

Exploring the Wey Navigation

Penny Parkin visits one of the oldest navigations in Britain, and discovers many delights along the Wey

THE Wey Navigation covers a 20-mile stretch of river that runs from the Thames at Weybridge to Godalming in Surrey. A tranquil wildlife corridor, which runs through the heart of the South East, it covers some 19 1/2 miles of towpath, all of which is open to walkers with free moorings for visiting boats along most of its length. Opened in 1653, it is one of the first British stretches of river to be made navigable. The following is a guide to some of the highlights you can expect if you're planning a trip this summer.

The river is ideal for families or for couples, with friendly pubs and villages marking the stretch. Starting in Godalming, Farncombe boathouse offers a range of pleasure craft including punts, rowboats, canoes and narrowboats and runs a horse-drawn boat from Easter to September for a unique experience. If you're starting your journey in Farncombe, you'll find Sainsbury's and Waitrose a short walk from the boathouse to stock up before you start your journey.

Further downstream, once you've mastered the basics of rivercraft and are used to driving your narrowboat on the right, you can take a breather and admire the sunny watermeadows that run from Farncombe to Guildford, pausing to admire the friendly black and white cows that line the banks before arriving at Saint Catherine's chapel and ferry, marked by a stretch of golden sand and said to be used by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, after which Guildford or 'golden ford' was reputedly named; although other theories are based on the golden flowers that used to line the riverbanks or the town's fame as a corn exchange.

From Saint Catherine's you'll pass under a footbridge and follow rows of expensive, intriguing houses on your left and willow tree-lined banks and further lush watermeadows filled with tall grass to

your right. The right-hand bank, before the weir just before Guildford Rowing Club, has ideal moorings for your first or perhaps second night on board. This is a popular 24-hour mooring spot and has the advantage of being extremely close to Guildford boathouse, which will carry out minor repairs, has a restaurant boat and rowing boats and where you can refuel or take on water.

The area beyond the rowing club is also within a minute's walk of the excellent Weyside pub and water meadows or a more cultivated stretch of grass with picnic tables where you can stretch your legs, have a ball game or a picnic and feed the ducks by Guildford lock. Alternative moorings can be found at Dapdune Wharf whose visitor centre, open from April to October, offers the chance to experience barge history first hand aboard the Wey barge *Reliance*.

This stretch of river is even more appealing during July when Guildford Festival begins in earnest. Expect to find a boat festival where narrowboats are specially decorated for the occasion together with craft and produce stalls in Guildford High Street and the lively Guildfest in Shalford Park if you fancy letting your hair down. Concerts with firework displays are also commonplace during the summer months and Guildford Lions' raft race is a sight not to be missed.

Guildford High Street and Guildford Castle are both well worth a visit and are situated a leisurely five-minute walk away from any of the Guildford moorings. The nearby Guildford Museum is a gem with lots of buttons to press and intriguing curios to examine and contains memorabilia commemorating Lewis Carroll, who lived in his sisters' house 'The Chestnuts' next to the castle toward the end of his life. A ghost tour of Guildford also takes place every Friday at 8pm, starting outside Holy Trinity church at the top of the High Street.



Milmead Lock.
All Penny Parkin

The Weyside Pub,
Guildford.



The Harry Stevens, named after the last proprietor of The Wey Navigations who donated the river to the National Trust in 1964.

Further upstream, several pubs make pleasant stopover points including The Rowbarge near Stoke Mill at Woodbridge, The Olive Tree, a short walk upstream over Warehams footbridge and The New Inn at Cart Bridge in Send. High Bridge in Send is a short walk from the village shops where you can stock up on papers and local produce. If you miss it don't panic however, as The Seven Stars pub is only a short walk from Newark Lock, slightly further upstream and Walsham Gates is a 20-minute walk from Ripley, which is a small village with many shops and restaurants.

If you're looking for moorings along this stretch, Sutton Place (home to Sir Richard Weston, originator of the idea of making The Wey navigable), Send Church and the area around Papercourt Lock and Newark Priory all offer picturesque views. Be warned however that the A3, the main thoroughfare from Guildford to London runs parallel to the river so it is particularly close and therefore noisy between Stoke Mill and Sutton Place. Several National Trust landmarks can be found within a

short drive of this stretch of river including Polesden Lacey, Clandon Park and Hatchlands Park.

