

Trip to Lechlade

30th July to 6th August

We're based at the Thames & Kennet marina situated between Sonning & Caversham locks. It's a pretty good spot being roughly midway between Lechlade and Teddington lock, ie the navigable non-tidal Thames.

Our boat is a 1980 something Birchwood 25 which, at some point in its life, has been converted to a soft canopy version rather than the normal hard top. It has been "lovingly" restored over the past two years by my partner Chrissie & me, where we've replaced everything from the engine (a Watermota Sea Panther diesel) to the galley to the headlining to the shower room etc. Oh, we also replaced the canopy, anchor, winch, helm and even have new prop shaft, stern gland and gearbox coupling. But all of that's another story! Her name is Tiger Moth 2 (or as we refer to her...Tiggs!) and we bought her on the Norfolk Broads in 2017, our first boat! She was called Tiger Moth up there, not sure why but there was a nearby Tiger Moth flying out of a local field, maybe that was the previous owner). Believe it or not there's already a Tiger Moth registered on the Thames, hence we're Tiger Moth 2

Last year we took Tiggs to Hampton Court, our furthest trip and 5 nights away. We stopped at Windsor and Walton on Thames marina on the way down and Windsor, Marlow and Henley on the way back. This year we decided to try for Lechlade while we had a boat that could get under the infamous Osney Bridge. Interestingly, while Osney (they seem to pronounce it Oh-sney up there!) Bridge may be the actual lowest bridge on the river, I suspect most of the gin-palace cruisers would struggle to get under Folly Bridge which is on the southern edge of Oxford before you reach Osney Bridge.

Given that our Hampton Court trip was a bit intense last year, eg. Our first leg was T&K marina down to Windsor involving 10 locks, I decided to plan for a more relaxed itinerary to Lechlade. However, it is 20 miles further and involved 24 locks so we still needed 7 nights away and couldn't afford to hang around too long at each mooring. The proposed schedule (thanks Barbara for sending me mooring suggestions!) was:

Tuesday 30 th July pm	– T&K Marina to Benson Marina – 3.75hrs + locks
Wednesday 31 st	– Benson to Osney – 4hrs + locks
Thursday 1 st August	– Osney to Shifford – 3.5hrs + locks
Friday 2 nd August	– Shifford to Lechlade- 3hrs + locks
Saturday 3 rd August	– Lechlade to Bablock Hythe (The Ferryman) – 4hrs + locks
Sunday 4 th August	– Bablock Hythe to Abingdon – 3.75hrs + locks
Monday 5 th August	– Abingdon to Wallingford – 2.75hrs + locks
Tuesday 6 th August	– Wallingford to T&K – 3.5hrs + locks

As with all plans, a degree of flexibility was needed due to various events, some not in our control such as an ill dog and a Salters Steamer stuck in Sandford lock due to a split hydraulic hose controlling the lock gate!

Aboard Tiggs would be me, Chrissie, Summer (Chrissie's daughter) and Bailey (2 year old white Golden Retriever). As Tiggs has a brand new Galley we decided to eat on the boat until Lechlade then dine out until we got home.

Night 1 – After a later than planned departure (4pm in the pouring rain and blustery gales!) we set off from T&K, destination Benson Waterfront. The journey was undramatic and we arrived around 9pm, still just enough light to find our reserved mooring next to Bygone Boating. Katie the lock keeper at Benson lock was out in her PJs and operated the lock for us, she even offered us a free mooring and use of her shower if we'd had a problem mooring at Benson. Breakfast the following morning in the Waterfront café set us up for the day and we departed late morning.

Osney Bridge and The Punter pub – moored right outside!



