

Canalboat and Inland Waterways Magazine Article

A Day on the River

Richard Fairhurst drives a cruiser on the River Thames.

Just upstream of Marlow is a hive of sporting activity that belies its rural Thames-side setting. The Bisham Abbey complex, which includes the National Sports Centre, is home to organisations as varied as the Lawn Tennis Association and the British Amateur Weight lifting Association - but also on the site is an independent boating school.

The Bisham Abbey Sailing & Navigation School provides instruction in craft ranging from sailing dinghies through rigid inflatables up to sea-going motorboats. The Inland Waterways Helmsman's Certificate is fast becoming one of their most popular courses, with tuition offered on a 36ft narrowboat, or a 22ft Mitchell single engine river and estuary cruiser, or a 17 metre Dutch Barge. MD Roy May has run the school for many years and has instructors who can also provide tuition on boaters' own craft, travelling to their home mooring if necessary.

Tuition is available for one or two days, with up to three people taking the course at one time. I was joined by Douglas Gold, who had some sailing experience but little on inland waters.

As someone more used to navigating 70ft of steel (or wood) around the canal system, I expected our day aboard The Green Parrot the 22ft Mitchell - on the wide waters of the Thames to be a new, and slightly unsettling, experience. On the narrow canals, there are no keepers to give you frosty looks as you make a hash of entering their lock; few rowers or dinghy sailors to avoid; and falling overboard, though embarrassing, is rarely dangerous in the shallow water. I suspected I had picked up one or two bad habits, and this would be an opportunity to correct them.

Before setting foot on the boat, we began with some basic ropework, learning to coil and throw a line around a mooring or lock bollard. My instinct was to roughly form a long loop and throw it hopefully in the direction of the bollard, but Roy's method was much more accurate, though just as easy.

Boarding the boat was another opportunity to unlearn old ways. Rather than jumping on board, disregarding the gap between bank and boat, we gently pulled the cruiser into the side before stepping on. Buoyancy aids were provided, and Roy recommends that these - or life jackets - are always worn.

The Green Parrot has an inboard diesel, so the engine checks were little different from a narrowboat. But although checking the stern gland and the oil level before setting off comes as second nature to most inland boaters, there are a host of other checks which are easy to overlook, such as the cooling water filter on this river boat, and whether the instruments are working. As we were beginning to appreciate, the Helmsman's Certificate is more than simply a boat-handling course. Roy introduced us to the boat's layout, warning us to keep hold of the solid rails - not the guardwires - when walking around outside. We were also shown appliances such as the cooker and water heater, with an explanation of gas safety precautions.

We were taught how to use the engine and the ropes to set off from the bank, rather than pushing off with outstretched limbs; and then we were underway. First, the wheel steering required concentration: there were a couple of occasions when I mistakenly turned the wheel left to turn right, thinking it was a tiller, while its extreme sensitivity came as a great surprise. But the skill was easily learned - and even if your own boat has tiller steering, it is useful to understand how other craft on the waterway will be moving. Once Douglas and I were confident with the basic steering skills, Roy explained how to use the current of the river to best advantage. By keeping the boat in forward, but applying minimal power, we learned how to remain static in our position in the channel - a useful skill when waiting for locks. We measured our position by a post on the bank, and were pleased to find how easy it was to stay parallel. Using the current was a theme to which we would return later in the day, when turning and mooring.

Before long, we were ready for our first lock, and ready to employ the rope techniques we had learned earlier. Thames byelaws require the engine to be turned off in a lock at all times. (Though this can be waived in exceptional circumstances at the discretion of the lock-keeper, such as allowing a narrow-boat with a vintage diesel to lock through on its own.)

Having practised throwing a rope around a bollard earlier, the lock work was comparatively easy, though I found it hard to remember to pass the rope under the rails before throwing it. However, as Roy explained, recognising that you are doing something wrong is the important step: correcting old habits inevitably takes time. We were taught to leave the lock without scraping along the side or pushing off with our feet. By taking in the rear fenders, leaving the front ones hanging, then pulling the stern of the boat in with the stem line, we could point Green Parrot towards the middle of the lock, ensuring a smooth exit. We then brought the other fenders in as soon as we were underway.

We moored at two distinct locations, a stretch of grassy riverbank, and a jetty in front of a pub. Approaching the riverbank at an angle of around 30°, we brought the bow in first, stepping off with a rope, then putting the engine in gear, and using it to bring the stern in. Once again, Roy showed us how to use the current to help the process. Coming alongside the jetty sticking out from the bank, we again used the current to hold the boat against the piles, while bringing the boat round alongside.

The man overboard drill, involved picking up a life-ring thrown in the river. The initial reaction is to panic, and this is where much of the danger lies: over-hasty manoeuvres risk causing a further accident, and too much throttle can potentially swamp the person in the water. Instead you motor on beyond the casualty, turn round away from them, and come up gently alongside, with the engine in neutral. Then it was back to base for a debriefing. At the end of our day I felt much more confident in river boating, and handling a wheel-steered cruiser, and Roy confirmed this by issuing both myself and Alistair with our Certificates. I then went on to take the CEVNI Examination, which allowed me to apply for my International Certificate of Competence.

The Inland Waters Helmsman's Certificate course is also available on our 36ft narrow-boat, our 17m Luxe-motor Dutch Barge or your own boat at your venue.