

FROM THE NEWS LETTER DATED 20/4/63

OPERATION "NELSON" - BRAUNSTON TO BABWORTH BY CANAL.

Following the publicatio

of the "Newsflash" that the narrow boat "Nelson" had been acquired, a period of intense activity followed. Finances had to be sorted out, and a crew raised for the trip. Several members immediately put in for a week of their annual holidays, and immediately following the last committee meeting, Messrs. C.R. Clarke, Denis Banton, (Chesterfield), John Brooks (Sheffield) and David Dawson (Sheffield) with Mrs. Banton as cook set out for Braunston by road, loaded up to the eyeballs with the gear necessary for a 158 mile long voyage. Fate was not kind. What should have been a most interesting and delightful canal cruise turned out to be a continual battle against the elements for the whole of the trip. Mother nature threw everything it had at the crew, including gale-force winds for $\frac{1}{2}$ of the trip.

The outboard system seemed to work reasonably well, although progress was very slow, and our first hazard was turning out of Braunston Lock, when John Brooks, steering us round the sharp bend with a boathook, suddenly found it impaled in three foot of mud. Making a hasty decision to part company with the boathook rather than the boat, Nelson drifted away leaving the boathook stuck up like a mooring buoy! However, we soon recovered this, and commenced the ascent of the Braunston locks,

in the first one of which, the skipper, (yours truly) dropped a clanger, kicking the megaphone into the turbid waters of the lock! A commodity which proved to be sorely missed later on in the trip. Then followed the eerie experience of the passage through Braunston tunnel. This twist and turns like a donkeys hind leg and is over $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles long. It was a very tricky business piloting 72' of narrow boat along this very narrow tunnel, particularly on the turns. However, we emerged at the other end after only having bumped twice (although we dare not reveal the number of near misses!) Leicester

Dusk saw us turn into the section of the Grand Union Canal, and we completed the ascent of the Watford flight in pitch darkness being several hours behind schedule. Nothing daunted David dragged the skip out of bed ~~the~~ at 6.0 a.m. next morning, and the two of them cast off with the rest of the crew still asleep. However, it was not long before heads started to appear from within, and soon the smell of bacon wafted back to the tiller. Progress along this summit pound was painfully slow. It was found that Nelson was drawing a full 2' of water for the back ~~of~~ 10' of its length, for the full 7' of its width! In the restricted channel, even shallower than the Chesterfield, forward movement was barely perceptible for long periods. However after some miles it became a little deeper and progress improved. Not for long! The wind had been getting up as the day progressed and by 10.0 o'clock had built up to a howling gale! Rounding one particularly sharp bend the wind just took the boat and blew the front hard aground. David, Denis, and John did yeoman work with the boathooks shafting us off the mud and once more we got under way, being blown aground on the average about every quarter of an hour. Then the wind eased slightly, and that was it! With startling suddenness, the whole sky was blotted out as a swirling howling blizzard swept the Grand Union summit pound! The writer sat out at the back hugging the tiller, 3 pullovers, two jackets, and two overcoats on, collar pulled right up and raincap to protect the top! The wet kept dripping off my nose end, and the uncomfortable situation was relieved when the galley hatch lifted and Bessie Banton emerged with a steaming hot drink. Never has the finest liqueur ever tasted so good!

Thus progress continued and it became obvious that we were falling far behind schedule. Rounding on hillside, aviolent gust caught us and blew us sideways hard and fast on a mudbank, solid as a rock. All the combined efforts of the whole crew could not dislodge the boat from the fury of the gale! Having exhausted ourselves from nearly half an hours solid struggle, we decided to take an early lunch and hope for the wind to ease up later. Thus we were stuck hard aground for nearly three hours. Eventually the gale eased up a little and the combined efforts got us off and we were able to continue our voyage. The summit pound twist and turns like a snake charmers harem! Hairpin bend after hairpin bend made the task of getting 72' of boat round a most difficult job particularly when fighting a near gale most of the way.

We eventually arrived at North Kilworth at 4.30 to find that our rendezvous with John Woodward and party had gone wrong. We got a message that they had left for Tardebigge at 3.0 p.m., and so yours truly had just to sit tight where he was; That night, the quintet explored the local hostelry, and had a really good warm, turning in very tired.

The following day, other members started to appear, Charles Atherton, (Dick's brother from London), John Atherton, (no relation) and various others, and somewhat late we set out for Foxton, arriving there late Saturday afternoon after a very pretty ride over the last few miles of the summit pound. Here we were met by members Nicholson from Chesterfield, and also by Ross Phillipson from Hayton, near Retford, who journeyed with us some little way. A fairly uneventful cruise along the Market Harborough section towards Kibworth concluded the day's run, and we made fast in the dusk at the tail of the fourth Kibworth lock.

