

Grand Union Canal – August 2013 Trip Report



Ryan Hooper at Bordsley Junction

I woke up one morning in early June 2013 and decided that my body and mind needed an adventure. As I cycled to work that morning along the Nottingham canal I thought that a great adventure would be to kayak a canal. After researching the best canal routes in the country I decided that a paddle along the Grand Union canal which runs from Birmingham to Brentford fitted my brief perfectly. The Grand Union covers a distance of 137 miles. However, rather than finish at Brentford I thought that I would make the challenge even more attention-grabbing by finishing a few miles further on the River Thames by the Houses of Parliament.

I am used to endurance activities and pain having completed running and swimming marathons, walked the Pennine Way and cycled from Lands End to John O'Groats. I was therefore confident that paddling around 30 miles a day was achievable and very realistic.

I contacted my mate, Nathan, in Devon to see if he was interested in the adventure. He was hugely enthusiastic and keen. The adventure would take place over 5 days in August.

My first action was to decide what kayak I needed. I already had a hard shell plastic kayak but the logistics of getting this to Birmingham and then back home from London made its use impractical. For ease of transportation it was therefore decided that an inflatable kayak would be the best option.

I researched many inflatable kayaks on the internet and decided that the Advanced Elements Advanced Frame Kayak was the one for me. The main selling points of this kayak were its tracking performance, its rigidity, and the fact that it had plenty of on-board storage room for the 5 day trip. I therefore purchased this kayak in mid July.

For my first training session I took the Advanced Frame kayak onto the River Trent. I was immediately impressed by how easy the kayak was to set up in under 15 minutes, the tough material that it was made from and also the fact that it cut through the water in a much straighter line than my hard shell kayak. Actually, it did not feel like an inflatable at all!

My training involved paddling two to three times a week covering distances between 10 and 20 miles. I also trained at home on my rowing machine to build up the strength in my arms.

We researched the Grand Union by reading various waterway guides. The research showed that the challenge was going to be tough to complete in 5 days due to the number of locks involved – 166!

There were no realistic options for accommodation along the Grand Union canal and so we planned on camping each night.

You need to purchase a licence from the Canal and Rivers Trust to use the waterways in England. However, I found that the cheapest option was to join Canoe England since you can use the waterways for free as part of their membership.



Aylsbury Lock on the Grand Union Canal



Setting up at Camp Hill Locks

With only a week to go before the challenge I became really concerned when I received news that Nathan's Seyvlor inflatable had suffered a blow out during a training session – a new air chamber was required – which could not be patched up. Fortunately there was just about time to acquire a new one before the start of the adventure.

On the evening of Sunday 18 August 2013 I excitedly set off from Nottingham for Birmingham with my gear in arm to meet up with Nathan at a city Travel Lodge. Though I packed as light as I could, I was amazed when I weighed both my kayak and gear that the weight totalled 36kgs.

The adventure was about to begin.....

Day 1 – 19 August 2013

We got up at 5.30am in readiness for a taxi that we had booked for 6.30am which would take us to the starting point of the Grand Union at Bordsley Junction. Unfortunately, the taxi was late and the taxi driver then struggled to find an easy access point to Bordsley Junction. After 20 minutes driving us around the canal he dropped us off some 400 metres south of the starting point at Camp Hill locks at 7.30am.

We set up the kayaks under the watchful eye of 2 strange looking people sitting by the canal. They looked on in bewilderment as we turned our bags into inflatable kayaks.

We then paddled up to the starting point at Bordsley Junction passing two locks. Bearing in mind the graffiti along the canal walls, the scampering rats and the empty beer bottles along the towpaths Bordsley was perhaps not the most glamorous of locations for the start of an adventure.

The paddle south from Birmingham took us past countless old wharf buildings and derelict graffiti buildings. Indeed the bleak ambience around the canals in Birmingham gave us the push that we needed to paddle as quickly as we could out of the city.

It was going to be a hot day and so sun cream was slathered on thickly onto our faces and arms.

We paddled out of Birmingham towards Solihull where we stopped for a lunchtime break at the Navigation Inn after completing about 8 miles. The Steak and Ale pie was a joy!

After Solihull the sunny canal passed through a green and very peaceful countryside. We paddled beneath the heavy traffic of the M42 motorway near Knowle and then headed towards Knowle Locks. We had a rest, a banana and a toilet break here. We were able to use the toilet facilities at Knowle Locks since I had purchased a key from the Canal and Rivers Trust. The toilet looked like the shell of a steel bomb!

After Knowle Locks we paddled for 7 miles until we arrived at Shrewley Tunnel. There were no lights in the tunnel and so we had to paddle in the dark for 400 meters. It did not seem worth trying to locate my lights which were stored in one of my dry bags for just



Taking a break in Knowle



Shrewley Tunnel

a short distance. Fortunately there were no canal boats coming in our direction whilst in the tunnel.

