It was then sherry time in the warmth, followed by supper of fresh trout caught by Rob, then strawberries and cream, and more drinks, and more talk. We fell into bed very late - a luxuriously comfortable bed!

Wednesday morning after a sortie to the market to get some bread, Rob drove us back to Marsh Benham to recommence our journey. He and Clare were off the next day to the 505 Nationals being held at Lyme Regis. It was still raining and we were soon soaked again. The day became more and more unpleasant. The wind got up to force 6-7, lashing the trees around, and the rain sheeted down. We only saw two other boats all day. We had a brief respite at Hungerford when we shut ourselves in the cabin for lunch and listened to the Archers. It was then another long slog for 4 ½ hours of wind and rain and winding paddles and pushing gates. We had to press on if we were to keep to our new timetable.



We moored below Crofton Bottom lock and were soon warm and dry in the cabin. Eggs and bacon followed by a game of scrabble provided a good ending to a rather horrid day. The rain stopped and there were patches of blue sky, but it was still blowing hard.



Thursday 24th June. We woke to a pleasanter scene with a moderated wind and blue sky but still very cold. A couple of narrow boats coming through said that a gate arm on the next lock had broken. As we needed both gates open, unlike the narrow boats, we thought our plans might go awry again, but in fact when we got there, we were able to move the damaged gate and get through.



We moved higher and higher, and the countryside opened up to fields and pastures.

Black rain clouds kept threatening us but passed us by. Lock No.55, Crofton Top Lock seemed like the top of the world, before a flat stretch which led us into the mile long Savenake tunnel, dedicated to Thomas Bruce in 1810, and then we were starting on our downward journey.

Wootton Rivers was a suitable lunchtime stopping place. We had hoped to do some shopping, but as in all the small villages along the canal, the local shop had disappeared. We listened to Wimbledon tennis for a while - they had managed some games today: it had been totally washed out yesterday.

We had arranged to meet another friend of Gillie's for tea at Pewsey Bridge. We arrived in good time and gave the boat a bit of a clean up: it seemed to get very dirty on the canal with bits of twigs and leaves and muddy water and some nasty scratches had appeared caused by the buffeting in the locks. A man stopped to talk while we were waiting. He was one of the many people who live on the narrow boats and roam the country. He told us a real horror story - he'd spent 11 years building his dream catamaran in Bristol. It was almost finished - just needed the rigging and sails - and he went off for a few days down the coast to arrange a mooring spot. While he was away, the boat blew up and sank. There had been a gas leak, and the pilot light of the fridge had ignited it. He was lucky he was not on board, but he was shattered and turned from sailing to a life on a narrow boat.

Gillie's friend arrived with daughter in tow. There were a lot of heavy rain clouds about but we were lucky to have some sunshine while they had their tea and biscuits on board. They left soon after 5 to pick up a friend from the school, and we waited a few minutes before leaving, while they got to the first floor classroom, and teacher and friends all waived to us from the window.

We continued through the pleasant country of the Vale of Pewsey and had a good view of the white horse cut out of the hill. We donned our wet weather gear, and that seemed to ward off the ominous rain-filled clouds for a while, but inevitably a big storm arrived and it got very cold. We had to push on as we needed to spend the night near Devizes for our morning descent of the Caen Hill flight of locks. During a break in the rain there was a magnificent double rainbow behind us. The further west we went, the more narrow boats there were moored along the banks. Apparently many of them were lived in by gypsies, and they didn't move around, but just set up rather messy sites.



The rain and the cold persisted until we finally got to Devizes Wharf at 8.0pm and were able to tuck ourselves into the cabin. Gillie spoke to her nephew to confirm the arrangements for the morning. He was on duty and spoke to her from a panda car outside a pub. The England v Portugal UEFA quarterfinal match was being played, and trouble was expected when the pubs came out. We listened to the match as we had supper, and it was still going on well into extra time when we went to bed. We heard the last few minutes as we were drifting off to sleep with Portugal's winning by a penalty goal!

Friday 25 June. There were three locks to negotiate before we met up with the family, so we were away by 7.30. As we arrived at the meeting place, the Black Horse, we saw them waiting for us on the bank. We were lucky with the weather as it was a fine day with the wind moderated. There are sixteen locks in the Cairn flight but in just over two miles we had to negotiate twenty nine. A narrow boat came through at the same time, which halved the winding and pushing, and also speeded us up a lot as they set about preparing three or four locks ahead, so that they were filled in advance of our arrival.



We were down through the main flight of locks (16No.) by 11.0am and invited the family aboard for tea and biscuits. It was then time to say good-bye and move on. There were still many more locks in the secondary flight to Sells Green and we regretted not having their support for these. Suddenly the work load seemed very heavy. However by the time we had reached Semington, where we stopped for lunch, we had reached a much more lazy part of the Avon valley and the countryside had become very beautiful with rolling hills on either side.