Night 2 – The furthest north we'd been previously was just past Benson, so we were now in uncharted waters for us. We were very impressed with Abingdon and vowed to stay there on the return trip. Like Wallingford they have an outdoor lido next to the river, so that was added to our to-do list. Surprisingly though our journey through Oxford was a big disappointment! If you've never been this far by boat and you have an illusion of cruising through Inspector Morse territory, gazing in awe at the architecture of the various colleges then I'm sorry to say that is just an illusion. Apparently, that can be achieved by cruising the Oxford Canal, but sadly the Thames skirts the edge of Oxford and is the equivalent of driving through the service area rather than the town centre! I was then confronted with Folly Bridge which no one had warned me about! At first I thought I'd taken a wrong turn as surely a major part of the Thames couldn't have such a small bridge! But it's true, Folly bridge is made up of small arches and is an old, listed bridge that's about 10ft high but doesn't look it as you approach. Osney is 7ft 6" and Godstow is 8ft 5", so these three are the ones to watch out for. Shortly after, we reached Osney lock where the lock keeper was about to finish for the day, we were his last visitor. When asked about moorings he set off down the tow path to find one for us! He returned, said he'd found one in front of the Punter pub and he wouldn't charge us; what a gentleman! So we spent the night moored by a pub, fabulous!



Night 3 – The next morning it was down with everything – canopy, mast and windscreen in preparation for the one and only Osney Bridge. After two years of hearing the stories and seeing the videos on You Tube, we were now cruising towards it. As we approached people leant over to watch us go under and we all ducked down just in case. It looked closer than it actually was, I think we probably had a couple of feet spare in the centre and maybe could have left the windscreen up. Still, better to be safe than sorry! From that point on the only boats we saw were either small cruisers like us, narrow boats or canoes, day boats etc. The river changed dramatically too as we turned west and the twists and turns began. After Godstow Lock and the unexpectedly low, narrow and strangely angled Godstow Bridge, we got a big surprise on reaching King's Lock; there were no buttons! Ignorantly, I had assumed all the Thames locks were hydraulic, but from King's Lock and

beyond they are all manual. However, once we'd got used to them, we enjoyed the experience and when on self-service you can fill or empty the locks as fast as the lock keepers. We had planned to moor at Shifford however there didn't seem to be much around to see and we were somewhat concerned about Bailey, our dog, who had come down quickly with a stomach upset impacting both ends which was not much fun in a small cabin cruiser! The lock keeper at Shifford Lock advised that there was a pub/restaurant at Tadpole bridge, so we kept going. Unfortunately, when we arrived there the mooring, albeit free it you ate at the Trout, was at the bottom of a steep slope (see picture) making it almost impossible to get on/off with a sick Golden Retriever! So we kept on going to Rushey Lock, where the lock keeper suggested a fabulous meadow-side mooring a couple of bends upstream. This proved to be one of our best mooring spots of the trip, moored opposite friendly fishermen and alongside a field just perfect for Bailey!

Tiggs in one of the many locks & Bailey's meadow mooring:



Squeezing under Godstow Bridge with the SUP on the roof & steep mooring at Tadpole Bridge:



Night 4 – We arrived in Lechlade shortly after lunch time and cruised down past the riverside marina to see how far we could go. The river was becoming denser with underwater plant life and getting pretty shallow – between 2-3ft in places. We could see the house and bridge about a 100yds further on which mark the end of navigable river so decided to turn around as I didn't really want to foul the prop. As we passed the riverside marina, we stopped to ask some people if it was possible to fill with water. The marina there doesn't have any visitor facilities and is now under new ownership. Apparently, there's quite some history with the previous owner but things are now expected to improve. The very friendly and helpful people we met filled our water tank for us from their private hose. It's worth mentioning that the last lock before Lechlade, St John's Lock, has an Elson Point and fresh water so it's worth taking advantage of that as nothing is available in Lechlade. We moored alongside the field downstream from the bridge almost opposite the New Inn hotel. We also ate in the New Inn hotel and the food was excellent and very reasonable.

