



CALEDONIAN CANAL TRIP – MAY 2013



It was back in late 2011 that Terry first broached the idea of kayaking the Caledonian Canal – a distance of 60 miles. The canal cuts right across the highlands of Scotland, through the Great Glen, linking the east to the west coast. It is normally easier to travel from Fort William to Inverness, with the prevailing wind behind you, as we did. After much discussion, Terry and I decided that, if we were going to take on this adventure, it would be advisable to do a reconnaissance trip first. We then realised that it was Terry's 60th birthday in May 2013. It was sorted! A 4 day Reconnaissance trip was arranged in May 2012. A year before his birthday. We hoped to get some idea of the potential weather conditions.

During the reccie the weather went from bad to worse, to beautiful and back to awful. The scene was set. This was going to be an adventure! No pushover and certainly not for the faint hearted. But exhilarating, with a superb sense of achievement at the end - if we could pull it off. Remember we were taking on Nessie and her loch – how unkind was she going to be? So the invitations went out to family and friends. 15 intrepid guys put their names forward, that whittled down to a final 12 – the Dirty Dozen – true, we only had one shower all week! We were a total mixed bag of kayakers, some experienced, some novices, with ages running from 20 to 60.

We now set about planning our trip. Terry was the brains; I was going to supply most of the Advanced Elements inflatable kayaks, along with Terry's recently purchased Advanced Elements double convertible kayak. Practice sessions were arranged at Sheffield Rother Valley Park, along with a weekend on the river Thames October 2012. The reconnaissance trip, proved so valuable, we provisionally arranged our accommodation, the hire of sea kayaks and a canoe from John and Tina who run the Snowgoose Centre at Corpach. If anyone is thinking of doing this trip, John is the man to talk to, a Yorkshireman with a great sense of humour so good he only gave us a 50/50 chance of completing the trip! To finish our training, we visited the Tees Barrage White Water Centre, where we learnt some valuable rescue techniques, which were to prove so important to us on our quest.

All was set – the time had come. No turning back now! It was during all the preparation that I realised that, although this was primarily a 60th birthday bash, it would be nice if we could incorporate a little fundraising. In August 2010 I had major heart surgery at the Chesterman Wing of the Northern General Hospital in Sheffield and we decided that we would like to [raise some money on their behalf](#).



The day arrived – Saturday May 4th 2013. Eight of us left sunny Sheffield at 8am, meeting up with the remaining four en route. Our band of 12 headed, with some trepidation, to Scotland, in search of adventure. We arrived at the Snowgoose Centre around 4.30pm. It was windy, pouring with rain, low cloud and the water looked uninviting to say the least! We had a meeting at 6pm with John, who had the weather forecast – it was not looking good! John advised us to reconsider setting off on Sunday morning.

Sunday came – we decided to go as the weather had improved. The trip was on! John took us from the bunkhouse up to Banavie, at the top of a flight of locks known as Neptune's Staircase. Our Armada consisted of 6 sea kayaks, 2 single, 1 double Advanced Element kayaks and 1 canoe. The canoe was to carry our camping equipment. We were off. John waved us goodbye. 60 miles in 5 days, wild camping, 4 lochs including the biggest challenge – 22 miles across Loch Ness.



Day 1

Our group made good progress along the canal arriving at Gairloch by late afternoon. We had favourable weather conditions and it was still light, so we thought that we would head out onto Loch Lochy and camp at Clunes. As we left Gairloch the weather closed in. Rain and high crosswinds, which John had warned us of, blew across the bay in 30 m.p.h gusts. Nearing our destination, the water became very choppy, and the wind was affecting our progress. Then, the inevitable happened, Paul Burton was in the water, capsized out of his kayak! The rest of the group rafted up to rescue him. We had to perform this rescue 3 times! The bay is now named Burton's Bay! We were forced to land short of our intended campsite, in order to get Paul warm and nourished. That night we camped on a boggy bank side, in horrible cold wet weather. Tarps were a godsend! It was our most uncomfortable night. Hot food and port lifted our spirits. All in bed for 8pm.



