

Off-the-cuff cruise to **LIVERPOOL**

After a disastrous meeting with a film crew, **Emma Culshaw-Bell** headed out on a solo trip to Liverpool Docks

I was on my way home aboard my 30ft narrowboat *Dawn Piper*, after spending two weeks on a literal crash course of single handing into Chester from my home waters on the Leeds & Liverpool at Parbold.

A slight detour had me meeting up with a film crew at the bottom of Hurlston Locks, the mouth of the bewitching Llangollen Canal. They were shooting a pilot for a potential TV series and simply wanted to film me single handing up a couple locks. Easy enough. Except it went wrong from the off.

Calamity on camera

When I get nervous I lose all sense of up, down, left and right. This doesn't work too well when attempting lock passage, especially with the cameraman on the back deck, filming me navigating into a tight single lock. He was quite a big fella with a big camera and also slightly unsteady on his feet, having never been on a narrowboat before.

Basically, as we approached (read that as careered towards) the bottom of the lock, he staggered to the right, grabbed the side rail to prevent himself

**"I was heading into
the bandit country of
the western L&L"**





MAIN LEFT
**Heading into
Liverpool.**

TOP LEFT
**Passing the
Liver Building.**

TOP RIGHT
Caption.

ABOVE LEFT
**Filming on the
Llangollen Canal.**

ABOVE RIGHT
**With best
friend Jelly.**

falling in, missed and dislodged the canopy instead, which then hung over the side of the boat, making me too wide to fit in the chamber. I grabbed him by the earphones and pulled him back in while trying to stop the boat, steer the boat and haul my brand new pram cover back in. It was never going to end well...

Dawn Piper smacked head on into the wall of the lock, bounced off, banged into the other side and made a kind of sideways manoeuvre to get into the lock. A shocked cameraman was soon seen hoofing up the lock ladder as fast as he could go, desperate to put as much distance between himself, me and my boat as possible.

That was the end of my chance of being the new Robbie Cummings then. The whole crew were very polite about it, said they may or may not be in touch before gently backing away from the wild-eyed and dishevelled me.

Back to Parbold

Mercifully, the return journey home from the mouth of the Llangollen was pretty mellow. The season had started to change, it was mid-September and I found myself savouring every moment of these adventures. The leaves were turning to their autumnal colours,

apples were bobbing past me in the water as they fell from the trees, hedges were laden with sloes, rose hips and crabapples. The scent of summer had been replaced by the earthy, subdued smell of early autumn.

I returned home and moored up. It was time to grasp the nettle. Settle down. Get back to work. Commissions were stacking up and Lord knows I needed the money.

Well, that lasted exactly two weeks...

Solo to Liverpool

I was obsessed with that little boat and couldn't bear to think that the season might be over. That I might have to tuck her up safely in a marina for winter.

Then an Indian Summer descended and I made an off-the-cuff decision to head into Liverpool. A round trip of 56 miles, 12 locks and, here's the issue, 32 swing-bridges.

Paul, my boat buddy that I occasionally cruised in tandem with (as it helps us both doing locks and swing-bridges together) was out on his boat miles away, and so this really was an entirely solo adventure.

"A shocked cameraman was seen hoofing up the lock ladder as fast as he could go"



Bandit country

I was going to need mettle for this new challenge. I was heading into the bandit country of the western L&L, where only the intrepid (read that as stupid) moor casually without research and forethought. There are large areas where tying up is extremely ill-advised due to the deprived neighbourhoods the canal passes through. It's a tricky thing this. Cruising down the canal, it's really easy not to be aware of the surrounding environment. You can literally be in the moment of a serendipitous scene where kingfishers are fighting for territory, and there can be a stabbing in the next street, where you didn't even know there was a street!

I had taken advice. I knew the (relatively) safe mooring spots on the three-day journey to the city. All I had to do was reach those chosen destinations before dark. As this was the end of September, my cruising hours were becoming limited, so I had to be aware of my travel times.

