



Leaving the Lanky

Following incident-filled cruises of the Lancaster Canal, it was time for **Emma Culshaw-Bell** to head further afield. A trip on the tidal Ribble Link was the next challenge

After many minor struggles and setbacks, I had managed to cruise the full length of the Lancaster Canal main line (WW December and January) aboard my newly refurbished 30ft narrowboat. It was now time to take *Dawn Piper* to my home village of Parbold on the western Leeds & Liverpool – a move that would involve crossing the dreaded Ribble Link.

There was no way my little boat, with its single-cylinder Sabb engine, had sufficient power to accomplish this tidal passage in the allotted time. But I had a cunning plan. My previous rescuers, Tony and Margaret aboard narrowboat *Huffler*, had proved extremely calm and competent during that little crisis. They were also due to cross the link at the same time. All I had to do was beg for a tow across and, as my begging skills have always been far more honed than my boating skills, they mercifully agreed.

I had given myself three days to get to Savick Brook Basin, the gateway to the wider connected network. Plenty of time to tackle the weed-choked southern reaches of the Lancaster Canal, where only the intrepid choose to travel by boat for fun.

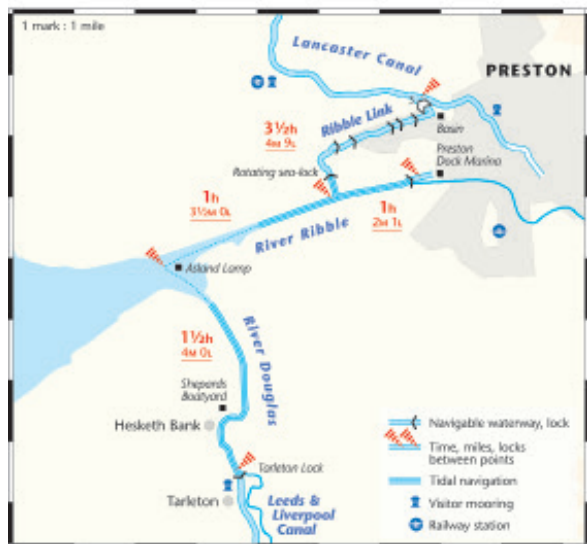
Monkeying around

My mate Monkey and I had one more opportunity for a

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last night out before I set sail. Our intention was to enjoy an evening listening to a fellow boater sing in a band at the local bar, but it quickly got out of hand. Somehow.

We decided to splinter off as I really wanted to watch the sun set one last time at my favourite mooring half an hour's cruise away, called the 'Lambing Fields'. (I love the random names given to particular moorings, passed along from boater to boater). We jumped on the boat and set off, Neil Diamond blasting out of the speaker, back to our true uncool selves, singing our hearts out and dancing on deck. We'd had such a fantastic summer – talking rubbish for hours, watching sunsets, sitting on the back deck under the stars. Just the best of mates.

I managed to moor up next to another boat with grace and aplomb (well, it felt like that). Then I decided to light a bonfire on the towpath in the fire pit I kept in the bow well, to keep us warm as darkness fell. We had been 'quietly' singing, sniggering and shushing so as not to disturb my neighbour when I went in for yet another glass of wine.

I'm not really sure how I managed it but as I stepped off the boat in my bare feet (I'd spent all summer running about bare footed) I staggered and booted the fire pit, which fell over, immediately setting the towpath alight with a mighty wumph! Oh my God, panic! Monkey impulsively tipped his precious cans of Skol over the fire to quench the flames. No idea why, as there was a canal full of water right there.

The morning after, Andrea on the neighbouring boat commented, as she perused the damage that could only have been made by 50 people at a rave, that we sounded like a pair of hysterically cackling and drunk ferrets running about trying to put out the flames. A miracle we didn't burn ourselves. It was definitely time for me to leave the Lanky though.

However, that began another friendship. I was to meet Andrea again on our travels over the Link and beyond. Fortuitous meetings are another great positive that comes with living on the cut.

Savick Brook

There were eight boats crossing the Link on that hottest of days in early August. We all paired up to reverse into the staircase locks, which marked the beginning of our journey from Savick Brook Basin to Tarleton on the Rufford Arm of the Leeds & Liverpool. It's an odd feeling reversing down a staircase, you can't quite get your bearings.

Sailing out, Huffer and I turned the boats forwards and suddenly found ourselves in the most bewitching stretch of water. Savick Brook really is a brook. The trees had grown over the navigation on both sides, creating an Amazonian tunnel for us to travel through. Struggling with the shallow water, the boats were constantly running aground, but the experience was so incredibly worth it, as we had found ourselves in what felt like a secret paradise.

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BELOW RIGHT
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.

All the boats eventually moored at the big sea lock with trepidation, where we would wait for the tide to be at its highest point.

