

Friends of PRESIDENT

***“Steaming Up” – Oct
2007***



“Out on the cut at last!”

***Captain Neil Ratcliffe takes the boats out on the way to
Shackerstone***

Website www.nb-president.org.uk



From the Editor

2007 – The year that wasn't ! You will read later on, that the year has not gone to plan. After last year's tube problems I think we were all looking forward to a great season – but like so much this summer, it was not to be.

It is for this reason that this is the first issue for a few months. I have though managed to include one trip report.

Simon Nuttall

Chair Chat

As you were all aware the summer of 2007 will be remembered for the rain resulting in floods and disruption to many parts of the country. Unfortunately our boating season was also effected by the weather. As you all know we were going to break new ground with our 'Below the Sea Tour'. Our visit to the eastern counties would have been a first for a FMC steamer, but it was not to be. After the very enjoyable Braunston Boat Gathering we started the trip to the River Nene. On arrival at Gayton the crew found that the river was closed and as it turned out it remained like that on and off for the next five weeks. With the delay and the roistered crew missing their slots it was decided to return to the museum. It was very fitting that on the Friday evening on the way back after a very wet day 'President' was featured on the BBC local weather forecast from the mailbox. We did have a presence at the Nene Valley Railway weekend and the IWA Festival thanks to the Museum's road-show caravan. Our thanks go to Emma and Angela and the volunteers who braved the weather at Wansford and the mud in St Ives.

Next year is going to be better, we have yet to decide the 2008 boating programme, but talk has already suggested that we try again and take the boats on a revised tour to the East. All the contacts are in place - so just watch this space.

A lot of hours were put in over the winter to maintain the boats and prepare them for the summer. I would like to pass on my thanks to the members who gave up so much of their time, remember there is always a place for you on the working parties.

Best wishes

David Powell

Andy Flack



I have just heard from Andy's wife Lynn that Andy passed away in September after a short illness.

When we first met Andy he was a chief engineer on Oil Tankers working in the Far East. He had long leave times and spent many hours working on the boat in the early nineties when we were replacing the boiler. As a marine engineer the expertise he brought to the 'Friends' was invaluable.

I am sure that all the members would like to join me in passing on our condolences to his wife Lynn and the family.

David Powell



From the hole

Apart from the disappointment of not doing the below sea run it has been a very good year down the 'ole. The modifications carried out last winter have proved very successful except one minor snag which will be discussed later in this report.

The expansion box has performed well. There is a slight reduction in noise, as the beats have been smoothed and now produce a steady muffled roar which is easier on the ears. The biggest gain is that all the oil and water (apart from, when starting from cold or after an overnight stop) is removed from the exhaust, resulting in a cleaner and easier cleaned boat.

The snag mentioned earlier is the annoying knock of the non return valve at low speed i.e. when passing the odd mile or so of moored boats which can get on one's wick. A modification is planned this winter to eliminate this problem.

Looking ahead, we have two further biggish jobs this winter, the weir pump is becoming a major problem the valve gear is worn and we have come to the conclusion that the infrequent use is one of the problems as it is designed to run for long periods. A replacement pump is being considered, which will be a banjo type, being a rotary pump with a simple slide valve and a small fly wheel is a much simpler pump and more reliable.

The second consists of small mods to the engine, Brian Empsall is fabricating a small umbrella to fit below the main gland on the piston which will deflect water away from the oil cups to stop contamination of the oil. Linked to this is the fitting of a pump to remove the oil and water from the engine sump which will be pumped to the hold into a oil drum.

I would like to thank all the drivers and engineering team for their valuable contributions this year and of course their good company and humour.

David Stott

Trip Report

BCLM - Shackerstone

Crew – Neil Ratcliffe (Capt.), George Hopkins (driver), Pat & Brian Empsall, Malcolm Dunlop and Chris Smyth.

After deciding that we were going to go to Shackerstone via the North Stratford and Braunston, the first day was going to be a nice easy day into Birmingham, nothing too strenuous. All of this changed during the working party that was held the weekend before we were due to set off. It was planned to load 120 bags (3 tons) of coal so that we would be ready for the trip. Unfortunately the coal hadn't been delivered to the wharf, so it couldn't be done. It would have to be loaded on the Saturday morning before we set off for Birmingham.