In the afternoon at 4pm we arrived at the picturesque Hatton locks in Warwick. There were 21 locks at the Hatton flight covering a distance of 2 miles. Unfortunately, most of the locks were too close together for paddling to be a worthwhile option and so carrying the kayaks around the locks was the only way to go. The flight is commonly known as the "stairway to heaven" but I have renamed the flight as the "stairway to hell" due to physical and mental torture involved in carrying the kayaks and gear over the two mile distance. We attempted to carry our kayaks down the hills along Hatton locks one at a time due to their weight. However, this short distance took two and half hours to complete and we lost an enormous amount of energy during this time.

From Hatton Locks we pushed on for a further 6 miles paddling in the dark through the waterways of Royal Leamington Spa until we arrived at Fosse Locks at 10.30pm. We decided to call it a day. It had been a real tough first day. Our arms and hands were already wrecked due to the kayak carrying.

A kind canal boater gave us a hot dog each prior to arriving at the locks. It was honestly the best hot dog that I had ever tasted in my life!

We set up our tents behind some trees and were soon soundly asleep.

Day 2 – 20 August 2013

We were up early at 5.30am since we had another long day of paddling ahead of us.

The waterways from Fosse Locks were an attractive and isolated part of the Grand Union.

Whilst assisting in the lowering of Nathan's kayak into the canal at Fosse Locks I fell in and lost a flip flop in the deep muddy sludge at the bottom of the canal. I also badly cut my middle toe in the fall. There was no St John's ambulance at the canal side to fix my bloody foot and so I patched up the wound with savlon, plasters and duck tape. I borrowed Nathan's flip flops which I was grateful for since I had no other footwear.

We continued to paddle through the quiet, wooded countryside before stopping for a morning drink in the canal garden at the Blue Lias Inn. The extremities of the kayak carrying on the first day had started to bring on major hand blisters despite the gloves. Nathan therefore set about creating a strap system to assist in carrying the kayaks around the locks. This involved joining the two kayaks together with a pair of straps at each end and then using these straps to lift the kayaks onto our shoulders.

The new strap system was put to good use at Stockton Locks which involved a $\frac{3}{4}$ mile climb past a series of 8 locks. It was still a tough walk though



Having a swim at Fosse Locks



Fosse Locks

despite the new strap system. In hindsight, I think that a trolley system may have made the carrying job a lot easier. I wish that we had thought about it.

The canal after Stockton passed through the open countryside with a backdrop of hills. The empty landscape was soon broken after an hour paddling with yet more locks at Calcutt.

There was a long rural stretch of canal running for the next 7 miles with no locks which took us past Napton Junction, Shuckburgh and Wolfampcote.

We had a short ten minute break at Braunston where Nathan talked an old lady into providing him with a cup of tea. We hadn't been able to find anywhere to eat all day and so we were hungry at this point. The mars bar rations were a life saver.

The Braunston Tunnel was 1.1 miles in length with no towpath running through it. The thought of carrying our kayaks two miles over the hills above the tunnel filled our hearts with dread and so we thought that we would paddle through the tunnel as fast as we could. As we paddled through the dark tunnel with only a couple of cheap touches in hand we realised that we had made a foolhardy and irrational choice. The tunnel was narrow with sooty brick walls and with lots of canal boats inside. We realised that we were totally reliant on the other canal boats spotting us. If they didn't spot us we could have been crushed. We can have a good laugh about it now but we certainly would not recommend the experience to anyone. It was great to see the sun light at the end of a tunnel!

After Braunston we headed towards Buckby. Fatigue in our hands, arms and backs were now taking its toll as we carried our kayaks around Buckby Locks. I was also limping due to my toe injury which didn't help. After the locks we were now paddling in close proximity to the M1 motorway and a train line. Much of the earlier peace and quiet were now gone but travelling in a kayak is certainly a much more enjoyable experience than travelling on a motorway during rush hour.

We kayaked in the dark again until we stopped at Weedon bridge at 9pm. We were given permission to camp in a farmer's front garden which was a great find by Nathan. It was then off to a local pub for our first meal and wash of the day. A bar girl told me a story of man who paddled down the Grand Union in a tin bath a few years earlier. Now that is tough! The story re-energised my mind.

We had only managed 23 miles today due to the time spent carrying our kayaks around the 34 locks. We were behind schedule.

Day 3 – 21 August 2013

We were up early again at 5.30am to see the milk trucks arriving at the farm.

The paddle out of Weedon was full of interest since it included an aqueduct which runs over a road. I did not like it though, having to dodge the dead rabbits and a badger floating in the canal.