Lechlade:- Tiggs surrounded by swans & The Riverside Inn at sunset:



Night 5 – Saturday morning saw us taking Bailey to the vet in Lechlade as he was still struggling with a poorly tummy. We then set off on the return journey, our target destination The Ferryman Inn at Bablock Hythe next to a large static caravan site. The mooring was free and we ate at The Ferryman, the food being no-frills, well priced fare. The staff were very honest when asked if the food was home-made, the answer being no! There's a large, mown field next to the Ferryman where you can moor so it's great for dogs. There's also a small slipway if you have canoes or paddle boards with you (which we did).

In case you get lost at Abingdon – sometimes the river just disappears in front of you!



Night 6 – Destination for Sunday evening was Abingdon, however this was almost curtailed when we reached Sandford Lock which was broken. Unfortunately, there was also a Salters Steamer trapped in the lock with a large party on board, although there was obviously plenty of food and drink to keep them happy and the party atmosphere over-spilled to the queue of boats waiting to use the lock. The upstream gates had failed half-way due to a split hydraulic pipe and an engineer was apparently several hours away, it was Sunday after all. The lock keeper was doing his best to rectify the situation and was able to top-up the hydraulic fluid as an emergency solution to get the gates open allowing the steamer to exit the lock. Fortunately, he was kind enough to allow boats who wanted to risk being stuck in the lock the opportunity to attempt transit until the gates failed again. In total only three of us attempted it and we had to physically force the upstream gates closed when they stuck again. Luckily the downstream sluices and gates worked fine (presumably on a separate circuit) and we got through the lock and arrived in Abingdon as planned. Abingdon has a lot of mooring capacity along the left bank (as you face downstream) and alongside the lido on the right bank, however dogs are not permitted that side. As far as we could tell the mooring was free (certainly upstream from the bridge where we were moored). Downstream from the bridge there were signs, but we couldn't read them as we went past! We did see diesel for sale just south of the bridge as well which is worth remembering! Also, worth mentioning that the lido has just been refurbished, everything is spotless and the water is warm!

Riverside mooring at The Ferryman, Bablock Hythe & Folly Bridge, Oxford:





Night 7 – Next stop was Wallingford where we planned to stay the night. We moored up alongside the lido on the left bank (as you face downstream) however Bailey was still not well and looking very sorry for himself. A call to the vet in Pangbourne changed our plans and we set off to moor up in Pangbourne and get Bailey to the vet for 6.30pm. We made Pangbourne by 5.45pm and as always seems to be the case there is very little mooring availability, fortunately Tiggs squeezes into small spaces so we end up with a bush covering the foredeck and an anchor dangling over the stern! Bailey was prescribed anti-biotics for his fever and we were close enough to home to have friends drive out to collect him. We retired to a dog-free boat armed with a takeaway feast! FYI, if you moor at Pangbourne, Dominos will deliver from Tilehurst, you just need to give them an address in town and meet them there.

The next day, Tuesday, we left Pangbourne and arrived back at Thames & Kennet shortly after lunch time. It was, for us, an epic trip and fortunately Tiggs behaved perfectly over around 30 hours of cruising with plenty of stop-starts at the locks.

Observations:

- If you have a boat small enough you should add this trip to your must-do list
- The Thames is very different beyond Godstow Lock
- It's possible to cruise the whole day and not meet another boat!
- All of the boats are either small cruisers like Tiggs or narrow boats
- The narrow boats generally have to travel slowly to negotiate bends in the river. They are very accommodating, moving over to wave us past
- Beyond Osney you don't pass through any towns until Lechlade. It's a countryside journey!
- In places the river is shallow with the trees overhanging such that you feel you're on a canal rather than the Thames.
- There are many more places to moor versus the below-Osney Thames. Having said that, long stretches of the river are lined by reed banks which are not suitable for mooring, but there are definitely fewer "No Mooring" signs!
- We paid £10 to moor at Benson (included electric and use of showers etc) and £5 to moor at Lechlade (no facilities). No other mooring fees.

The riverside marina at Lechlade just past Riverside Inn & Bailey getting some TLC!



We hope this summary of our trip helps in some way for others who may plan to make the journey.

Andy & Chrissie