



Emma being filmed for the new Channel 4 series, *Narrow Escapes*.

Watch Emma's adventures

Emma's cruising exploits aboard *Dawn Piper* form part of a brand new TV series, *Narrow Escapes*, that's devoted to the UK's inland waterways.

Due to be broadcast on Channel 4 from January, Emma is among several boating characters who will feature prominently in the shows. The channel says, "Whether it be retirees looking for freedom, young people searching for an affordable alternative to the cost-of-living crisis, newlyweds, families or divorcees, we'll be introduced to a new and vibrant community made up of people from all walks of life, ages and backgrounds."

Emma says it was her "adventurous calamities", posted on social media, that caught the production company's attention.

In at the **DEEP END**

After the expense and challenge of fitting out her boat, **Emma Culshaw-Bell** anticipated relaxed cruising. Her early forays on the Lancaster Canal proved anything but...



Cruising the Lancaster Canal near Garstang.

I'm sitting here on my little boat, moored up and stranded in Litherland, a rough and insalubrious suburb of Liverpool. It's a bit like Scouse Beirut at night, with all the street bonfires burning. It's hoofing down with rain with wind speeds in excess of 40mph. My little adventure of cruising into Liverpool past the Liver buildings and through Albert Dock is postponed until the weather improves. I've had to learn a different, *c'est la vie* approach to life afloat, which is no bad thing for a hot head like me. Just as well, as over half of my hair has fallen out due to the prolonged and intense stress I have put myself through over this past year. But what a year of adventures it has been.

I thought the excitement of buying the boat and the trauma and expense of fully painting and refitting it would have been where the challenges ended. After all, how difficult could cruising the cut actually be? Really difficult, it turns out. I didn't realise I had so much user error in me. Or swear words...

Launch

It all started with launch day. I'd bought, restored and refitted my 50-year-old Piper narrowboat in dry dock, so I had never had her on water. I knew there was an element of risk, I knew the ballast would need adjusting, but I had no idea where to begin with the 50-year-old, single-cylinder Sabb raw water-cooled engine.

On launch day she was lowered gently into the water by the sling crane. Yes, she listed alarmingly, which I expected. No, I couldn't get the engine started, which was also to be expected but neither could anyone else for that matter, which was beginning to make me nervous. Until I miraculously managed to dig out a mechanic on the boatyard who could help. It must have been the wild look in my eyes that told him I was on the brink of an utter meltdown. But he wished he'd never set eyes on me or my blighted little boat, for Big John was to become my lifeline, rescuer and all-round super hero mechanic over the traumatic few months that lay ahead.

John got her going with a deft mechanical twiddle (well, that's what it looked like to me) and the resultant dulcet chug from her lovely old engine became music to my ears. Drama over. Now all I had to do was to set off. She had two control sticks for me to figure out, which I

"My nerves were getting shredded that first week on the Lancaster Canal"



ABOVE With its '70s-influenced colour scheme, Emma's boat certainly cuts a dash.

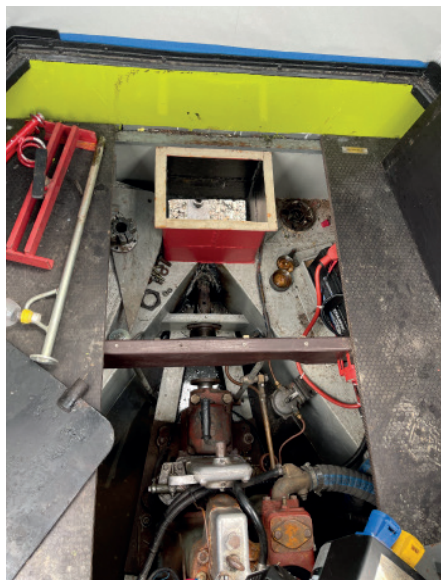
got wrong, obviously. But I managed to kind of career off anyway, out of the mouth of the marina, then immediately broadsided right into the towpath. Hmm, this steering thing was proving trickier than I had imagined and I had thought that was the easy bit. Then it dawned on me that I hadn't even got to the stopping and tying up part.

Turns out I excelled at a particular technique with my boat: crash mooring. I was brilliant at it. And performing unintentional donuts. *Dawn Piper* is only 30ft long and everyone said I could turn her anywhere. I couldn't but she could and would manage to turn herself around and get wedged on a mud bank every time I looked at Facebook while steering. How is it a narrowboat that goes so slowly can crash so quickly? It's one of life's conundrums.

A false start

My nerves were getting shredded that first week on the Lancaster Canal and not just because I was rubbish at moving my boat. There was water dripping from the prop shaft. John had repacked the stern gland but the dripping water was getting worse. Also, my new batteries

BELOW (L-R) *Dawn Piper* in for repairs; trouble with the 50-year-old Sabb engine; bailing out a flooded cabin.





“Every day was a new challenge, a new adventure and also a new trauma”

ABOVE Cruising a particularly green and hushed stretch of canal.
ABOVE RIGHT Caught out by the canal's only swing-bridge.
RIGHT Funny the things you see while on a boat.

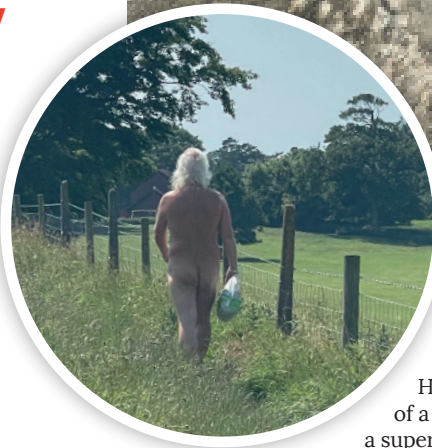
had somehow stopped working so I had no power and no water as the pump wouldn't work without electric. And I had pulled all the knobs off my brand new cooker – how did I even manage that?

