

RCR BOAT STORIES

THIRD PLACE



A Cautionary Sail

It is interesting that the closing date for this article submission should be on the 16th May. Twelve months previously on this very date we had an incident on our narrow boat Lucy that we have been trying to wipe from our memories ever since. We may still need counselling but hopefully sharing here will be a cathartic process.

Whilst it's the stuff of nightmares it is an account of what can happen on rivers if you become complacent and you underestimate their power, so it is worthy of being reminded and perhaps a cautionary tale for others to take heed. Always wear your life jackets on rivers and keep your phones about your person.

We were on the River Severn having left Tewkesbury, Gloucester bound. Coming through Upper Lode lock we exchanged pleasantries with the lock keeper and received written instruction for how to proceed to Gloucester locks, though we hoped to overnight on the way and told him so. He said he would let the next lock keeper know not to expect us and to have fun.

We were not aware that mooring at any of the spots on the way wouldn't be possible, the previous year's floods rendering the pontoons unsafe. Though anyone sensible could see that our chosen mooring at Ashleworth Quay was likely to be fraught with difficulty and we didn't know that the Boat Inn was closed.

Our first rookie mistake was to pull up facing downstream instead of turning Lucy about to face the current but the surface was like a mill pond. Whilst the pontoon appeared rickety and some planks missing Chris suggested Mandy jumped off and tested its durability. This she did moon-walking her way along.

When she didn't plummet through the wood Chris joined her and began reeling Lucy in whilst Mandy proceeded up to the bow end. We watched in horror as the centre line fed through his hands like someone trying to manage an out of control pot on a potters wheel or hold a slippery eel.

Chris morphed into Scotty from the Star Trek Enterprise shouting something like "I cannae hold her Captain. She's going to blow".

Mandy hearing "Get back on at the bow" launched herself at Lucy and somehow managed to 'Mind the Gap' which was rapidly increasing.

She was always good at long jump at school but this time didn't have a good run up to it so power-jumped instead. She sprinted through the cabin, a 57 foot dash, and popped out at the stern to take hold of the tiller. Not something that she is used to doing but wished right now she had had more practice.

However Lucy had done an about turn and was now facing the opposite direction but moving backwards into hawthorn trees. Mandy - disorientated and not being able to see the pontoon for leaves and branches - listened out for instructions being bellowed ahead of her.

"Full throttle and power forward!"

This she dutifully did, bending down to avoid the foliage whipping her in the face. There was a thud and Lucy came to an abrupt stop. She had hit the scaffolding poles hard. She couldn't see Chris for the mound of twigs piled on the roof and wondered if she had inadvertently knocked him off the pontoon.

A thought flashed through Mandy's mind, much like your life does in times of acute stress, accident or near death. What would have happened if she hadn't managed to get back on board and Lucy was making her way un-manned down the river to Gloucester? We had no phones on us to ring the lock keeper or River Canal Rescue. How would we explain this to our insurance company?

Thankfully Chris reappeared and interrupted this thought process, taking over the controls. He had somehow managed to step on at the bow end, which was why she couldn't see him. We proceeded to Gloucester lock ringing the keeper to forwarn him of our arrival.

When we arrived Lucy was still covered in hawthorn debris. We were shaking and rattled. The lock keeper said, "I thought you were stopping off for the night" So did we, but the river had other ideas.

Mandy and Chris McDermott

