

Inland Waterways News

Weirdos (and Weirdon'ts)

Eoin O Brolchain

Back in February 2001 we were walking along the Barrow towpath near Graiguenamanagh. It was a very pleasant walk but we couldn't help noticing that the river was moving faster than us. "Wouldn't it be great just to relax and drift down the river," said Deirdre, and so the idea was born to organise a canoeing trip.

We told Charlie of **Go with the Flow** that we wanted to explore the Barrow at a fairly relaxed pace; he suggested an itinerary that involved about 4 hours paddling per day. All that was left was to organise a few friends and to book a couple of B&Bs. (Bringing tents was suggested but seemed just a bit **too** swallows-and-amazons-ish.)



Consequently six intrepid explorers met in the Manor House in Bagenalstown on the evening of Friday 4 May, to be ready bright and early on Saturday. The level of experience was varied but only two of us had shot weirs before. To steady the nerves we decided to have a pint or two. This seemed to work quite well and it was agreed that the steadier the nerves the better, particularly in an unsteady canoe, so more steadying was done.

Consequently breakfast was a bit subdued but we headed up to Milford, just below Carlow, to meet Charlie. He provided us with three Canadian canoes, lifejackets, wetsuits and dry barrels for our gear. A quick bit of instruction ensued and then we were off — for about 50 yards, until two canoes got stuck on some rocks. It was far enough away that we couldn't see Charlie's face but definitely close enough for him to see two of his precious canoes being manhandled over the rocks. Anyway five minutes later we were off — again.

The first weir was fairly small but slight trepidation was felt by all. We manoeuvred around trying to find the best place to shoot it, when one of the canoes went too close and got swept over backwards. This had two major advantages. One: we got to see the looks on Anthony and Tabitha's faces as they went over, and two: since they made it down safely, we felt that following them down forwards was relatively safe.

We had a short journey to the Lord Bagenal where we had planned to stop for lunch. Anthony discovered that getting out of a canoe on to a jetty designed for cruisers is much harder than getting into one which is secured to a riverbank. Still, all the wedding party at the Lord Bagenal enjoyed his impromptu swim enormously. All credit to the Lord Bagenal: the manageress came out specially to offer the use of their showers and clothes dryer.

After lunch we had a relatively short trip with two more weirs down to Bagenalstown. We had some fun trying to get the canoes out of the water as the bank is extremely soft and muddy: Paul ended up waist deep in mud. We eventually got out at the lock and padlocked the canoes together. We stowed the rest of the gear in the yard at the Manor House and trooped gratefully up to our rooms for showers, food, beverages etc.

On the Sunday, we found that the locals' habit of abandoning their cars while they are at mass was a bit of a hindrance to car shuttling, so we started off a bit late. We headed down to Goresbridge without incident except having to get out and push on one of the weirs where we all got stuck. I had found the weirs a bit daunting but, as most fisherman could have told me, the weir's roar is much worse than its bite. We freed the canoes easily.

We arrived in Borris without incident; Paul insisted on pronouncing the town name in a strong Russian accent. We had booked rooms in **The Step House**. First impression: walked into our room, which was fully decorated in Georgian style with high ceilings and 4-poster bed. The landlady made us feel extremely at home and within five minutes had memorised our names and breakfast orders. It was getting on for 9.00pm by the time we were all washed and rested and to our dismay the one pub that served food was no longer serving. However, the other pub had no hesitation about letting us bring chips in to go with the Guinness. What more could you want?

Monday was to be our last day. We made detailed plans to organise the cars so that Anthony could go straight on from St Mullins and the remainder of us could go back to Dublin. Paul, myself and Ian were let out at the canoes to get them ready and the others went to shuttle the cars. I had no sooner remarked that there was nothing better than boating to teach you logistics when we discovered that we hadn't got the keys for the chains on the canoes. We went running back to the car park to discover that the other three had gone — in only two cars. This meant that all the shuttling would have to be repeated at St Mullins. It had all seemed a lot clearer at 2.00am!

Over three days we had gone from "Oh no, not another weir" to "Hope the next one's not too far away". The last leg was great as there are more weirs and white water. It's also the most beautiful stretch of the river, with slopes covered in deciduous trees. Whoever said there are only 40 shades of green must be colour-blind!

Aside from getting a bit of water in the boats, there were no major incidents and we cruised serenely into St Mullins in time for a late lunch. Charlie had organised with Mulvarra house that we could leave the gear there, along with the padlock keys. So we bid a fond farewell to the canoes beside the bank, had some sandwiches and pints and headed on our respective ways (after the car shuttling of course).

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