Sunday dawned bright and clear, things looking set fair for the best day of the whole trip. Unfortunately we were in the middle of the heavily locked Leicester section, and had to work through 30 heavy locks, although this task was eased somewhat by Charles Atherton cycling on ahead and getting them ready for us to motor straight into. This is known as "lock wheeling". By noon we were approaching the outskirts of Leicester, but so heavy is the locking that it was 3.0 p.m. before we moored up at West Bridge for lunch. Later that day we entered the River Soar, to find this in flood, and a terrific current running. To make matters worse, the wind had got up again and the river follows a meandering course through the meadows. Again and again we were blown aground on the tight turns.

and then it happened! While the crew were working their hearts out to get our front end off, the swift current took charge of the stern, and before we knew what had happened, we had swept us broadside on across the river and wedged us firmly between the banks!. All the time the flood swollen current was pushing us harder on! What a predicament! Eventually the wind eased slightly, and the combined effort of crew and engine in reverse managed to bring the stern back into the stream, and once more we were under way.

There followed many more adventures that day, which perhaps had better not be published, but will no doubt be talked about for years during our natters in the Clubhouse, etc! Suffice it to say that we completed the trip to Mountsorrel in pitch black, and thankfully made fast just in time for the nerve-wracked crew to catch the local before closing time!

On entering the river, we had experienced sever propeller cavitation due to the less dense river water. In view of the hazardous conditions experienced (I had forget to mention the the gearbox had jammed in gear, depriving us of brakes or reverse!) it was thought prudent to attempt to get hold of a longshaft motor to give better control in the dangerous river. After much discussion, Mr. Boon, who keeps a nearby boatyard, converted our spare engine to longshaft, and after some delay we left Mountsorrel about 1.0 p.m. Apart from a very tricky bridge at Barrow-on-Soar, the journey down to Kegworth proved reasonably uneventful, and we made excellent time with the modified engine, and the swift current helpful along. At Kegworth, we met up with John Woodward and George Swanwick, and continued to the mouth of the Soar at Redhill lock, finally mooring at the entrance to the Ere wash canal at Trent Lock, Long Eaton. Here we started making enquiries about lock windlass keys, and by much scraping about managed to secure a small supply for club use (all of which are now taken up) and found that these are made in B.W. workshops at Newark.

Leaving Trent Lock next morning, the skipper was nearly lost overboard. Reversing out under power, extra power was put on to combat the increasing effect of the river current, when without warning, the tiller shot hard over, hitting yours truly in the chest, and there I was hanging out over the river by my heels and hanging on to the outstretched tiller for dear life! Phew! John Woodward eventually slowed up the engine, and with a struggle I got back on board, and the Nelson was nosed into Cranfleet Cut. Below here the Trent was running like a millrace, and the greatest care and skill in navigation was called for proving the predictions of various news reporters to be an understatement. Edging by the submerged training wharf we found ourselves aground on the opposite side, but managed to slide off, and after a very careful approach to Beeston lock, thankfully made fast. At this point, we made the short journey to the lower side of Beeston weir and were horrified to see nearly three foot of flood water thundering over amid tremendous clouds of foam and spray. Many pictures were taken of this so that members will be able to see what we were up against. Had we have known how bad the conditions were, I doubt whether we would have left out mooring.

At Nottingham we were met by photographers, etc. and were very fortunate in meeting a friendly barge skipper who kindly offered us a tow down to Newark which we gratefully accepted. Never before or never again, will Nelson show such a turn of speed. We must have made nearly 15 miles an hour over the land. The barge was empty and went flat out, aided by the flood water. Nelson had a four foot bow wave, and her stern was way down so that only the top of the engine showed above the water! Nevertheless, we arrived at Newark slap bang up to schedule, just after 6.0 spending a most pleasant and interesting evening among the barges in this important canal town, whilst other members of the crew nipped off to sample the delights of a Chinese restaurant and the local cinema. Early next morning we were greeted by thick fog!

You couldn't see one end of Nelson from the other at one time! Shortly after more reporters appeared, and when we did set off, the fog had cleared slightly and one of them continued aboard down the Trent as far as Newark Nether Lock. Apart from pouring rain and one or two close shaves on the jagged Trent bank stones, the trip to Yorksey was reasonably uneventful and we made a very wet mooring. From Newark onwards, the boat had a steady supply of visit ors, the news beginning to filter through from the papers of the epic struggle which had taken place, and curiosity was becoming really aroused. All the week we had been working out in pub after pub how we were going to get Nelson into Stockwith lock against

a fierce tide which appeared too strong for our engine to punch, and after much thought declined the offer of a friendly barge skipper to give us a tow right down, and decided to do the last leg in our own way. Thus we were able to leave Yorksey half an hour after high water, which meant that we arrived at Stockwith at half ebb, after the fiercest of the ebb tide had gone. The rain poured down for the whole of the journey and we rounded up to Stockwith to see quite a crowd waiting on the bank!

