

Solo trip to Chester



Now addicted to boating, **Emma Culshaw-Bell** headed out alone on a 162-mile exploration of the waterways of the North West

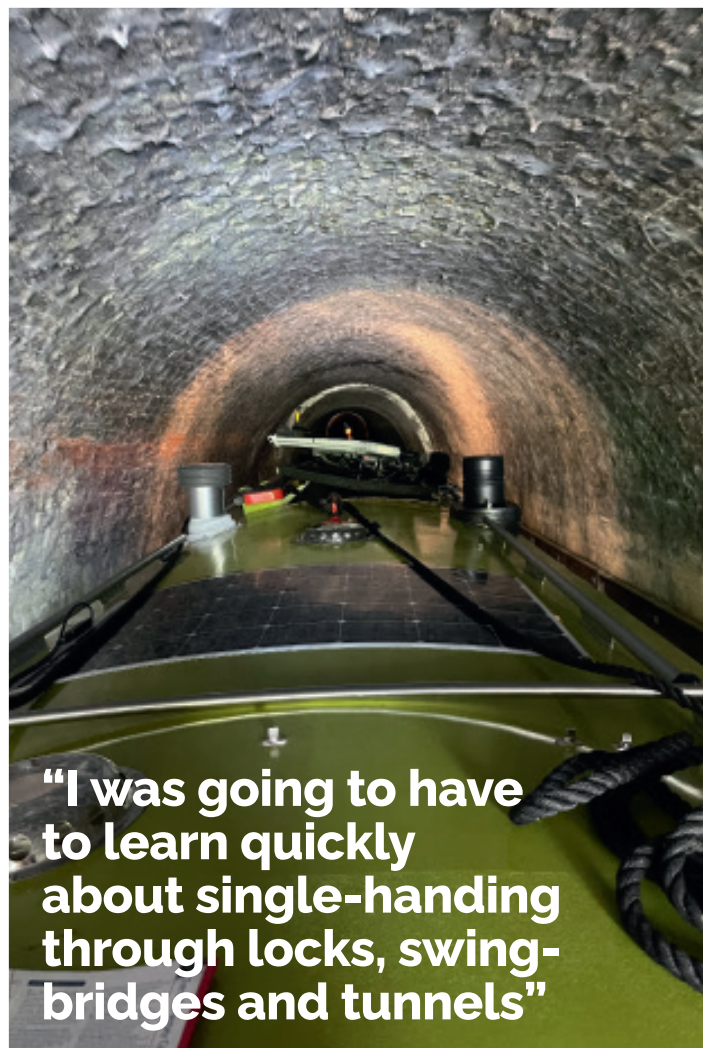
The 162-mile round trip to Chester I was about to embark upon was fraught with the unknown. The only thing I did know was I was going to have to learn a lot and quickly about single-handing through locks, swing-bridges and tunnels. Plus navigating and booking passages. There were a myriad of questions going through my mind. How was I supposed to know how long the travelling would take? Where could I moor safely? Would I be desperately lonely? I had been such a rubbish girlfriend up to this point, I was now single...

In the end I decided to just set off from my home mooring at Parbold on the Leeds & Liverpool and hope for the best.

First challenge

The first hurdle was getting through the dreaded Appley Deep Lock. No one in their right mind single-hands through this and I wasn't about to either. Cue Facebook. I put a shout out on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal Group for help. This came in the form of a lovely young solo boater who brought me gently up through the terrifying Deep Lock and the next lock, 2 miles further on. Here he left me to get on my way to my first mooring for the night at Crooke while he had to walk the whole way back to his boat. How lovely is that? Someone will take the time and

TOP Moored at Castlefield Basin in the heart of Manchester.



"I was going to have to learn quickly about single-handing through locks, swing-bridges and tunnels"

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effort to help a complete stranger. Boating is a different kind of life entirely and one I was utterly besotted with.

My intention at Crooke was to find another boat that was going up the locks into Wigan and buddy up with them, as I still had no clue how to do locks solo. I dawdled the next day, not having the courage to set off until at long last a boat went past and, yes, I could join him. He would even set the lock and wait for me so I could just sail straight in. (I didn't have the heart to tell him that me sailing straight in anywhere had never happened before, he'd have to find out the hard way.)