No one, apart from boaters with a love of night swimming while being shot at with air rifles, would ever travel at night through these waters. Indeed, the boats I came across that were not in a boat club flotilla or marina had grilles on their windows to prevent little scrotes shooting out the glass from the comfort of their bedrooms.

There were also those swing-bridges to consider – 16 each way, one of which only opens at certain times each day as it's a busy road crossing. Others have the controls on the off-side or are manual. My last solo swing-bridge on the Lancaster Canal still sent shivers down my spine, so God knows why I thought this trip was a good idea.

In the end, I managed fine. In fact, better than fine. It was incredibly knackerish though.



“I met some charming drug dealers who were happy to open the swing-bridges for me”

ABOVE LEFT
Back-to-back terraces at XXXXX.

ABOVE RIGHT
A rainbow at XXXXX.

BELOW
Moored at Salthouse Dock, Liverpool.

The first night I moored rurally just after the farmer had sprayed his field with utterly noxious rotted fish manure. So, that was me and every possible molecule of the boat stinking of rotting fish for the next two days – a turn off for most baddies and burglars right there.

I met some charming drug dealers (yes, really) who were happy to open the automatic swing-bridges for me with my key.

The Liverpool Link

I successfully made it to Litherland secure moorings. Yes, secure! I was safely moored offside in a locked compound behind Tesco. A fine place to watch nefarious and entertaining activities on the towpath proper, and very handy for cider purchases, which was just as well as a storm had descended leaving me stranded. Cruising into Liverpool is only navigable in relatively clement weather – any wind turbulence means the potential of being thrown and pinned against the harbour wall, which naturally, was something I was keen to avoid.

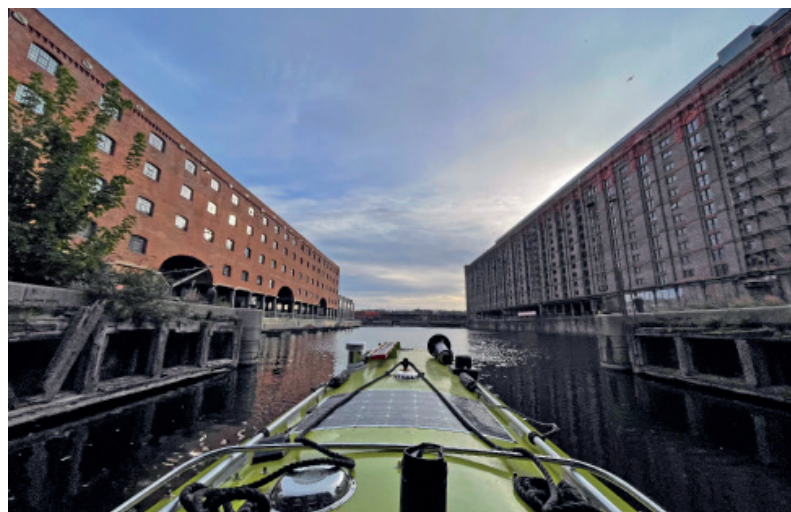
The eventual trip into Liverpool was magnificent. I had been stuck in Litherland for three days until the storm passed, but it was all worth it. Sid, the lock-keeper, helped me down the first lock flight, then I was off. I sailed past the largest brick building in the world, the Tobacco Warehouse, along a new cutting called ‘Sid's Ditch’ – turns out this was named after my lock-keeper, who, during the link's construction, had referred to the newly dug channel as a ditch and the name had stuck. Sid's Ditch allowed me to cruise right past the spectacular Liver Building, through the slightly overwhelming Albert Dock, and finally moor up in the massive Salthouse Dock, right in the heart of the city. Magnificent, indeed!

That sunny Sunday I had a wonderful time taking the family out on the boat and eating in the restaurants at the dock. It was like being on holiday and a bit of a dream coming true. I had always wanted to do this. This is what had been driving me forwards on those dark, teary days and nights of restoring the boat.

Left behind

I stayed moored in Salthouse Dock for exactly 20 whole hours.

