

## Travelling slowly is best

Posted by Peter on 16 June 2009



Boat on a canal near Worcester. Picture by [juggzy\\_malone/flickr](#).

We have more about canal boats in today's podcast.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the [boatyard](#) to find our canal boat. One of the staff took us round the boat, to show us how things worked. Then he gave me the keys. The boat was ours, for the next week, at least. The first thing you learn about an English canal boat is that it is slow. It is, in fact, almost the slowest form of transport you can think of. Small children riding bicycles overtake you. People walking their dogs on the towpath overtake you.

Perhaps you think that sailing a canal boat is easy. It must be easier than a car, you think, because it goes so slowly. Wrong. Sailing a canal boat is difficult.

To start with, there are no brakes. "If you want to stop," the man in the boatyard told us, "you put the engine in [reverse](#)." OK - I put the engine in reverse. The boat [takes no notice](#). It keeps going forward. In a panic, I increase the engine revs [ie I made the engine go faster]. Gradually, the boat slows down, and eventually stops. It takes me about 50 meters to stop a canal boat travelling at walking pace. Amazing.

Then the trouble starts. You can only steer a canal boat if it is going forwards. If the canal boat stops or goes backwards, it goes where it wants to go, not where you want to go. Generally, the canal boat wants to [drift](#) in front of a boat coming the other way. If there is no boat coming the other way, the canal boat will probably want to drift to the side of the canal where it will [run aground](#) in the mud. You then have to spend several minutes pushing the boat off the mud.

Now, suppose you want to turn the boat round, to go the other way. Turning round is no problem in a car. However, the canal boat is 15 meters long, while the canal is only 10 meters wide. You need a special wide bit of canal, called a "winding hole", to turn the boat round. You look at the map. No problem, there is a winding hole only 5 kilometers down the canal. Then you remember. The canal boat will take an hour to travel 5 kilometers.

You sometimes hear car drivers say that "parking is a nightmare". They know nothing. They should try mooring a canal boat. ("Mooring" is the proper word for parking a boat). First you have to stop the boat. Then you have to persuade it to move towards the bank and not towards the middle of the canal. Everyone on the canal boat, except you, the driver, has to jump onto the canal bank. You throw them ropes to tie the boat to the bank. The ropes fall in the canal. You pull them out of the water and throw them again. A group of people

## **Travelling slowly is best**

*Posted by Peter on 16 June 2009*

watch with interest as your helpers make the boat fast. (The word "fast" has two completely different meanings in English - generally, it is the opposite of "slow"; but sometimes it means "cannot move". So, if I "make a boat fast", I mean that I tie it to the bank with ropes so that it cannot move. English is a crazy language!)

The people who built the canals liked to [play tricks](#) on canal users. A favourite trick is to put a canal bridge just before a bend in the canal. That makes it impossible to see whether another boat is coming the other way. Another trick is to make some bits of canal so narrow that two boats cannot pass each other. When you find a narrow section, you have to stop (if the boat is in a good mood), and send someone to walk along the towpath with a mobile phone, to phone you when they can see that there is no boat coming the other way.

But at least there are no traffic jams on the canal, you say. Wrong. At busy times, you may have to wait an hour or more to take your boat through a set of locks. But it is not like a traffic jam on a motorway. On a motorway, you sit in your car getting more and more tense and angry. You look out of the window at other drivers who are also getting tense and angry. But on a canal, when you find a traffic jam, you park - sorry, "moor" - your boat and go and talk to the people in the other boats. You swap stories about your adventures on the canal, and then help each other take the boats through the locks.

In a week on the canal, I think we travelled 60 kilometers. It is good to travel slowly. You relax and notice things which otherwise you might not see, like the wild flowers on the towpath and a [heron](#) standing completely still in a field. At night, we moored in peaceful quiet places, and in the morning the singing of the birds woke us up. We met several people who live on the canal permanently. They call themselves "live-aboards", because they live aboard their boats. They have a simple life, because there is no room in a canal boat for many [possessions](#). Some of them make souvenirs which they sell to other people on the canal. Some of them stay in one place for most of the time. Others move their boat to somewhere new every day. The "live-aboards" think they are the luckiest people in the world. What do you think?

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=466>,