There began another friendship with my new boat buddy, Paul. Another fortuitous meeting and what was to become a crash course (literally) in single-handing and navigating.

Catching up with Andrea

We got through to Pennington Flash, a charming series of lakes created by mining subsidence from the nearby Bickershaw Colliery, where Paul left me to moor next to Andrea (my tolerant neighbour from the torched towpath incident on the Lanky). She was trying to get back to her home mooring but was stuck due to low water levels.

We went wild swimming (not in the canal, I hasten to add), something I'd never tried before. That's another thing I love about boat life, other people's random hobbies that you get to join in with.

Afterwards, we barbecued and bonfired and drank red wine. It was a great catch up. At dusk, Andrea suddenly leapt up. She'd seen an otter. Giant swimming rat more like! We decided to call it a night at that point as clearly enough red had been drunk. My mate Monkey was joining me the next day to sail into Manchester (somewhere he'd never been, in spite of living only an hour from the city) so God knows what was going to unravel with that one – an early night seemed prudent.

Monkey in Manchester

Next day, Monkey duly jumped aboard and the boat immediately broke down. I got my butter knife out again and after a couple of unintentional donuts we resumed our progress. Something I had always wanted to do was cruise my own boat into Manchester.

Before we got there, however, we had to cross the Grade II-listed Barton Swing Aqueduct, which is not only a marvel of Victorian engineering, but, like the ship canal it spans, overwhelming in its scale.

Cruising into Manchester, past Old Trafford football stadium, was everything I'd hoped it would be. I moored in the heart of the city at Castlefield Basin, free of charge. This was my opportunity to get dressed up, go out and drink glamorous cocktails. Up to this point I'd been running around barefooted, watching swimming rats, so I

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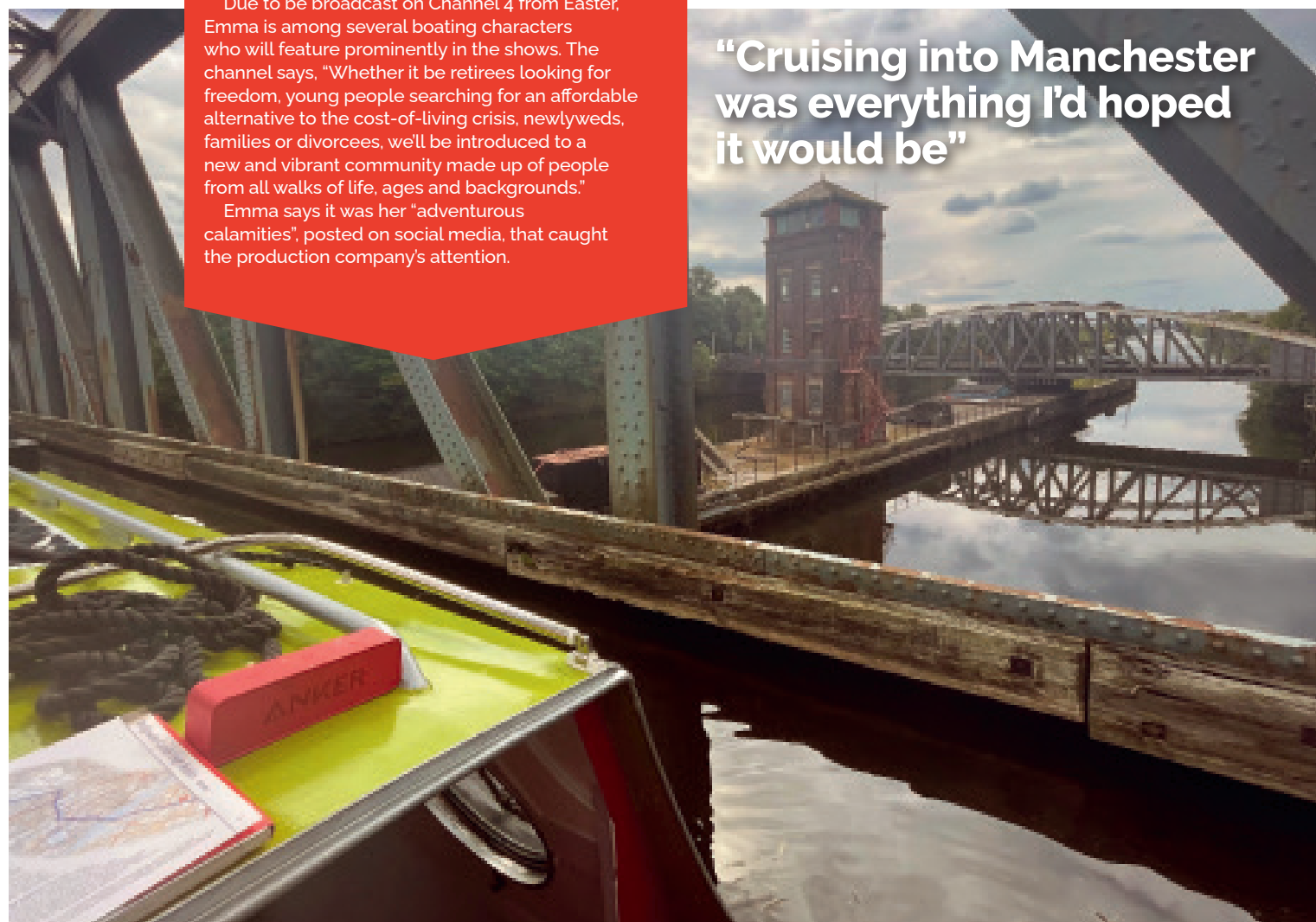
Watch Emma's adventures