There was another storm coming in but I had a window of a couple of days to get home. There were two boats leaving that Monday morning and I'd asked if I could buddy up with them – I couldn't face doing all those swing-bridges on my



own again (and I didn't want to push it with the drug dealers I'd met previously).

We set off early in the morning, back through the docks, ditches and locks to reach the main line L&L. I barrelled ahead as I needed to use the services at Litherland. The other two boats followed and said they would wait for me at the swing-bridge there.

I got to Litherland, used the services and waited. And waited. No boats. Where were they? Turns out they had gone and left me. They had cruised right past my boat and through the swing-bridge while I was busy emptying the cassette. The b*****s!

Swing-bridge setback

"Now I was embarking on a new adventure - night cruising"

ABOVE TOP
Caption.

ABOVE MIDDLE
**Waiting at
Hancocks
Swing Bridge.**

ABOVE
**Cruising through
St Albert's Dock,
Liverpool.**

That left me with a bit of a problem. I had to get through the particularly tricky timed Hancocks Swing Bridge a couple of hours cruise away. It was closed to boats between 2pm and 6pm, too busy with cars at rush hour to open for a lowly boater. If I didn't get through before the bridge automatically locked, I would have to wait the four hours until I could gain passage, leaving me with only an hour's sailing time in the fading autumn light.

Indeed, if I didn't get through in time, I would have to moor up in bandit country or cruise a long way in the dark, through swing-bridges, to get to a safe mooring. I was all alone and I had wasted precious time waiting for the boaters, so now I'd be pushing to get there.

It was a very stressful cruise. I got to the Hancocks Swing Bridge, threw the boat against the towpath, ran to the control panel, shoved my key in to begin closing the road and opening the bridge and... nothing happened. The bridge had automatically locked itself three minutes previously.

I was stuck in bandit country, next to a housing estate full of bedrooms with air rifles in them. There was nothing I could do but sit it out. And post on Facebook.

Four hours later I got through the bridge. An hour afterwards, I had no choice but to moor up in the fading light. I was bricking it, I have to admit. As I was bashing in my last mooring pin, I became aware of a cyclist approaching and slowing down. Here we go, I thought, trouble right from the off.

Turns out that cyclist was actually Paul. My boat buddy. He had seen my 'stranded' posting on Facebook while he was boating back from his travels further afield, had turned up the revs, got to his home mooring, dragged his bike out and cycled the 10 miles to find me.

How about that? Triumph over adversity and it was all down to a fortuitous meeting on the cut only months earlier.

Night cruising

I had been really badly let down by fellow boaters. Now Paul was helping me embark on another new adventure – night cruising. And it was immense fun. Great to have the craic with Paul and his help with the swing-bridges. It got even more entertaining when the head lamp blew and I had to shimmy down the gunwales with the emergency spotlight to navigate by. Then even more entertaining when the batteries went flat...

We eventually moored me up in a safe, rural spot after a four-hour, after-dark cruise. Paul then headed off on his bike, back to his own boat in the dead of night. And here's me thinking that the only legend I was to meet that day was Sid.

End of the season

This was the last adventure I was to have that season. I tucked my beautiful little boat up in the marina for three months of winter and began to reminisce about the year I had spent buying a narrowboat I didn't even know I wanted and spending every last penny of my hard-earned, self-employed money restoring and cruising her.

All I know is that it had been worth it. The risk taking, the fortuitous meetings, the calamities, the laughter. The love.

My best friend in all the world, Jelly, who had been supporting me through this whole traumatic yet exhilarating journey, sent me a quote a couple of years ago and it had always resonated with me.

Twenty years from now you will regret the things you didn't do rather than the things you did. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from safe harbour, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

This past year is dedicated to Jelly: 31.01.69 to 21.05.23. May you rest in peace, my best friend in all the world.

Emma will be publishing a self-written book about her adventures with narrowboat *Dawn Piper*, details of which will be announced in a future issue of *WW*.