I would not be able to leave the tiller for one moment during the three-hour crossing, so I had to make sure that the crew of two (including my daughter, Kitty) and I were life-jacketed up, and that the two-way radios were working to stay in touch with *Huffler*, who would have me tethered from my bow to their long stern line. Although I was travelling under my own steam, being attached to *Huffler* was extremely reassuring when faced with the treacherous rip tides, hidden sandbanks and gusting winds on the 7-mile crossing.

Tidal challenge

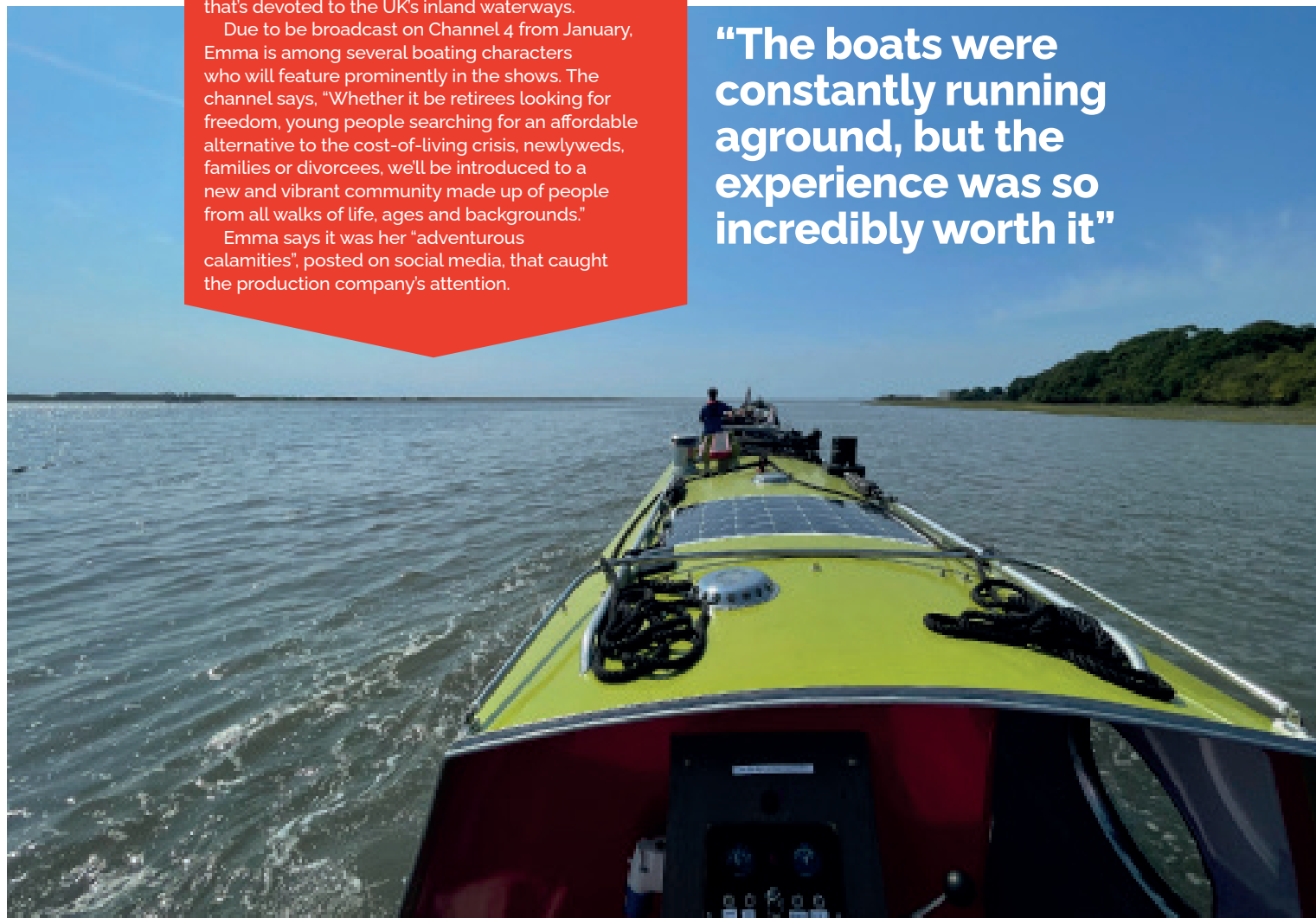
Picture the scene, eight boats all tightly breasted up on the holding jetty, bobbing around side by side, like whippets in a trap. The lock-keeper appears on the horizon and gives the thumbs up. And we're off!!

It was like *Wacky Races* – everyone vying to be first through the lock, no time to waste. The boats were bumping off each other as we barrelled out of the sea lock and round the last bend to enter the Ribble Estuary proper. As we did so, we could see the rip tides we were just about to hit – swirling, fast, angry stretches of water to be navigated around. We had all started off in a huddle but now the boats were scattered right across the open water. Some clearly struggling and careering around, others picking their way through the rip tides or charging along with powerful engines.