At Bugbrooke we were aware from media coverage



Braunston



Kayak on boat to go through Blisworth Tunnel

that this section of canal was patrolled by a thug swan called Tyson whom had been known to attack boat users. Sure enough we saw a swan behaving aggressively ahead of us as we paddled through. It must have been Tyson. Fortunately it was probably too early in the morning for him to take us on. This was a relief since I had left my gum shield and boxing gloves at home.

We paddled for the next 9 miles without a break until we arrived at the next challenge – Blisworth tunnel. This tunnel is the third longest waterway tunnel in Britain at 1.7 miles. After our Braunston tunnel experience there was no way that we were going to attempt to paddle through it. After waiting a few minutes we managed to hitch a lift off a canal boater who placed our kayaks on the roof of their boat. The journey through the tunnel took us around 40 minutes and gave us time to reflect on the paddling miles ahead of us.

After the tunnel we had a late morning full English breakfast at the Boat Inn in Stoke Bruerne. This was a most attractive canal location since the Grand Union ran through it like a High Street. It was full of ice cream tourists probably attracted by the Canal Museum. We had no time for museums though since we had more locks to tackle.

There were 7 locks over a ½ mile distance at Stoke Bruerne. This was tough - military style marine training toughness. The carrying and lifting of the kayaks in and out of the canal was making the adventure more of a weight lifting rather than a paddling challenge. The bacon and eggs in our stomachs gave us much needed energy.

The paddle after Stoke Bruerne was enjoyable since there were plenty of canalscapes to take our minds off the tiredness such as the Ouse aqueduct. At this aqueduct one minute we were on the waterway and the next it felt we were in the heavens. There was only a narrow edge from the aqueduct to prevent us falling into the River Great Ouse below.

There were no locks for the next 14 miles, just lots of interesting bridges. We came across a few drunks as we paddled through the suburbs of Milton Keynes but we managed to find a safe camping spot inside Milton Keynes Marina. It was 7.30pm.

We had mega delicious mountain of potato, pork, turkey, sausage and vegetables in Peartree Bridge Inn. However, the post-mortem was about to start whilst we watched Arsenal play on the TV in the pub lounge....we had only managed to paddle 26 miles.

We reviewed the miles left and the considerable number of locks which were grouped together over short distances and the penny dropped - there was just not enough hours left in the final two days to get to London by Friday 23 August. We were both happy to paddle through the night without sleep if it meant that we could get to London by the Friday but the number of flight locks that we still needed to navigate past made it a physically impossible challenge. The dream of seeing the golden banks of the Thames was gone. We reckoned that we were probably short of time by about 1 ½ to 2 days.



Ouse Aqueduct





Morning breakfast at Milton Keynes Marina

Nathan came up with a plan B of finishing our challenge on the Aylesbury Arm of the Grand Union which was 25 miles away. It was close to transport links to get us back home on the Friday. We went to bed with heavy, tired hearts.

Day 4 – 22 August 2013

We had a lie in our tents today and awoke at 6.50am. The previous night I attached one end of a rope to my kayak and the other end to my ankle. This was intended as a security device in case anyone tried to walk off with my kayak as I slept. Fortunately, I did not get pulled out of my tent during the night!

I cooked a breakfast on my camping stove on the wall of the marina and then we were off at 9am just as a fisherman arrived to set up his rods in our camping spot.

The canal from Milton Keynes to Fenny Stratford passed through open country for 4 miles. It was a pleasant paddle through the canalscapes despite the rain. It was fortunate that there was only one lock on this canal section. We were certainly sick and tired of the locks now.

We stopped in the afternoon for a burger, egg and fries lunch at a canal side pub called The Three Locks at the Soulbury Locks. Nathan used this time to book a car rental so that he could get back to Devon from Aylesbury. The real ale beers looked great in the pub but we acted like true elite athletes and refrained from temptation.

The journey continued through the urban environment of Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire. We were interrupted briefly by a BBC news reporter who interviewed Nathan for his views with regards to an incident concerning a blind woman who had fallen into the canal when walking her dog. Apparently a passerby did not attempt to help her. This sounded like a shocking event for the lady who fortunately managed to swim out despite her blindness. What type of society do we live in when people are not willing to help another person fighting for their life? It does make you angry.

The locks started to occur more frequently at Cheddington. The cut on my toe was now making walking a very painful and difficult experience as we carried the kayak around the locks. Or how much we wished that a plane would drop a dam buster bomb against the locks so that we could have an easy paddle through the Grand Union! This part of the Grand Union was fairly isolated which may explain why the Great Train Robbery took place near here in the 1960s.

At Marsworth Junction, which was full of boat repair workshops, we beared west towards Aylesbury. There were again a considerable number of locks over a short distance at the top of the Aylesbury arm. We pushed as hard as we could carrying the kayaks around the locks for nearly a mile until we made it to a lock by Gudgeon Stream for 9pm.