The bird life increased and we saw one of several kingfishers flitting along ahead of us pausing to sit on the branch of an over-hanging tree. As soon as we got close it was off again flickering in the sunlight. Rounding one corner we heard a shout to slow down and were surprised to see a short narrow boat half submerged with its bow pulled up on the tow path. There was still room to edge round outside it and as we did so we noticed the crew huddled up on the bank clutching small bundles which they had managed to rescue from the wreck. A kettle could be seen through one of the portholes floating amongst the debris. A number of people had gathered on the tow path to help.

We arrived at Bradford on Avon at about 6pm where we stopped to fill up with water and replenish the stores, although it was too late to find anything but the basics. It was a pity we could not spend more time in this beautiful town exploring all the backstreets and stone houses. The lock coming out the town was the deepest yet (over 10ft drop) and it became quite dark in the enclosed space as the water level dropped.

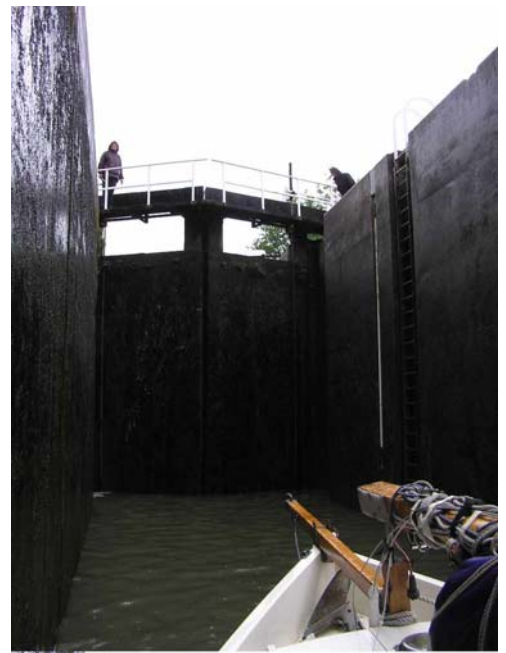


The last stretch of the day took us to Avoncliff and it was exciting to pass over the River Avon on the John Rennie aqueduct, built in 1804. Once round the bend on the far side we found a suitable place to moor by the bank for the night. We made a quick sortie to the Cross Guns for a well deserved drink and admired the view of the steep valley from an outside bench, then returned to the boat for supper on board.



We were up at 6.30am the next morning, Saturday 26 June, ready for the arrival of Rob's engineering friend, Alf, who was coming up from Bristol by train. The station was only two hundred yards from

where we were moored and we had plenty of warning as the noise of the train could be heard from a long way off. He appeared waving from the top of the aqueduct and by this time there was a steady rainfall and it continued like that for the whole day until we arrived at Bristol. Still undeterred we chugged off clad in our waterproofs and had a clear passage without locks until we arrived at the outskirts of Bath. At the first lock of the Widcombe flight (Locks Nos. 13 to 7) we heard that the gate post at Weston lock just below Bath had been damaged and some of the lock wall had come away. We decided to continue and see the damage in the hope of getting through. Lock No. 8/9 of this flight was extra deep (over 19ft). This was the result of combining two locks to allow the building of a new road scheme. On coming out of this lock we were greeted by the crew of a long narrow boat as long lost friends. They had gone aground in the pool between this lock and the last one, No. 7, and were waiting for a boat to come through with the extra water to allow them to refloat. Passing through Bath was an odd experience as the roads and traffic were hidden from us. We came across pretty Victorian cast iron footbridges and between the bushes and trees on either side we caught glimpses of fine stone houses.



At Lock No. 7, the Bath Lower Lock, we had arrived at the end of the canal and reached the junction with the River Avon. It was a shame that this momentous moment had to be enjoyed in the pouring rain but we were encouraged by Alf that he had a good pub lined up for lunch - always providing we could get through the next lock which was the damaged one. We slowed down as we arrived at Weston lock and found two yellow clad engineers there examining the broken post. They explained that a temporary repair had been made and the lock was able to hold the water. The damaged gate had to be left shut but as they were quite a lot wider than those on the canal there would be plenty of room for Bumble to squeeze through. The engineers said that we would be the last boat that they were allowing through before closing it for the permanent repairs. Wow!! We were going to get to Alf's pub at Keynsham after all. We arrived at the 'Lock Keeper's Inn' at 1.30pm absolutely drenched through. We entered the pub like three drowned rats and although very full of people found an empty table. We warmed up quickly with the aid of drinks followed up with a huge bowl of chilli-beef and crusty bread. Alf considered it to be a special occasion and ordered a round of malt whiskies which went down well.



There were only two more locks before reaching Bristol and as we approached the city Alf pointed out the new construction that was going on and the details of each job, many of which he had been involved with. We entered the Floating Dock at Natham lock and wound a way down past the SS Great Britain built by Brunel in 1843. Unfortunately it was completely wrapped up in polythene whilst being restored. Close by was a huge catamaran yacht which had been sailed by Tracy Edwards on one of her round the world trips. Eventually we arrived at the west end of the Floating Dock and Alf guided us into the Underfall Yard, which was situated close to the Harbour Master's office. We moored on to a small pontoon close to the huge 'Patent Slipway', surrounded by various interesting and historic boats.

We had at last completed the first part of our voyage! It had taken us eight days and we were on schedule in spite of the unforeseen delays.