Day 2

We woke to cold damp weather. The wind had dropped slightly and no rain. Overnight four of our party, sadly, decided not to carry on. They waved us off before being picked up by John and returned to the Snowgoose Centre. The remaining eight of us made good progress across Loch Lochy, in pretty wet and miserable weather, arriving at South Laggan by mid-afternoon. There we had a hot shower and a warm welcome at the Eagle Dutch Barge, with good food and hospitality. This was much appreciated after two tough days, and a drying room to boot! A great moral boost.

Day 3

We set off at 9am for our next wild camp site, Foyers, half way down Loch Ness. The weather was dry and bright. We started off on a tree lined avenue, opening out onto the beautiful Loch Oich. Looking over our shoulders, we could now see the snow-capped peaks of Ben Nevis and surrounding hills – arguably the most picturesque stage of the trip.



We under estimated the distance of this stretch of the canal and the effect that the portering of the boats would have on our schedule. We arrived at Fort Augustus at midday, also the mid - point of our journey. It was a warm day, which made the longest portering hard work, but the well earned fish and chips (best ever) gave us the sustenance to set off on our biggest challenge.





We could see the waves building up on Loch Ness in the distance. Once out of the shelter of Fort Augustus, we were paddling into a headwind and quickly realised that we could not make Foyers in these conditions. We needed to find a campsite before sunset. However, this was not possible for approximately 3 miles, because of the steep banking on the edge of the loch. Sticking to the south shore, just as we felt as though we had had enough, we found an idyllic pebble beach, which turned out to be one of our best camps – a gem!



Day 4

We set off in good spirits, after porridge for breakfast, knowing now that we would probably need our spare day and stay overnight at Foyers. Paddling was tough and tricky against a strong headwind. We eventually arrived at Foyers in sunshine, at 12.30pm – exhausted. What do we do? Decision taken to press on to Dores, a further 12 agonising miles, taking our total to 18 miles for the day, paddling across Loch Ness. This was the hardest day's paddling of the trip. Dores seemed to take an age to reach. We eventually dragged ourselves up onto the beautiful pebble beach and set up camp in the pine forest. A short walk to the Dores Inn that night and we soon forgot our aches and pains! Excellent food and hospitality was enjoyed by all, that night.



Day 5

We awoke to a beautiful sunny morning and, after a hearty cooked breakfast at the Dores Inn, we set off on the last 7 mile stage of the canal to Inverness. We arrived at Inverness around 3pm feeling elated, but at the same time jaded. Our spirits were uplifted by the sight and sound of Terry hitting the water after being launched from the jetty by his fellow paddlers! Happy 60th birthday Terry! A short while later, we were picked up by John in the minibus and made our return journey by road alongside the Caledonian Canal. The atmosphere was one of quiet contemplation, as we all peered out the window, reliving the stages of our journey. We had just completed what had started off being an idea voiced over a pint in the pub, which had turned into a wonderful adventurous reality.

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www.justgiving.com/shct



We would like to thank:

Nick Pipe - Vortex, distributor of Advanced Elements Kayaks, accessories in the UK, 0844 870 0747

www.advancedelementskayaks.co.uk

John and Tina Cuthbertson, Snowgoose Mountain Centre, Corpach, 01397 772 467

www.highland-mountain-guides.co.uk

Beth - The Moorings Hotel, Banavie, 01397 772 797

www.moorings-fortwilliam.co.uk

Janet & Paul - The Eagle Barge at South Laggan, 07789 858 567

Note: Lots of info/ photos on their Eagle Barge

[Facebook page](#)

The Dore Inn - by Loch Ness, 01463 751 203

info@thedoresinn.co.uk

Rother Valley Country Park – Watersports Centre, 01142 471 452

www.rothervalleycountrypark.co.uk

Tees Barrage White Water Centre, 01642 678 000

www.tbiwwc.com



16 TAN Y BWLCH – MYNYDD LLANDEGAI – BANGOR – GWYNEDD – LL57 4DX
01248 602225 (+44 1248 602225) - sales@advancedelementskayaks.co.uk - www.advancedelementskayaks.co.uk