



PEAKY BLINDER

Colin Dobson-Fox describes how a spontaneous decision to cruise the Peak Forest Canal resulted in a five-week-long stay

We'd just completed a cruise of the Huddersfield Narrow

Canal, exiting Lock 1 in Ashton-under-Lyne, and our plan was to continue west towards Manchester, or perhaps go back over the Pennines on the Rochdale Canal.

"Why don't we do the Peak Forest while we're here?" I said to my partner Shaun as we emerged from the Asda Tunnel, literally 200 yards from Dukinfield Junction where the lower Peak Forest Canal branches off opposite Portland Basin. Shaun replied in

his usual way, "Yeah, whatever." It was the best spur of the moment decision we've made in ages.

Marple Aqueduct

For me, the Peak Forest Canal is two separate waterways. The lower part between Dukinfield Junction and Hyde Bank Tunnel, near Romiley, is where the canal blends the industrial outskirts of Manchester to the more rural landscapes ahead, such as the Goyt Valley and High Peak of Derbyshire. Technically, on this lower part, we're in the borough of Stockport.

We moored on the approach to Benjamin Outram's stunning

Marple Aqueduct. The highest canal aqueduct in England, it carries the Peak Forest Canal 315ft across and almost 100ft above the meandering River Goyt as it leaves the Goyt Valley on its journey towards Stockport. The aqueduct is outsized by the slightly newer railway viaduct, which runs above and alongside it, like a big brother looking down on the canal.

Before you go over the aqueduct, stop here, grab your camera and walk down the steps on the northern side path, which lead down to the river and a very well-positioned picnic table. There's no better place to stare up in awe and

marvel at this architectural masterpiece while you're eating your cheese sandwich.

Marple flight

A few minutes around the corner



Possett Bridge Horse Tunnel.

"If want an example of how a town grew and built itself around a canal, the Marple flight is ideal"



Marple Aqueduct.



Samual Oldknow's warehouse.



Reversing to Marple Services.



Roman Bridge.

from the aqueduct is the bottom lock (1) of the Marple flight. Sixteen locks, all squeezed into a stretch of canal that's less than a mile long, take you 214ft up towards Marple Junction. It's an interesting incline, which took us about two-and-a-half hours to complete, providing a scenic combination of woodland, parkland, housing and a busy road. If you ever want an example of how a town grew and built itself around a canal, the Marple flight is ideal.

Just before Lock 10 is Samuel Oldknow's warehouse. His name is well known around Marple almost 200 years after his death. An entrepreneurial hero of his time, he brought development and industrialisation to the area, building roads, bridges, mines, mills and lime kilns, and he even played a part in the construction of the canal.

Further along the flight, between locks 12 and 13, is the three-arched Possett Bridge. The arch on the left is where the canal once branched off to one of Samuel Oldknow's nearby lime kilns (now disused and filled in). The centre arch is the navigation, which goes into Lock 13, and the smaller arch on the right is an interesting and quirky egg-shaped horse tunnel, just 5ft wide, built to allow towing horses to pass under the road. It's a fine example of perfectly preserved canal architecture that's still in use over 200 years after it was built, although not by as many horses nowadays.

With the Marple locks being situated so closely together, maintaining water levels can be problematic. The pounds between locks 13 and 15 were almost empty when we approached but, luckily, Canal & River Trust staff were already refilling them and we had no delay in reaching the top lock (16) in time for an early lunch.

Marple Junction is a treat for the eyes. Top Lock House, with its



View of Kinder Scout.

manicured lawn, stands proudly above the junction and Bridge 1, where the Macclesfield and Peak Forest canals meet. If you're looking for facilities, CRT's Marple Yard services are located just a few metres down the Macclesfield, immediately after Marple Wharf. I'd recommend reversing into the services from the junction with a spotter on the bridge looking out for oncoming boats.

Patience is required at this

water point. It took us almost an hour-and-a-half to fill our 350-litre tank, a situation only made worse if someone is using the Elsan point or toilet. It's a well-known frustration among local boaters who waited patiently for us. If you want to pass some time, it's only a five-minute walk to the shops from here, so you can stock up on provisions while the water tank (very slowly) refills.

Scenic moorings

For me, the 6½ miles between Marple Junction and Bugsworth Basin form my favourite stretch of the Peak Forest. After leaving the services, we moored just half a mile from Marple at Hilltop Footbridge (20). Cross the bridge and walk up the footpath to Hawk Green and you'll find a pub and a fish-and-chip shop within five minutes of each other. If you fancy walking off the excesses, head down the hill from the bridge towards Barlow Wood, the River Goyt, and the historic Roman Bridge (although not exactly Roman, being built in the 17th century). Crossing the bridge, you can go left towards the Roman Lakes, a peaceful reservoir now used for recreation that was created when the river was diverted to Mellor Mill. You could instead turn right and follow the Goyt Way towards Strines, where you can catch a connecting train to Manchester or Sheffield, or walk back up the hill and pick up the canal again.

There are some lovely mooring

"I have to admit, I fell in love with New Mills"



CRT's Marple Yard and Wharf.



New Mills
Torr Mill.



New Mills Marina
and Swizzles.



Millennium
Walkway.

spots just after Stanley Hall Bridge (23), which shares its name with the adjoining dense wood that climbs the hillside away from the canal, up towards Disley Golf Club. The towpath here is, for the most part, in good condition with no mud, so ideal if you have a dog.