It was truly magnificent. To be sailing out in open water, the vast expanse of sea and sky was incredibly overwhelming, especially having passed along what felt like an Amazonian tributary only minutes before.

"The boats were constantly running aground, but the experience was so incredibly worth it"

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"I'd actually fixed her"

Tony and Margaret on *Huffler* were superb, the crossing was going smoothly and I had started to relax. It was then that I hit a rip tide. Tony had managed to dodge it, but my little boat started acting like a water ski, swerving dramatically from side to side, the waves splashing up the gunwales, being pulled forwards by a rope that looked like it could snap at any moment under the force.

It was a massive struggle to correct her. Even under her own power and being towed, she hit sandbank after sandbank, listing wildly. I was truly amazed that Tony could navigate so accurately through the treacherous waters. He pulled me free from what, because of the profound and fast tidal change, would have undoubtedly been an overnight stay on a sandbank in the middle of the Ribble Estuary (on reflection at that moment, having precious cargo on board in the form of my daughter was a tad rash). It was a harsh and absolute education of how wrong things could go in the blink of an eye and a note to myself not to relax too much again.

Boat in distress

A little while after this, only slightly calming as I watched the different sea birds flying over and observed the wild washing machines and ubiquitous shopping trolleys beached on the banks, I saw something on the horizon. It was quickly getting closer. A tug boat. Rather intimidatingly, he came right along side to ask us which boat was in distress (clearly he thought it was me as he'd been watching my boat swing like a pendulum off the back of *Huffler*).

Ooh, a boat in distress! I'd been too busy water skiing to notice. Apparently one of the boats was over heating, having to fight themselves out of a riptide that required full engine revs to try and stop them going sideways, then backwards. They were well off piste and behind schedule, so had made the emergency call for a tow. The crossing surely was living up to its reputation for being scary, erratic and hazardous in parts.

We all managed to eventually pass through the river lock at Tarleton in the nick of time and moored up together in varying forms of shredded nerves, euphoria and profound bowel evacuations. I was absolutely banjaxed. An early night was needed as there was more fun ahead the next day.

Homecoming

I was now on home waters, the Rufford Arm of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Very exciting. With the drama of crossing the link behind me, I could enjoy the cruise up the hefty locks of the arm and onto the Leeds & Liverpool proper. It took a day of victory cruising to get to Parbold, with Kitty and our friends helping with the swing-bridges and locks.

This was the bit I'd dreamed of – bringing my precious boat home. The bit that I'd focussed on through all the dark and difficult days. So, it would have been rude not to immediately do a crowd surfing loop of all the pubs in the village as a homecoming gesture.

My short-suffering, disgruntled boyfriend gave a huge sigh of relief. At least I was going to be at home now that I had the boat back. He'd have a sensible, well-behaved girlfriend that wore shoes from now on.

Fixing the boat

I had a wonderful time heading out with friends and family on little cruises from the visitor moorings at Parbold. A notable one was taking my sister (who was last on a narrowboat during her wedding day) and niece out on in glorious summer weather.

After completing a delightful round trip, I was just about to moor up back home when the engine alarmingly overheated. Again. I cut the power and tried the old butter



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knife trick once more. This time, I took the sea cock hose off and blew into it to try and remove the blockage from the inlet pipe. Get me, being a boat mechanic (full disclosure: I had engineer Big John on Facetime showing me how to do it). The inlet pipe was too blocked, it wouldn't shift. I needed an air hose to blow the crud out that the raw water pump had sucked in. Not the easiest thing to find on a towpath. Also, I'd have to plug it in somewhere. How on earth was I going to achieve this? Can't move the boat as she's overheating. Can't start the engine to power the air hose because she's overheating and there is no other 240V supply available on the towpath.

Miraculously, I found a portable air hose (not very portable as it was heavy as hell) and a couple of extension reels. The next task was to charm my one and only boat neighbour to move their boat next to mine and leave their engine running so I could use their mains power. That way I could fire up the compressor and shoot air through the hose to unblock it.

Guess what? It only went and worked! A jubilant wriggle dance on the towpath ensued. I'd actually fixed her. Thanks again to getting unconditional help from a fellow boater. I blimmin love the cut for this.

Now to settle down, moor the boat up for a while and concentrate on pressing matters like working for a living and not being a rubbish girlfriend.

On the move again

That lasted ten whole days. I couldn't help myself, I decided to take my little boat on another adventure. This time to Chester: a round trip of 162 miles, 62 locks, six tunnels and God knows how many swing-bridges. All single-handed. What could possibly go wrong?

Needless to say, I was immediately chucked by my disgruntled boyfriend. No matter, I'd been chucked by him more times than a ball at a rugby match. I was determined to embark on this new journey. But how exactly was I going to achieve it? I honestly had no idea and the first hurdle to overcome was the scariest lock ever: Appley Bridge Deep Lock.

Next month

Emma cruises solo along the Leeds & Liverpool, Bridgewater, T&M and Shroppie Union canals to reach Chester.