

TRAVELS WITH HAWTHORN

Athlone jetties in winter

Photo: Giles Byford



Giles Byford reflects on one of those 'I learned a bit about boating from that' moments, offers his views on safety improvements needed in Athlone and a suggestion on the proposed changes to the canal bye-laws.

It's an odd thing how, even on a quiet loch late in the season, life on the river never ceases to deliver surprises.

The light was fading and supper was about to go on the table when we first heard the shouting. We listened for a while, and when it didn't stop, I got up and pressed my face against a porthole to try to see what was happening. I see a hire boat off our starboard side, and its crew is shouting to a tender just near an island beyond it. Unable to work out what's going on, or if there's any urgency, I went into the wheelhouse to get a better look and, hopefully, work out what's going on. The tender has three men on it, but I can't make out the language, or understand what's going on. So I join in and shout at the hire boat, and they reply the men need rescuing. The hire boat has no

tender of its own, and I know the island has rocks around it. Rather than risk having to deal with a much larger vessel aground, I tell the hire crew I'll go and help. I put on my life-jacket, and motor over in our dinghy. There's nothing unusual at this point, and I fully expect to be back long before my meal's cold. Seeing me on my way, the hire boat starts to head off.

The stranded boat is a small, moulded plastic tender of the type often towed behind hire boats, and I'd assumed the reason I couldn't understand their shouting was because the men were foreign nationals. They are, and they're absolutely hammered with drink. I struggle to make out their slurred words, and it takes a while for them to explain their outboard's packed in and they've no oars. There's also the additional problem of a fourth crewmember somewhere on the little island, and he's refusing to get back on board. Having taken in the state of the men in the boat, this is a relief. I tell the man ashore to stay where he is, that once I've got the tender back to their hire boat on a nearby mooring, I'll shoot back and pick him

up.

Our dinghy is flat bottomed and, while I'd prefer to have the tender alongside for stability, experience has taught me trying that will only leave us going round in circles. So I take the bow rope I'm handed, pass it round our outboard, and very gently set off. The three slump in their seats – one in the bow, another amidships, and the third astern. Only two of them are wearing lifejackets. By the time we're half way to our destination there's no more talking, and they all appear to have fallen asleep. And that's the problem: the guy in the middle slowly slumps to starboard, and instinctively reaches out to steady himself on the gunwale. Which makes the boat tip, and his two companions slump sideways. They reach out for the same gunwale and, without a pause or a wobble, the little boat instantly turns turtle.

I pull our outboard's kill cord and drop the tow. Somehow, and he does it so quickly I almost miss it, the man without a lifejacket clammers atop the upside down boat now drifting towards me. He then leaps aboard

our dinghy. He's moved so fast I half expect him to still be dry, but he isn't, he's wet through and shaking with cold. Another man swims to us, and we drag him aboard. The third man has very different ideas: despite the water being very cold – it's only 11 degrees – he's determined to right the tender, and get into it. The arguments start. The men with me (and I - though I remain silent) think this is a bad idea, but he won't come to us, and there's no way I'm going to start our outboard with him in the water. So there's a stand (or should that be swim?) off. It's completely bizarre and, having seen what's happened, the hire boat that was leaving has turned and is heading back. Its crew is shouting offers of help. They've a boarding ladder, but it's over the prop, and I've no idea if the crew know of the dangers involved in trying to use it. I ask them to hold off. Finally, the man in the water makes the mistake of getting within reach: the man nearest me grabs one of his arms, and I grasp the other.

The man we're hanging onto isn't happy to have been captured but, taking my lead from the man next to me, I'm not going to let go. So there's a second stand off: we won't release him, and he won't agree to being dragged aboard. For now he's safe, but I can't start the outboard until we've pulled his legs well forward of the propeller. Finally we're able to get moving, and we very slowly make our way towards their mooring, with the man in the water creating enough drag for me to need to have the engine at almost full lock. Thankfully, help arrives: there's another boat on *Hawthorn's* mooring, and the man on it must have been watching what was going on. He's brought his own RIB out and is offering assistance. While very relieved to see him, I'm now close to getting the wet (and considerably more sober) boaters home, and the guy on the island isn't in dire need of rescuing. I also know recovering the now drifting boat is going to be hellish difficult with my little dinghy, so I'm happy when our helper takes the turtled tender in tow.

He's still towing it back when, having delivered the three men to their hire boat's swimming platform, I roar over to the island. The man on it seems to be in shock, and it takes a little cajoling to get him into the dinghy. I sit him directly opposite me, and



keep hold of his lifejacket until I'm able to pass his care to his colleagues. The few minutes I expected to be away for have stretched to over thirty. By the time I get back to *Hawthorn* it's dark, and my supper is cold.

I have to put my hands up in making the mistake of assuming the little tender was much more stable than it later proved to be, after all four men had somehow made their way to the island on it, but I've learnt from the experience: next time, and doubtless there will be a next time, I get involved in what appears to be a relatively minor matter I'll be much more cautious about making assumptions, and much more demanding about doing things the way I think is best. But, as something we've learnt over this winter illustrates, you never know what being on the water might present you with.

ATHLONE JETTIES

I wonder how many of us who use the council mooring jetties in Athlone are aware that there aren't any ladders a swimmer, or more likely a faller, could use to get out of the water. It's an odd anomaly, for the rest of the safety equipment – there are numerous life-rings, and even long poles with generous loops of steel attached – is all here, and regularly checked by the council. We've wintered on the jetties, and have only good things to say about the location: the town centre's just a few minutes walk away, as are - and not having a car this is a major bonus - trains to Dublin and Galway and buses to the airport. But we are now very conscious that the water is running at quite a pace and, even if the cold doesn't do for us, if

one of us were to fall in the chances of getting ashore are remote. And we keep our dinghy inflated and ready to go just in case. Before writing this, I did ring the council employee responsible for Health and Safety, and was reassured that he'd recently been made aware of the absence of ladders, and that allowances were being made to install new ones in 2014's budget.

CANAL BYE LAWS

Being aware this issue of *IWN* is likely to feature a lot of commentary on the changes proposed to the canal bye laws by Waterways Ireland, I'll limit myself to commenting on what I consider to be a daft suggestion, namely the imposition of 'five day mooring' on miles and miles of empty canal bank. Which, given the day you leave your boat counts as the first of the five, means you're going to have to be moving again within four days. This just isn't going to be achievable for all but a tiny minority of fortunate live-aboards or retirees, and if enforced will surely damage the pleasure of spending a lazy few months wandering the canals. While I know suggesting the English might have a better way of working gets the goat of some Irish friends, I will point out that, with the exception of the particularly pressured and popular short lengths with 48 hour restrictions, it's permissible to leave a boat in one place for up to 14 days on the English canals. It's a system we lived with for over a decade, I know works well, and I can see no reason why it wouldn't work here. Given that this may already have been decided by the time this is published, I can only hope some pragmatism has been applied.

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