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 Easter, 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.

BELOW
Crossing Barton
Swing Aqueduct.



was really looking forward to some kind of sophistication. Except, oh my God, it was like dragging *Crocodile Dundee* around the city with me. Monkey, not used to tall buildings, cars or people, and only familiar with drinking cans of Skol, was a bit perplexed by it all. He got the hang of it after about 11 cocktails, though. I had an extremely entertaining night out being his carer and poured him into the last train home.

Deer at Dunham Massey

The next day I was to begin the next stint of my journey along the Bridgewater to Little Bollington. Now this is an absolute peach of a place to moor up as Dunham Massey is nearby – a National Trust country manor with a park full of fallow deer. The best time to see them is at dusk when everyone's gone home and they come out of the shadows to eat and play.

I'd promised my best friend in all the world, Jelly, this special trip and it did not fail to deliver. It was breathtaking in the park that evening. We sat in a clearing, soaking up the serenity of watching the deer slowly appear at sunset and waiting to see what would unfold. A massive stag sauntered out of the gloaming, stared at us majestically, and suddenly reared up on his hind legs. He thrust his antlers into the branches of the oak tree he was standing under and shook the tree. We couldn't work it out at first but then we came to realise that he was pulling the acorns down to eat. A truly magnificent sight to behold and a memory I will always cherish. This was boat life – a chance to capture nature in its most precious moments.

Growing confidence

Things were going pretty well on this journey, it seemed. I was managing happily on my own, with friends jumping on

"Cruising into Manchester was everything I'd hoped it would be"

the boat, exactly as I had wished at the beginning of this rash gamble into owning a narrowboat, that only months previously I had little idea how to move, moor up or navigate. At this point in the journey I was feeling relaxed and more like a proper boater.

As I continued my journey, admittedly getting through the three tunnels – with two of them being timed passages – was a bit ‘crash, bang, wallop’, but then I reached the Trent & Mersey Canal. And, okay, it was quite hairy meeting all the hire-boaters coming from the other direction, but we all managed to get past each other in a bashy kind of way.

Big Lock

At this point I'd been out on my own, single-handing for nine days with only one small stop lock to negotiate. But there was no avoiding it, I was now in Middlewich and I had to go up Big Lock. In front of all the alfresco drinkers at the pub right alongside on a sunny Sunday. This had massive room for error, as I'd been accompanied by Paul at all previous locks.

