



You need to be aware of the current going into locks

Current accounting



Will taking a course on river boating skills improve your cruising confidence? We joined one on the Nene to find out

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY NICK WALL



Gauge boards at bridges (below) let you know if you'll pass underneath



wood. The Freeman is an interesting craft for those who are used to narrowboats; it has a Ford Escort 1300cc petrol engine, a wheel, throttle and separate gearlever, so at times you have to do the one-armed wallpaper-hanger trick with one hand on the wheel, one on the throttle and your foot on the gearstick. It feels as light as a feather after a narrowboat and is lively to steer – and it's good fun.

It also has an air draft of 2.1 metres, a fact drummed in by mentor Andy from the get-go because, of course, river water levels rise and fall, but bridges don't. While many rivers have plenty of headroom under bridges, you can't bank on that on smaller navigations – and not far up the Nene from our starting point of Hardwater Mill, near Wellingborough, there was a particularly low one.

To tell whether you'll make it underneath without unintentionally removing some of the roof furniture, gauge boards by bridges tell you the height of air draft available. So lesson number one on rivers, particularly the smaller navigations, is to know your air draft and check the board before going under. As the river was reasonably high some careful checking took place and Jeremy, who's a strapping chap had to duck...

Almost as soon as we passed through the bridge (had another boat been coming we

Guillotine gates might look intimidating at first, but they are straightforward to use

would have waited because boats travelling downstream on rivers have priority) we were faced with one of the Nene's guillotines. Locks on this river and many others are left with the downstream gates open so that the river can continue to flow by cascading over ▶

There's no doubt some boaters don't like the idea of rivers. The fear of the moving water, weirs, channels and different locks simply puts them off. And that's a shame because river boating adds a whole new dimension to cruising.

We're often asked "how different are river skills, and is it worth going on a course to learn them?" The answer depends on what

Trainer Andy Newman wrote the *Inland Waterways Helmsman's Course handbook*

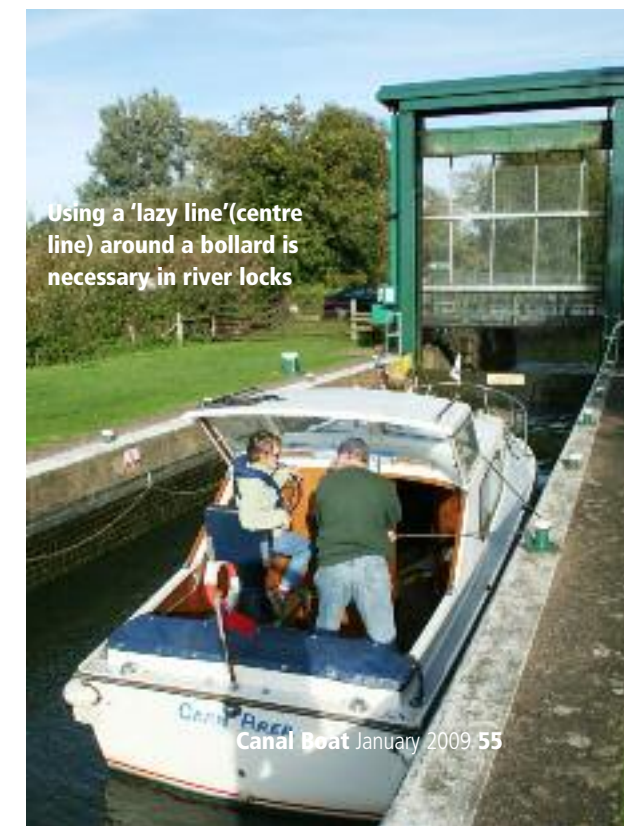
type of boater you are. Some are happy simply to give it a go and learn as they 'go with the flow', while others prefer to get experience from a seasoned hand.

With that in mind we joined Willow Wren Training's Andy Newman and two students, Jeremy and Clare Coleclough who were in the process of buying a new boat, for a day on the River Nene to see what tips and tricks were to be picked up.

The Nene in Northamptonshire is an interesting river, ranging from

wide open stretches of meadowland where you really do have to think about the sweeping effects of crosswinds on a boat, to tight twisty sections that require concentration to stay in the channel. Plus, there's a reasonable current to learn to handle and plenty of guillotine locks for those who have never experienced them.

The 'rivers' part of Willow Wren's RYA Two-Day Inland Waterways Helmsman's Course is carried out in a Freeman 23 cruiser (dubbed the Springer of the rivers) and follows the first day spent on a narrowboat on the Oxford Canal to give students a more rounded waterways experience. But the lessons are much the same whether a boat is fibreglass, steel or made of



Using a 'lazy line' (centre line) around a bollard is necessary in river locks



You must stay clear of overfall from upstream gates



Wide entrances make lock entry easy

◀ the top gate and flowing out of the bottom one, which is handy when you're going upstream because the lock will be set for you.

While most of the locks on the Nene now have electric guillotines, there are still some hand-operated ones (they are gradually being replaced) which means turning a very large wheel to raise and lower the heavy metal gate. This lock was a hand one and Andy asked with a smile if I'd lower the gate – 120 turns later, I understood his smile...

