



Even when lockdown restrictions eased, many decided to restrict their sailing or not launch at all. Liz Dodwell took a different approach. We hear her tale of Doreen C.

Tim and Guy Faller with Doreen C at Lock 16 on the Deepcut flight. Photo by Liz Dodwell.

A puzzle for you – What is a small gaffer without its gaff? The answer might just be a canal boat!

Well it certainly was for us when we took Doreen C, our 16ft Winklebrig, on the Basingstoke Canal this year. We have strong sentimental ties to this canal but that is really another story. Suffice it to say we have long wanted to achieve a pilgrimage all the way up the canal to its limit of navigation and back from the River Wey. This year we made it.

The canal has not reached Basingstoke since the tunnel at Greywell collapsed in 1932, but since restoration in 1991 it has been navigable at certain times of most years to just short, near Odiham Castle. It is 32 miles long, and has 29 wide locks (ie 14 ft rather than just 7ft), now jointly owned by the Surrey and Hampshire County Councils.

So, just as soon as the restrictions were lifted, we launched Doreen C (minus her mast, boom, gaff, sails including topsail, squaresail and all that sailing gear) at Pyrford Marina on the river Wey. Over the next three days we climbed up through the 29 locks, over its three aqueducts, through the two swing and lifts bridges to the now collapsed Greywell tunnel. Here is much for any fit gaffer to enjoy. Working the locks is quite hard work but Tim managed it mostly single-handed, and I handled the boat. Being under seven foot beam we can actually slip in with only one gate open, if there's not rubbish behind the gate that is, and sometimes there was!

We were quite challenged though, mainly by the weed which caused an overheating problems with the outboard, when we frequently had to tow the



A lock in the St John's flight. Photo by Liz Dodwell.

boat. We did try paddling too but that was even more exhausting. But somehow we made it through the charming locks at St Johns, Woking to a peaceful mooring in the Brookwood country park. The next day saw Tim working through the 16 locks at Deepcut.

The great consolation, for me the helmsman anyway, was just how beautiful it is here, one of our very favourite stretches on any canal. The many locks slip by with charming views round each bend, passing the fine pine, oak and beech trees. One of the conservationist's favourite phrases is 'green fingers' creeping into urban areas, and this is very true on this canal. Nature is certainly right here with the dragonflies and mayflies joining the ducks, coots, moorhens and occasional herons and, later on

where the water is clearer, the glimpses of fish gliding through the weed. That night we stopped at the Canal Centre at Frimley. Here we did have a shock when at 4am one of the Canada geese landed on our cabin roof. I don't know who was more surprised as we emerged shouting from the cabin not knowing who or what was boarding us!

The next day we worked through Ash Lock, the last and only lock in Hampshire, on passing near Farnborough and Aldershot to Fleet. One great thing about Covid 19 is that so many people have been doing great things in their gardens, and nowhere more so than along the canal, especially in Fleet. We admired them all, especially those with boats moored, or canoes and paddle boards on the bank. Here we exercised our family 'bubble' rights and over the



Doreen C in the hydrocotel weed above lock 1. Photo by Liz Dodwell.

next three days welcomed two of our children and two grandchildren to join us, either on a bike, or the bows of the boat (yes, that's two metres away), and we enjoyed our first meal out in months, socially distanced in a cosy courtyard of a restaurant near the canal.

Soon we were passing through my very favourite part of the canal, winding past Crookham, Dogmersfield and Winchfield to Odiham and on to Greywell. Even more memories here as this is where I grew up and we were married in Winchfield Church. We spent the next night at Colt Hill, Odiham. The following day we motored on to King John's Castle, always a treat, and then came the short walk, crossing the trout stream, and on to the mouth of the Greywell tunnel. This is now a famous habitat of many types of bats, so much so that those of us who would one day like to see it reopened fear the bat-lovers might win the day to see it kept closed!

On this top pound there is a swing bridge and a lift bridge to be worked, as well as three aqueducts to cross - over the main railway line, the busy A331 near

Frimley and the charming Whitewater trout stream near Greywell.

The return journey was even more enjoyable as we had little or no trouble with weed, and grandchildren helping with some of the locks. Since lockdown has eased, the hireboats at Odiham have been busy with all their narrow boats out, helping to keep the weeds at bay.

We gather the weedcutter should already have made some improvement with the weeds and volunteers are back trimming the banks. Then there are all the smaller boats, lots of paddle boards as well as the canoes and rowing boats, with some for hire at Frimley and Odiham. I understand the three tripping boats are all back in business now.

Yes, as many of you know, our English canals offer something really different for us old gaffers, and definitely to be recommended. If you don't have the chance to travel by boat, make your way to a canal near you and enjoy a walk for that specially different experience, aiming of course for a suitable canal side hostelry when you need that well-earned break!