

The Barrow Navigation

Reading Ken Marsden's account of his trip to Southern Ireland reminded me of a similar journey 20 years or so earlier. The well-remembered John Brown was my crew. The boat was "Solace", a much modified Southerly 33. The most notable characteristic of this design is its "swing keel" which when raised disappears completely into the canoe body giving a draught of about three feet. We followed much the same course as Ken, along the South Coast and up the Bristol Channel, but we went one hop further to Barnstaple. We could then conveniently visit and anchor in the lee of Lundy Island before crossing to Milford Haven and then, in our case, on to Dunmore East on the South Coast of Ireland.

Using the anchor windlass, a powerful tabernacle and some auxiliary rigging, John and I were lowering the mast to stow on deck. The person on the yacht we were rafted to enquired as to our actions. We are going up The Barrow Navigation said I. He doubted the possibility of this but went off to consult. He returned with the club Commodore who confirmed that it would not be possible for a boat of our size. I admitted disappointment and thanked them for their helpfulness.

We slipped quietly out of the harbour in the morning. I said to John, look we have the mast on deck, the tide is making let's go up the Suir (the way to Waterford) and see what we find. We made the twenty miles or so up the tidal river, arriving at near to slack water and the outer lock gate was open, so we entered. We were greeted by a young woman who asked us what we were doing. Going up The Barrow Navigation said I. She said she was sure that was not possible. She went and returned with the lock keeper himself who confirmed that this was so. I made it clear to him that I fully accepted his advice but if I was to ignore it would he assist us. I pointed out that if things went badly the small knot of bystanders that had formed could each confirm that he had advised against and therefore no blame would attach to him. They agreed and so did he.

While the debate was going on the young lady had gone off and returned with someone who was clearly the local expert. He was, I seem to remember, The Secretary of the South Eastern Ireland Inland Waterways Association. He asked whether I was conversant with negotiating locks. I thought it prudent to be somewhat non-committal in my reply (not admitting that I had taken Solace through 400 or so on the way to the Med and back). He decided to come aboard and guide us through the first lock or two. He shouted down to a small motorboat tied up in front of us instructing it to cast off and show the way. We set off as a mini convoy.

We had shut the lower gate in the first lock. Had we a key (crank handle) for the top gate sluices he asked. Before leaving home I had fashioned one out of aluminium. This I produced. He was disdainful. He thought it a puny affair and we had a slight delay while he went off to return with a massive steel

implement. I thought it reasonable to excuse him for not noticing that mine was made from HE30TF a precipitation heat treated structural alloy. Presumably we had passed his proficiency test for he was leaving when I asked how I should return his key. He said for us to keep it as he had another. I rather think I still have it buried deep in the garage.

We proceeded successfully on our way and then as we passed under one of the arches of a rather medieval looking stone bridge there was our former pilot instructing us by gesture to come alongside a low wharf where he made fast our lines. Maybe he was still checking on our boat handling skills. Whatever, it was very generous of him to be so considerate of our welfare. So there we were to spend the night in this small town with an unpronounceable name. Alright then, if you insist, it goes CRAIGUENAMANAGH. Does that help?

Before our guardian left I asked if he knew of a taxi to be had nearby, as my Margaret was flying into Waterford airport the next day and I wished to be there to greet her. Within the hour I had had three separate offers to drive me there. The distance was about 40k each way, and so it happened, a lady drove me there and back and refused my earnest attempt to recompense her. We experienced a great generosity of spirit in Eire.

I have just unearthed " Guide to the Barrow Navigation" a booklet we had with us at the time and I see a pencilled note in John's rather crabbed hand (as he always himself insisted) : 1600 Sun 26 July 92. So that's when it was 1992.

The Navigation is mainly the Barrow River itself but in several places where loops in the river were too shallow a canal section was dug to bypass them. So one alternates between lengths of river and canal. It was created very early in the nineteenth century and has 23 locks.

We were in a river section going slowly when progress suddenly stopped. I walked up to the bow and stepped off onto the barely submerged rock that we were lodged against. In the river sections there was a brisk stream flow against us so when we backed off we had to quickly drop our bower anchor to keep her straight. With keel fully housed directional stability was not a strong point. We decided to move a boats width to starboard and try there. The result was the same, so we were back hanging on the hook again. We therefore made some tea. I remember saying to the others that the venture appeared to be a failure. We were looking to retreat tail twix legs. I didn't think it was a good time to admit what I knew, that the maximum recommended draught for these sections was 2ft 6in and that we drew 3 ft. Indeed I don't think I ever did reveal it.

Then a memory stirred and I consulted the guide. I read "the navigable channel keeps to one side of the river, since it was created in the days when all boats were towed from the bank". It was many years since the navigation had any commercial traffic so it was apparent that there had been little maintenance. I looked at the trees and bushes hanging low over the river bank and surmised that the original dredged channel would be under them. So it proved. We got Solace going forward with a modest urge, ducked our heads below the level of

the superstructure and forced our way through. We cleared the decks of all the leaves and small branches and we were on our way again. I remember thinking and saying, that if we did not get right through it would be a very expensive low loader job.