I pulled up to set the lock, bracing myself for potential humiliation, when I heard a familiar voice. Paul on his push bike. He knew I was feeling shredded and had biked down to help me. Bless him. He was moored further up, ready for our tandem journey into Chester. Big relief and disaster averted.

Just as well he was with me, as there was a tricky sharp right turn that I was totally unaware of to get me onto the Middlewich Branch of the Shropshire Union. Navigation and directions were still a big issue with me but I was ramping up new canals now. Like a proper boater!

Bunbury Staircase Locks

We were motoring along, chomping through the miles at, um, 3 miles an hour, until we came to a staircase set of locks. A big fat navigational issue for a boater of my calibre, requiring a manoeuvre affectionately called the ‘Bunbury Shuffle’. It's even got a nickname, so there's a hint of trouble right away.

Basically, it's a staircase of locks with no gaps to manoeuvre if there are any boats coming the other way. The Bunbury Shuffle goes something like: if there is a boat approaching, you have to shuffle your boat sideways to allow it to fit snugly into the lock beside you, plus some other tricky manoeuvring stuff. Turns out it was a lot more complicated than that. Turns out it was more a jam-the-lock-with-the-entire-length-of-your-boat-sideways trauma for me.

I panicked, you see. Paul had managed to get through earlier with no trouble and all the other lovely hire-boaters had researched the topic to death on YouTube, so knew exactly what to expect. Full disclosure, I did try to do some homework beforehand, except all the results I managed to get up were very rude, which distracted me enough not to go any further. (I've questioned this since, and it turns out that when I put the word ‘Bunbury’ into my search bar it autocorrects it to ‘Bumburp!’).

Beeston Iron Lock

Even more canal carnage followed at Beeston Iron Lock slightly further along the Shroppie. Paul was on the towpath, dropping the water out of the lock, I was on *Dawn Piper*, with his unmanned boat next to me. No problem, we do this all the time these days (being cool single-handed boaters and all). He opened the gates, but one would only partially open. No problem, he only had to get on his boat and go out first then I'd follow. Turns out there's no ladder in this lock because of it being just an iron tank. We didn't even notice until it was too late. Paul couldn't get on his boat and mine was stuck behind the jammed lock gate.

Now what to do? There will have been more reasoned



and clever ways of solving this problem but my solution was ramming the bejesus out of his boat to move it forwards. It worked, after a fashion. My little boat booted his big boat out of the lock and crashed it into the towpath. Not the most graceful of manoeuvres but at least I was using my crashing skills in a creative way for a change. (More homework should have been done here, as apparently only one boat at a time should go through this lock, so we got away relatively unscathed in the scheme of things)

Chester

Mooring up right alongside the city walls of the medieval city of Chester was magnificent. I spent a few luxurious days walking along the tops of the walls, drinking in the fascinating history of the city and meandering through the cobbled streets. I love the fact that boat life enables you to slow down, submerge yourself in your surroundings, enjoy all it has to offer, rather than rush through with a tick list on an expensive mini break.

I had to get going though, I'd been away two weeks. My real life (okay, my bank manager) was breathing down my neck, I was going to have to be sensible and go home.

Before I did that, however, I took a slight detour, because I had a date. I had arranged to have the boat at the bottom of Hurleston Locks, the mouth of the bewitching Llangollen Canal – somewhere I was desperate to go and somewhere I absolutely had run out of time to explore.

Since launching my boat I had been posting my idiotic boat life on Facebook. Those postings had caught the attention of a production company who were making a pilot film for a new series on Channel 4 called *Narrow Escapes*. My date was with a film crew. And it couldn't have possibly gone more badly wrong if I'd planned it.

TOP LEFT A stag at Dunham Massey.
TOP RIGHT Chester was among the highlights of the trip.

ABOVE LEFT Cocktails in central Manchester.

ABOVE RIGHT The deer park at Dunham Massey.

Next month

We join Emma on her journey to Hurleston Lock to meet the TV crew.