Beyond Newark Priory and Walsham Gates, Pyrford Lock hosts the Anchor pub, which is a must on a sunny afternoon as it is situated overlooking the lock itself and has a very pleasant family atmosphere. While further on, Parvis Bridge is close to Byfleet boathouse and the many pubs and restaurants in Byfleet town centre. After refuelling and taking on water, you'll pass the Basingstoke Canal to your left as you head towards New Haw and The White Hart Inn, just beyond New Haw Lock.

Coxes Mill makes a picturesque setting for an overnight stop before you hit The Thames. En route, pop into The Pelican at Addlestone Reach or take a last chance to do some shopping in nearby Weybridge town centre which has shops, a museum and a library and pubs including The Old Crown and The Minnow. A 10-minute walk further on, Thames Lock marks the end of The Wey Navigation and provides access to Windsor, Henley and Hampton Court.



Bring *Laughing Water II* back to life

ON a visit to a boatyard in Burton-upon-Trent I noticed a sleek, straight stern among the moored steel narrowboats, writes Chas Baird.

A walk out along the jetty revealed the unexpected sight of a classic Thames launch. Her upperworks were tarpaulined but the sheer grace of her hull stood out. This is how I discovered *Laughing Water II*.

She is understood to have been built by Horsham's Boatyard, Raymill Island, Maidenhead in 1912 for Nancy, Lady Astor of nearby Cliveden who was the first woman to sit in the House of Commons as an MP and was a long-time protagonist of Winston Churchill.

Laughing Water II is 50ft long, with a 6ft 8in beam and has a draught of 22in. Her hull planking and

cabin are of Honduras mahogany; her keel and frames are English oak. The type and make of the original engine is, however, unknown.

Very little is known about her early history but in the late 1940s she was acquired by a director of Ansell's brewery in Birmingham and later (between 1955 and 1958) by George Wilson of Kinver. He sold her to Jack Tomkins, a solicitor in Stratford-upon-Avon who was active within the Upper Avon Trust and the Stratford Canal Restoration Society, working with David Hutchings on the restoration of the canal.

In 1964 *Laughing Water II* became the first boat for 35 years to navigate the restored Southern Stratford from Lapworth to Stratford. By this time a second cabin had been built over the forward cockpit. She then lay abandoned in Lapworth Basin for several years. Purchased by someone from the north-west of England, she was towed north and again abandoned. This time at the southern end of Preston Brook Tunnel on the Trent & Mersey Canal. Over this time her condition deteriorated and sank, where she lay in that state for two years.

She was purchased by her current owner, Ray Woodland, in 1976 who removed her to his back garden for the start of a restoration which was to take 11 years. Examination revealed that several of the hull

planks below the waterline were rotten, more than half the 100 frames were cracked and the propeller, propeller shaft and rudder shaft were all damaged.

The cabin was also rotten but the construction of the original cabin could still be determined. The boat was acquired with a dismantled Gray Marine; a six-cylinder, 56hp petrol engine probably dating from the 1920s.

Ray was a skilled and meticulous amateur restorer of boats. He was at that time a founder member of the North West Museum of Inland Navigation, which established the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port.

Extensive research was carried out into details of original construction before restoration began. The same materials were used and fastening of new planks and frames was by copper nails and roves. A new cabin, of the same style, design and materials was built but was extended to 16ft to make it more practical for extended cruising. The engine was rebuilt and reinstalled.

Laughing Water II was re-launched in 1987 and in that summer completed the round trip to Teddington on the Thames and back to Preston Brook with no significant problems. The engine was found to be too powerful and was replaced in 1988 by a 20hp Vetus diesel.



Derelict at Preston Brook, 1975



Near Wigan, Leeds & Liverpool Canal, 1993

Until 2002 the boat cruised the river and canal system and was maintained in an immaculate condition. Unfortunately since then Ray, who is now in his 80s has suffered ill health and is now unable to care for her to the extent she needs and deserves. Varnish and paintwork have deteriorated and the cabin woodwork requires attention. She is kept securely in a marina at Burton-on-Trent where an automatic bilge pump deals with minor leaks and rainwater. Ray has now decided, reluctantly, that *Laughing Water II* should be sold to someone who will restore her to her former glory and use her for many years. She has a current BSS Certificate and the engine is complete and should be serviceable with minor attention. For more information on *Laughing Water II* contact andy.woodland@breathe.com or ring 01325 377741.