If you choose your mooring position well you'll be treated to magnificent views across the valley. Cobden Edge and Mellor look beautifully picturesque when bathed in the early morning sunlight, and in the distance, High Peak is waiting just a few miles further along the canal.

Wood End Lift Bridge (24) not only offers the ease of an electric-lift system, which comes as a relief after the previous windlass-operated lift-bridge, it also rewards you with a single, spectacular mooring spot just after the landing. There is literally enough room for a single boat and it's ideal for people like me who crave solitude. The view across the Goyt Valley is simply beautiful and it more than makes up for the lack of television and internet signal (if you rely on them).

Higgins Clough Swing Bridge (25) is another worth noting. Just before the hedgerows and you'll be able to see Kinder Scout, which, at 636m, is the highest point in the Peak District, peeping over the hills beyond Hague Bar. If you hear a rumbling while you're operating the bridge, it's probably a train in the 2-mile-long Disley Tunnel, which burrows its way under the canal and houses on the High Lane estate, eventually emerging at, and cutting directly through, the middle of Hazel Grove Golf Club.

New Mills

From Disley the canal and River Goyt are sandwiched by railway lines, each one heading towards New Mills in High Peak. This is a town where I could very easily live, and not only because of the ever-present mist of sherbet that drifts from Swizzles Matlow sweet factory. The canal passes a few feet from this 80-year-old building and there's literally sherbet on the walls and windows. You can't help breathe it in and taste those



Torrs Hydro.

familiar flavours of Parma Violets and Drumsticks. Heaven!

Just after Thornsett Bridge (28) is New Mills Marina, which is handy for diesel, water, pump-out and solid fuel. The staff are friendly too, as I would be if I was working next door to a sweet factory. There are also showers and a laundrette, which came in handy with the cold, rainy weather making towel drying that bit harder. New Mills Newtown railway station is just

behind the marina, and there are some conveniently situated Amazon lockers, which are ideal if you need anything delivered. We used them on the way back from a day in Manchester.

The sharp corner after the marina can be pretty perilous. Long-term moored boats line the towpath leaving just enough room for one boat to squeeze through. With very limited visibility ahead and no room to move, it's not a place I'd like to meet a boat



Furness Vale Marina.

coming the other way. Luckily, the canal was clear for us.

Mooring for New Mills is best just after Bank End Bridge (29). There is room for several boats towards the swing-bridge and although the busy Newtown railway line runs very close to the canal, there are lovely views across the valley towards Chinley Churn. In the distance, the railway from New Mills Central transverses the valley. Looking like toys in the distance, trains carrying freight and passengers fly across the peaks between Manchester and Sheffield.

From here, New Mills is a pleasant 15-minute walk away. In addition to a couple of well-stocked supermarkets, independent shops and cafés, the Torrs Riverside Park is a must-visit. Check out the Millennium Walkway, suspended from the side of the gorge like a steel spider's web. Built in 1999 it offers a fascinating view of the geology and heritage of the River Goyt and Torr Vale Mill.

Just around the corner on the site of the original Torrs Mill is the community-owned



Whaley Bridge Junction.

Torrs Hydro, a huge reverse Archimedes Screw, built into the weir of the River Goyt, which uses the power of the river to produce about 240,000kWh of green electricity every year that the local Co-op supermarket buys. I have to admit, I fell in love with New Mills, and it's a place I know I'll visit again.

Historic basins

Immediately after Carr Swing Bridge (30) is the tranquil and visually inviting Furness Vale Marina. Even more peaceful than New Mills Marina, the landscaped gardens and tree-lined moorings

offer a peaceful haven. A row of cottages opposite gives the whole place a timeless feel – it looks idyllic. It's definitely on my list of permanent moorings should we ever think about settling down.

Go straight on at Whaley Bridge Branch Junction and you'll pass a line of long-term moored boats before reaching Whaley Bridge Basin. There's a small winding point and services here, and it's handy for a brief trip into town or to check out the original Transshipment Warehouse where cargo was transferred from canal to the Cromford & High Peak Railway. The trip-

boat, *Judith Mary II*, takes leisure cruises here with regular trips to New Mills and back.

Go left at Whaley Bridge Junction and you'll arrive at Bugsworth (Buggy) Basin. This place is saturated with history. It was once the biggest inland port in the kingdom, where limestone from the quarries of Dove Holes was brought along the 6-mile Peak Forest Tramway to be shipped by narrowboats all around the country. After 40 years of painstaking restoration, the basin reopened to recreational traffic in March 2005. I could write a ten-page article on this historic gem and still run out of space to cram in every fascinating detail.

As you approach Buggy, you'll pass the boating services and a small shop and information centre on your left. The tendency is to go straight ahead and moor on the short, busier mooring section, but wait. Bear right and you'll discover some lovely, quiet, 48-hour moorings away from the main huddle of boats. They offer a tranquil escape (except for the ever-present noise from the busy A6 behind the trees).

As isolated as it appears, there is a large Tesco just ten minutes' walk away from Whaley Bridge Junction, or, if you just fancy a drink and a bite to eat, the Navigation Inn towards the very back of the basin offers refreshment and was once owned by *Coronation Street*'s most iconic matriarch, Pat Phoenix, aka Elsie Tanner.

We only planned to spend a week on the Peak Forest Canal but we ended up staying for more than five, only leaving to get ahead of winter closures. It's one of the most scenic waterways in the country and I can't wait to return next summer.

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Teapot Row Cottages.



Bugsworth Basin.