Then things got a lot worse. Water had started to pour into the engine bay from the stern gland and no amount of greasing would stop it. Panic set in. I really needed to get a wet vac to suck it out and control the water ingress. Except I had no power on the boat. I'd have to borrow my mate Monkey's generator to boot the vac up. It took a while but after locating a half drunk Monkey in the local pub, I hoiked him out and took him to the boatyard for his gear. We got the genny and vac to my boat and I duly returned him to the pub. All while my little boat was slowly sinking herself. I bet Robbie Cummings didn't have any of this drama or drunkenness to contend with.

I sailed her back into the marina the next day in the pouring rain, which emulated the crying in my heart. My beautiful little boat that I had spent 26 weeks restoring was having to be hauled out of the water before she sank. A whole 13 days after launch.

How much damage can a person actually do to a boat in 13 days? Really quite a lot, it turned out. Prop shaft, bushes, stern tube, four leisure batteries, one starter battery, alternator, bilge pump, wiring loom and so much more. However, my cooker knobs remained firmly unfixable.

I have been haughtily laughed at by many boaters who have said, “Do you know what BOAT stands for? Bring out another thousand.” Just a polite note, if anyone says that to me again, they can expect a hard shove into the cut. I had easily gone 200% over budget.



Exploring the Lancaster

Three weeks and oh so much money later, she was up and running again. Out of the marina I went, my boat swimming like a little fish. For 20 minutes, then she broke down. And so did I.

However, a quick FaceTime to John and the use of a butter knife to undo a clip by me and I was also a super hero mechanic. She was fixed again. For now.

It was time to begin my adventures properly. I wanted to get up to the most northerly point of the network: Tewitfield. After some hauntingly beautiful rural stretches from my starting point near Garstang, I reached Lancaster – a city of profound architectural beauty and culture, where I could stay free of charge. To me, it seemed like a gift. Meandering through its galleries and vintage markets, I met with old friends I'd not seen in years. I felt I was beginning to relax into boat life a little more.

Another highlight was to moor at Hest Bank, where the beach is just a five-minute walk away. Imagine that! You can build sandcastles and paddle in the sea just a short distance from your own boat. I walked for miles along the seafront, collecting pebbles and basking in the sunshine. This is what all the hard work had been for.

Swing-bridge mayhem

Every day was a new challenge, a new adventure and also a new trauma. I was, however, becoming completely addicted to my new boat life. One particular episode that encapsulates this time involved the only swing-bridge on the whole of the Lancaster Canal, which I had to negotiate alone. This turned out to be particularly horrendous. How could I have possibly made such a total idiot out of myself with one bridge?

Ask a group of boaters how to open a swing-bridge single-handed and you'll receive an array of answers: waiting for

Creating *Dawn Piper*

Emma's fit-out of her 1971 Piper narrowboat in fabulous retro-style was the focus of a five-page feature, 'A New Dawn' in the September 2022 issue of *WW*. From its shower lined with striking flamingo panels, to its exterior finish in bespoke shades of acid green and red, it's a true work of art, and demonstrates just how cosy and comfortable a 30ft craft can be.



another boat, getting help from passers-by, tying your boat to the bridge etc. I went for the genius and self-invented method of taking a run at the bridge from the towpath and shoving hard to open. It actually worked, except I hit it with such force that it bounced back and was now half open. I know all you seasoned and clever boaters will be shaking your head at this point. My next solution was to nudge my boat up to the bridge and tie her to it, then jump onto the structure to open it. However, *Dawn Piper* is so small that the bow went right under and got alarmingly wedged.

A crowd of well-intentioned hecklers, I mean walkers, gathered. Out came their sandwiches as they prepared to watch the show. I'll not bore you with reciting the calamity of me contorting my body and my boat to eventually manage to get through that one swing-bridge. It took an age and I'm still shuddering with the humiliation of it.

More surprises

Once through and back in control again, kind of, I headed north and into rural bliss. There was a slight problem with the water pump that kept kicking in when I was in bed but I decided to remain firmly in denial that there may be a leak in the system. I simply couldn't handle another breakdown.

Instead I drank up the beauty of this northern waterway, where the banks were overgrown with white meadowsweet, yellow iris and purple loosestrife. After several hours, I pulled in, as I wanted a break and needed some lunch. While I was on the back deck, eating and watching the moorhens and their chicks busying themselves in the reeds, I felt, rather than saw, a person walk past on the towpath behind me.

As I turned to look, I realised that the man walking past me was completely naked! Brilliant! God I love the cut for throwing such hilarious and random moments at me. He looked like a naked Father Christmas on his summer holidays.

That fun over, I set off once more. Next stop was the water point. I had noticed I seemed to be using a lot of water as I was often filling up. Then I kind of got the feeling that the floor inside the boat felt a bit squelchy. I binned my denial and tentatively raised the flooring to take a look underneath. Oh, sweet baby Jesus, the boat was full of water and I mean full. I knew I had a

ABOVE LEFT *Dawn Piper's* distinctive Flamingo shower. ABOVE The forward cabin, arranged for dining.

Next month Emma's troubles continue aboard *Dawn Piper*, but will she make it to Tewitfield?

Next month

December issue 17th October



Cruising the Lee & Oton

From London to Hertfordshire, providing routes and services

WORKING BOATS 1950S

An evening with the two



A FLOOD HOUSE

Story of a trader



SOLO BOAT

Travels aboard a narrowboat