Apart from the difference in gate design (the upstream end has standard mitred wooden gates with paddles, called 'slackers') there's no special trick to guillotine gates. They might look daunting at first, but apart from opening them slowly initially (the electric ones have a built-in delay as you open them) to avoid a sudden drop in the lock level, all you need to do is ensure they lift fully to provide adequate headroom.

Inside the lock, though, unlike a canal where you can initially put the bow against the top cill, you need to stay as near the centre as possible to keep clear of the overfall from the top gate which can be spectacular when the river's running high; a centreline (a lazy line in river talk) is a must to keep you stationary against the lock side. In larger locks on bigger rivers you might need bow and stern lines.

Currents on rivers are curious things – they can make life difficult, but they can also be a big help. For us the Nene was in a relatively benign state with a flow of some 1.5mph which meant mooring-up to reset the lock after going through was easy – simply keep the power on gently against the current until the last moment as you come alongside the



Wheel takes 120 turns, electric is easier!

lock landing. Jeremy and Clare, who had both been boating before, looked as if they'd been doing it for years.

Mooring when going downstream, of course, is a whole new ball game because the

current wants to whisk you straight past the bollards. Here it's all about thinking well ahead, positioning your heading for the mooring, not going too fast, and then letting the current help you gently coast in – a touch of reverse before the bow touches and you're there. It helps to have someone ready to nip smartly ashore with the lazy line to take a turn around the bollard and hold the boat before the stern tries to drift its way out.

As mooring is easier going upstream, you can make your life a heck of a lot easier and safer when stopping for the night going downstream simply by turning the boat and mooring against the current. On the subject of stopping on rivers, Andy reminded us that a point often forgotten is that because they are a natural feature, generally with no towpath, easy mooring places can be few and far between on some rivers so you need to plan journeys with that in mind.

The twisty section of this part of the Nene, quite apart from being an attractive piece of waterway, is also relatively narrow and offers a good demonstration of ways to follow the channel. We all know the inside of bends can be shallow on canals and that's doubly true ▶



Instruction is all hands on for Clare and Jeremy



Channel markers guide you away from weir streams

◀ on rivers due to the current pushing up a shoal, so you really do need to follow the channel on narrow navigations. Andy had some tips here: avoid calm, slack-looking water, it's probably shallow, and if there's another boat ahead, follow its propwash bubbles because they will follow the stream where the channel runs deep.

Going downstream around bends presents another challenge – with a decent flow it can be a little like skiing downhill with the steering or rudder feeling lighter and twitchier as you skid and slip around corners due to the current's push.

For a really tight bend, Andy advised approaching slowly, tucking the bow into the inside (but not the shallows) early, then powering the stern around the outside with a surge of power and a lot of rudder. If the bend is one of a series of hairpin bends (common on rivers) then to avoid excessive build-up of speed, follow the turn by a touch of reverse to slow you down as you straighten up prior to the next bend; that might sound counter-intuitive, but to everyone's surprise it worked.

One thing you don't often get on canals is side currents, but on rivers you certainly do.

Where tributaries and weir streams flow into the river there will almost certainly be a side current.



Concentration is all, especially if you're used to a tiller

The trick here is to simply see it coming and be prepared for the effect it will have on the boat, which might mean laying off your bow slightly towards it so that the current effect drifts you back on course. As Andy pointed out, they can also be used to help you to steer a longer boat around a tight bend. If, for instance, a weir stream is on a bend, angle the bow into the sidestream and allow the inflow current to bring the bow around, follow that with a tweak of power to bring the stern around and straighten up – simple. It's worth remembering, though, that the stronger the current the faster you need to go to get the best steerage.

Weirs on rivers worry some people, but provided you stick to the channel and follow the markers, usually an arrow pointing in the direction you should go, you shouldn't get near them: normally the upstream end will have a barrage across it to stop myopic boaters from taking the wrong route, but do give barrages a wide berth if you are able to so that you don't get drawn onto them.



Barrage blocks off upstream end of weir channel

Certainly on this trip no one worried at all: we saw the barrages (which were easy to skirt) and the open end of the downstream weir channels, but never the actual weirs.

Overall we spent six hours on the Nene picking up the tips and tricks of river boating and there's no doubt that both Jeremy and Clare were better boaters by the end of it: when we returned downstream both were

handling the boat and river confidently and skilfully – which perhaps answers the question about river courses. For once you're confident, it opens up a whole new world of cruising. **CB**

COURSE NOTES

THE RYA'S INLAND Waterways Helmsman's Course is for anyone wanting to cruise the UK's inland waterways or Europe's lakes, rivers and canals. It assumes no prior knowledge and is ideal for first-timers, but more seasoned boaters will still learn plenty of tricks and tips. The course includes deck work, handling lines and fenders, knots, securing to bollards, rings, cleats and mooring stakes, boat handling, recovery of man overboard, personal and boat safety, engine care, locks, 'defensive boating' techniques, bye-laws and local regulations and care of the environment.

To find a course centre near you, log on to www.ryatraining.org



Follow the current around bends to keep to the channel