Turning Nelson was a much bigger job than you would think, and we were thankful to have Harry Spencer standing by in Hopalong, powered by Joe Stringer 40 hp. Evinrude, as a safety measure. However we started the turn just past the Farmers Co. jetty, and were pleasantly surprised to find that once we had got the bows round, we could just hold our own against the ebb, sufficiently long enough for Ben the lockkeeper to get a line to us. From that point it was more or less straightforward, and once in the lock we posed in the pouring rain for still more photographers.

News had reached us by this time, that the TV people wanted to film us on the following day, and after a short stop for tea, we set out with Nelson up the canal towards Drakeholes. Minor mechanical breakdowns retarded our progress, the engine which had given such yeoman service in the Trent finally burling out its gears, and we had again to put a very tired spare on. Drawing much more water than we expected, passage over the half dredged sewage shoal between Shaw lock and Gringley lock proved a slow and exhausting business, and although we were supposed to tie up at Drakeholes for the night, in view of the torrential downpour, we spent the night in Gringley Top lock, getting up early next morning and continuing on to Drakeholes for 8.30a.m. A beautiful morning life in lovely deep clear water through delightful countryside.

The TV crew turned up and were quite pleased with the boat and the scenery. So pleased indeed were they that they decided to make a longer film for the programme "Scene at 6.30". The whole of Friday was spent in the making of the film, which showed Nelson emerging from Drakeholes Tunnel, interviewer Margaret Jordan introducing the boat, showing members of the crew docking the boat, and followed by interviews with our P.R.O. John Woodward, and the Chairman. This was followed by ~~xxxx~~ the working party at Retford Top lock, illustrating how we are able to supplement the work that B.W. are able to do on their limited budget which is laid down by Mr. Marples. The telecast did not show the canal in quite the light we would have liked, but most people seem to agree that it was extremely good, and most useful to the club. As a matter of interest several applications for membership have come about as a direct result of the broadcast which went out last Tuesday evening. The Director of the film was Philip Jordan, and the producer Barrie Heads. The ITV are to present a copy of the film to the club for club records, and at one of our socials later on in the season, it is hoped to be able to show this, which is on 16mm sound. (Has anyone such a projector? If so please contact the writer)

The work of the TV crew meant that Nelson was very late leaving Drakeholes and slow progress was made through Wiseton. It picked up again just past Wiseton, and passing Clayworth really good progress was made as far as the Gate in at Clarborough, where the shoal again slowed us down, and it was nightfall before Nelson was made fast about half a mile from Whitsunday Pie Lock. The following day, Saturday, was a nightmare for the crew. Having drained the Retford Top pound for the working party, we had left the remaining pounds short of water while this pound built up which meant that the canal through Retford was nearly 12" down on normal. However, the boat got as far as West Retford lock, where some little horror had thoughtfully deposited a brick behind one of the gates, and try as they may, the crew could not dislodge it. Trying to get into the lock with the brick still in position, Nelson got jammed tight, and it took four hours to free her. Eventually, the obstruction was cleared, and Nelson, captained now by Dick Atherton, had a fairly pleasant run up to Babworth, arriving at about 12 noon. ~~So~~ So ends one of the most exciting happenings since the club was formed!

P.S. to the Nelson Story. Just after the above notes were written, a most excellent account of the journey was handed in by a scribe who wished to remain anonymous. So excellent was the article (and refreshing to hear another viewpoint) that some of the more brilliant satires are appended herewith. It is entitled:-

The Odyssey

By "Trojan"

For many years to come members of the crew will be telling suitably embellished versions of Nelson's voyage..... Their captive audiences will hear tales of fierce winds, lashing rain, sleet & snow... of the passage of shallow canals and deep flood-swollen rivers, the aegre on the Trent, & the entry into the narrow cleft that is Stockwith Lock....

..... the toiling crew being driven on by a relentless skipper, a schedule-conscious P.R.O., and chased by the Leicestershire Police as being suspicious characters..... In prospect we looked forward to a weeks pleasant cruising; during the trip no doubt each member of the crew probably resolved that he would never again go near a boat, but in retrospect, we can look back on an important job safely completed, and one which we would not have missed.....

....the appeal for help in bringing Nelson to our own moorings brought a response characteristic of the members of the club, and we all owe a great deal to those who came to crew or cook, and in many ways to share the cost and labour of the trip. The interest shown has strengthened the club considerably and proved that our purchase of Nelson has caught the imagination of many people and won us their support.