All the coal was loaded and the boat sheeted up. After partaking of the usual excellent fish'n'chips, Kildare was moved alongside President, the bridge raised and we exited the arm breasted up. The bridge was lowered, we singled out and we were off, turning right at the junction to head along the old main line to Birmingham.

All went OK until we ran aground as we left Smethwick bottom lock, but no major delay getting going again. We found ourselves a mooring spot outside the ICC on a short stretch of moorings with the disabled sign on the bollards, meaning we would have had to move again if they were required by a boat with a disabled person on board, but as we were told that there wasn't a disable access to this side of the canal, we thought we would be OK.

Set off on Sunday morning with Lapworth as the planned destination, but it was not to be. 12 hours after setting off found us at Hockley Heath, so we stayed there. The Birmingham level was approximately 3" off and we found the bottom of virtually every bridge hole, some just slowed us down, and others delayed us for varying amounts of time. The tirfor had to come out twice; the most memorable was on the Hockley Heath side of Shirley drawbridge. We cleared the bridge before running aground. The only place to anchor the tirfor was a conveniently placed British Waterways dredger!! Unfortunately, no pictures were taken.

Sorry to all those that turned up to help the boats down Lapworth, Ann & Nick Oliver, Nick Haynes and family and especially Tony Tibbins. He walked all the way

to the Bluebell cider house. We gave him a lift to Hockley Heath, but he still had to walk back to Lapworth to pick up his car.

Monday now meant Lapworth & Hatton flights had to be done to get us back on target and reach our pre-arranged mooring in pole position outside the Cape pub in Warwick. The Oliver's also had an early start helping us down Lapworth – many thanks.

Lock 38 on the Hatton flight nearly saw an early end to my trip. My method of closing bottom gates on this flight is to pull on the handle to start the gate moving, and then, holding on to the handle, step around the end of the beam so that I can continue closing the gate with my back against the beam. Stepping around the beam on this lock, the handle came out of the beam and I ended up on the concrete 10ft below, luckily not injured.

Tuesday saw another long day getting us to the next pre-arranged mooring, in Braunston Marina. One hour was lost trying to get under the Bridge by Tesco's in Leamington.

Ansty was the destination for Wednesday night which we achieved without any problems. It made a nice change after the last couple of days. We had some help going down Hillmorton locks by David Goode, who also turned up on another couple of occasions and even signed a membership form at Shackerstone. Welcome aboard David & Sarah.

Shorter day planned for Thursday with an arranged mooring at Trinity Marina at Hinckley in return for having the boats on display for a couple of hours. When we were about 15 mins away I gave them a call but they didn't know anything about the arrangement, the person I had arranged it with was on holiday. We still stayed there after breasting up one of their brokerage boats, and took up half of their diesel mooring. After an hour or so, the owners of the boat that we had moved turned up to remove a sofa from their boat, so as the marina shop had now closed we took over the whole diesel mooring and put the other boat back where it was, we even helped move the sofa.

Friday took us from Ansty, through the festival site to the head of navigation, and back to the festival to find our allotted mooring. The car shuffling that took place on the Friday evening nearly ended up with two of the crew missing their meal in the pub.

Various crew changes took place over the weekend, with people leaving and arriving each day. Shackerstone had a lot of working boats attending this year, they were moored three abreast along the canal.

Many thanks to all involved for making this another memorable week, despite the problems.

Neil Ratcliffe

BCLM - Shackerstone

An alternative view – Chris Smyth reports on his first trip on the boats.

It was the “Below the Sea” Tour which attracted my attention. Over the years I have seen quite a bit of the canal network but I have never headed east. So I put my name down to join at Salters Lode and also for familiarisation at the Braunston weekend.