We set up tents for one last night by Gudgeon Stream. The trickling sound of water gushing through the small gap in the middle of the wooden lock cleared our minds for a good night's sleep. The trip was nearly over.



Stoke Hammond Lock

Day 5 – 23 August 2013



Aylesbury Canal

We were up at 5.30am. Though there were only 5 more miles to get to Aylesbury we had learnt from a walker that the canal was closed somewhere along the Aylesbury Arm due to a collapsed wall. We therefore wanted to make an early start just in case we had to walk the final distance.

The final hours of paddling were probably the best. This stretch of the Grand Union was a paddling dream of rural tranquillity and peacefulness as we journeyed intimately with nature such as carp, pike, dragonflies, kingfishers, herons, ducks and peacocks. There was also masses of pond weed that we had to paddle through which surprisingly helped to calm and clear the mind. Our aches and pains were now forgotten. However, the peace of the canal was soon broken when we reached Buckland lock. The whole section of the canal and

towpath had now been blocked off by a barricade of 15ft high wire fence. This made navigation through the canal impossible. We could hear the industrial sounds of busy workmen on the hills of the canal. We would not though be turning back; we had a plan....

We passed our inflatable kayaks over a barbed wire fence into a field, jumped over this fence, walked 10 meters to the front of the barricade and then passed the kayaks back over the barbed wire fence. It was incredibly slippery wearing just flip flops and I fell over a couple of days bruising my legs. However, Nathan came off much worse when the barbed wire pierced his groin area which must have really hurt by sound of his screams – ouch! He seemed more concerned though about the rip in his shorts than the pain that he must have been in.

The paddling from Buckland continued to be delightful in its setting as we past farm animals in the fields and went under narrow bridges. As we left the countryside, we began to enter the last few miles of the trip on the outskirts of Aylesbury. We had calculated that the distance from Birmingham to Aylesbury was 97miles. To make it 100 miles we paddled 20 times between the last two locks for an hour. Many canal walkers looked at us in bemusement as we repeatedly went up and down this section of the canal. Little did they know how far we had travelled.

The end of the canal was in sight as we past the final lock – a red brick office building. We reached our final destination at the end of the canal basin in Aylesbury at 11.38am.

There were no crowds to greet us in Aylesbury but that did not matter. We had journeyed 100 miles in inflatable kayaks in 4½ days despite the locks. I've not heard anyone say that they have paddled that sort of distance when there are over 100 locks involved in that time.

It had been a tough journey, both mentally and physically. The journey had at times been more of a weight lifting challenge rather than a paddling one but somehow we got through it. We had seen the world in which we live in a different light. Nathan had been a great paddling companion and I certainly could not have completed this trip without him.

It would have been fantastic to have made it to London but the distance was just massively unrealistic to achieve in only 5 days due to the



Pond weed on Aylesbury Canal





Nathan and myself at Aylsbury Canal

number of locks involved. I will not therefore be too hard on myself!

I was really impressed with my Advanced Frame kayak, both its rigid shape which made it cut through the water easily and its toughness. I paddled it comfortably for a long distance, carried heavy gear in it, dragged it, bashed it against the canal walls and not once did it show any signs of failing. A brilliant kayak.

On arriving home I recalculated our miles and realised that we had actually completed 102 miles even without taking into account the extra miles that we had paddled along the last section of Aylesbury canal.

So, what next? Well I am currently reading a book called "The man who swam the Amazon – 3274 miles down the world's deadliest river." Now the Amazon would be an exciting challenge for my

inflatable kayak. The Amazon may be full of piranhas, river pirates and tribesmen with machetes but there are no LOCKS.

Now that would be a paddling dream....

© Ryan Hooper 2013

Day	Canal section	Miles	Locks
1	Birmingham	2.5	5
1	Solihull	6	0
1	Knowle	5	5
1	Kingswood	5	0
1	Warwick	6	23
1	Royal Leamington Spa	4	0
	Stopped by Bull Bridge	28.5	33
2	Royal Leamington Spa	1	4
2	Stockton	5	14
2	Napton	7	3
2	Braunston	5	7
2	Bugby Wharf	5	7
	Stopped near bridge 24	23	35
3	Bugsbrooke	6	0
3	Gayton Junction	3	0
3	Stoke Bruerne	3	7
3	Yardley	6	1
3	Milton Keynes	8	0
3	Fenny Stratford	0	0
	stopped near bridge 89	26	8
4	Fenny Stratford	4	1
4	Soulbury	6	5
4	Linslade	5	4
4	Marsworth/Aylesbury Arm	4.5	14
	Stopped at Gudgeon stream on the Aylesbury Arm	19.5	24
5	Aylesbury	5	7
		5	7
	Total for kayak adventure	102	107