It clearly was a rather dodgy enterprise because I note from the guide book "at the two chamber Ballykennan lock there is a footbridge over the lower chamber which has a 7ft 6in clearance which can be increased to 8ft 6in if the water level in the chamber is lowered". The top of our tabernacle was slightly more than 8 ft. above the water. I remember scoring a small groove in the underside of a stone bridge. Perhaps it was here.

I was steering, when high up on the bank ahead of me was a figure directing me with signals first to the left, then to the right. He was apparently then satisfied and drove off in his van. Shortly we arrived at a lock to be met by the signaller. I asked "what was all that about". He explained that in the winter they had attempted to move a boulder but the crane had a limited reach and all they had succeeded in doing was to drop it in the middle of the river. He helped us through the lock and then instructed us to tie up to the bank, as it was time for a meal break. We conformed. It turned out that he was the maintenance man in charge of the navigation aided by his comrade.

In the following where I quote verbatim please feel free to practice your impersonation of an Irish accent. Of course should there be any actual Irish reader they are excused the impersonation aspect.

Margaret had the kettle on when the two approached with a request. "We have the makings if the good lady could oblige us with a little hot water". She did and added two slices of the home made fruit loaf she had brought with her. It was of course merely a coincidence when they arrived at the next mid-day with the same request but with the codicil," and if it wouldn't be too presumptuous we would greatly appreciate another slice of the good lady's delightful fruit cake". We knew we were being blarneyed but we thoroughly enjoyed lying on the grassy bank in the sunshine listening to Irish storytelling. Particularly the number two who had no apparent teeth and regaled us with "learning English dancing over Burtons (the tailors) in Wolverhampton".

But we had to make progress and there we were later, motoring along, when thick black smoke began emanating from the exhaust. I cut the engine immediately. Solace was heavy, so in this smooth water she continued to carry her way for a considerable distance. Overtaking us on the towpath was an elderly gent riding a bike. He waved, I responded. We exchanged pleasantries. I then explained our predicament. He dismounted, took our lines and we made fast to the river bank. He re-mounted his bike and said he would be back shortly. Perhaps 20 minutes later he returned in a van and introduced us to "the best diesel man for miles around". The engine was a Volvo 36HP MD17C, which I had installed 12 years earlier and which had already suffered several expensive failures (and was to do so in the future). I was apprehensive. The expert ran the

engine and gradually the exhaust improved and he declared it fit. We concluded that the problem was caused by dragging the bottom and ingesting some muddy nasties. Relief. "Diesel man" accepted a cup of tea but refused payment and soon departed.

Bicycle man remained chatting. He was exuberant having just returned from the horse racing at Cheltenham, where apparently he was ahead in the betting. "Do you know I even got to shake hands with the Queen Mum" says he. We were near The Curragh, an Irish equivalent to Newmarket I believe.

I always enjoyed alternating the rigours of the open sea with quieter interludes such as this, which I could almost refer to as an Irish idyll. My first idea for this trip was to sail into the river Humber, cross England by canal to the Mersey and traverse Ireland via Dublin and the Grand Canal. I found one bridge on the Trent and Mersey canal to be impossibly low so changed to this route. If my first route had been a possibility I quite probably would never have known of The Barrow Navigation. I notice that the charge mentioned in the guide is given as 50p (half a Punt) per lock but I can't recall that we actually paid anything. Punt to Pound rate was close to unity so even in 92 eleven or twelve quid for the complete navigation was a snip.

The last lock on the Navigation was at Athy. John's pencilled note was: 1350 30th July 92. So the trip from Dunmore East had taken 5 days. I remember asking the lock keeper what was the biggest boat he had passed through and he pointed to Solace. We continued North (28 miles-9 locks) until we turned West on the Grand Canal heading for the river Shannon.



Now with images so readily obtained it's hard to remember how different things were in 1992. The pictures above are the best I can do.

The top left shows, as was the case that the lock gates were in a good state of repair. Some were manned most DIY.

You can see we were proper, flying an Irish courtesy flag, as well as a red ensign. The mast on deck was stowed slightly skewed so that we could squirm into the cabin. John is steering, peering over the mast. A pair of knees to the right indicates that the skipper was taking his responsibilities seriously.

In the lower left, the towpaths restrict the width under the bridge. Did the horses manage this bit or were they detached from the tow and the boats man hauled through? I'm sure that at this moment I wasn't ruminating on this matter, I was more concerned as to whether Solace's 12 feet beam would squeeze through the gap. It did, just.

When dredging back through one's memories what is not apparent to us, because of its very absence, is the absolutely vast amount we have forgotten. I found another picture. John's note on the back says "talking to Daniel's brother". The

picture is of me talking to someone squatting on the river bank. Who on earth could it be? However, leaving this thought to be resolved over a period of time in the background of the mind, it slowly enters the "retrieval" compartment. Yes, of course, Daniel was the toothless orator mentioned above.