My participation at Braunston was complicated by dropping my son at Coventry for a familiarisation visit – he will be a fresher at Warwick University this autumn. So by the time I arrived the show was on the road – and what a show! “President” and “Kildare” were but two of dozens of boats manoeuvring round the restricted canal system at Braunston. A joy for the photographer but a significant challenge for those trying to navigate full length narrow boats; or worse still pairs of full length narrow boats. To add to the interest “President” and “Kildare” were conveying the VIP party including, of course, Sonia Rolt. I think they all had a good day. It was certainly an educational outing for me.

Over the following weeks I followed the boats’ progress via our web site. The photos of flooded locks on the River Nene told the sad story all too graphically. It must have been a hard decision to cancel the trip to the National, but it is hard to argue against it.

As the summer progressed the two week trip to Shackerstone and back was mooted. By happy chance it coincided with the week I had originally offered. I first met the Ashby canal some years ago when I used to work in Leicester and overnight in Market Bosworth. At that time it was a very quiet backwater which ambled past Bosworth Field on its way from who knows where to the back of beyond.

At first glance the week looks a leisurely affair. Seven low mileage days, clearly we are due to take our time with plenty of opportunities for static display of our historic boats. WRONG! Horribly wrong!

The first thing to learn with a coal-fired boat is that the day starts early. Very early indeed for the Driver, in our case Bluebell Railway based George Hopkins. His day begins before the dawn; perhaps at 05.30. By the time he has raised steam the rest of the crew need to be up, breakfasted and have the boats ready for the off.

Hidden behind “Kildare’s” traditional sheets are some modern facilities; bunks, a well-equipped small kitchen and a basic toilet. However this is a traditional narrow boat not a floating hotel; progressing from one end to the other demands the skills of a limbo dancer. Mind your head!

After the rains of the early summer we can, at least, be sure of adequate water levels, surely? Wrong again! The long Birmingham level is a couple of inches down, presumably because a lot of boaters had decided to enjoy the late summer weather and proceed down the various locks which exit this level. A couple of inches don’t matter much to craft of shallow draft but “President” draws three feet. We seem to

stick in every bridge! In almost every case our progress ceases just as the stern of “President” clears the bridge. A major challenge for Captain Neil Ratcliffe who has to supervise our efforts to regain deeper water. Also very frustrating for those who have turned out to help us down Lapworth locks.



With a six man crew there are always three people on duty – one on each tiller plus the Driver. When no locks loom the rest of the crew may find time to prepare tea, coffee or a snack. This must then be dispensed to both boats. This involves traversing “Kildare’s” rear cabin. A romantic reminder of traditional boating but with low headroom. MIND YOUR HEAD! Too late. It is just as well that we routinely wear flat hats!

The basic rule when locking is to keep the boat moving. Working two boats speedily but safely requires special skills. There are differences going up hill and down and, of course, in broad locks and narrow locks. Regulars like Brian Empsall understand the nuances but I still have a lot to learn.

I have steered a narrow boat so steering “President” or “Kildare” should be fairly straightforward? Wrong again. My previous experience should have taught me this. We once hired a converted Ice Breaker which, being deep drafted, sometimes had a mind of its own. I also have limited experience of steering a horse drawn narrow boat; where the main hazards are the lack of brakes and the wind. “President” and “Kildare” have many more lessons to teach. On “President” the basic rule is don’t cut corners. You must stay on the outside where the deep water lies. On “Kildare” there are different techniques. I have a competent tutor in the person of Pat Empsall who points out that the steerer on the butty can greatly reduce (or magnify) the effort required on “President’s” tiller. On tight corners the butty helps by initially steering the ‘wrong’ way, which at first seems wrong but certainly works.

At the end of the day a modern boat has little to do beyond mooring up. It is a shade different for “President” and “Kildare”. Smoke and dust get everywhere; since the canal twists and turns and speed is low there is no part of either vessel that escapes. So we must mop down every flat surface, polish the brasses and so on. If you want to get really dirty you can take your turn at moving coal towards the engine room. Fortunately Malcolm Dunlop seems to have beaten me to this; he is as black as the Ace of Spades and as happy as a sandboy. Mind your head down there Malcolm.

I hope that gives you some flavour of a ‘leisurely’ week! Would I come again? Oh yes, if you will have me.

Chris Smyth