



TAKING IT SLOW

Back in 1998, **Mike Trippitt** cruised 69 miles of the River Great Ouse in a single day. This year he returned for a more relaxed exploration

Above: Passing under Engineers Bridge at Bedford.

In the early hours of Friday 19th June 1998, I set off from Bedford Town Bridge, witnessed by a committee member of the Great Ouse Boating Association, to cruise 69 miles of the River Great Ouse, from Bedford to Denver, in a single day. The date was selected as it was as close to the summer solstice as possible, to minimise the hours I would spend travelling in the dark, and the journey was verified by GOBA with then-chairman Sid Fisher confirming my arrival at Denver Sluice at 9.18 that evening.

The cruise took me a total of 17 hours and 18 minutes, and required passage of 16 locks, all but one of which was unmanned. Dubbed the Midsummer Challenge, I had conceived the idea to raise sponsorship money for the RNLI. Although a one-off in aid of a good cause, even at

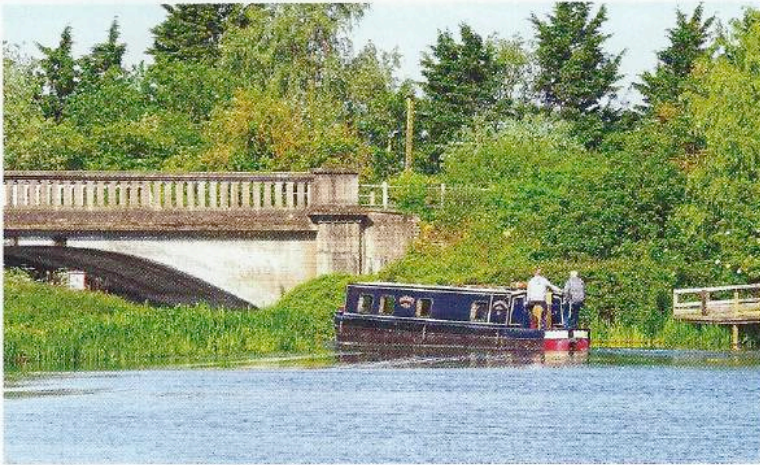
the time I realised that to navigate the river in such a short period was to miss the point of it. Bedford to Denver is ordinarily a comfortable four-day cruise, and this summer I decided on a long-overdue return visit to enjoy it to the full.

Great to be back

As well as the opportunity to explore the Great Ouse and its environs at a more sedate pace, I was also interested to see whether it was still as unspoilt and rewarding a route as I remembered. For my late '90s trip I had used a GRP cruiser – a Seamaster 27 called *Sea Bird* – but this year I opted for a 47ft narrowboat, *Merlot*, kindly loaned by Chris and Phil Wenn of Ely-based hire-boat operator Bridge Boatyard. Back then I had left Bedford at 4am, but for my 2017 cruise I set out at a much more leisurely 9am. With the boat chugging

Below: Mike at Great Barford Lock in 1998 with *Sea Bird*... and in the same location 19 years later with *Merlot*.





along, the sun bursting through a green canopy of willow trees and petrichor filling the air, it felt great to be back.

The riversides of Bedford are delightful, with the scenery remaining rural right into its centre. An increase in the height of the guillotine-gate at Bedford Town Lock means larger craft can now access the town, but, other than for the popular, bi-annual Bedford River Festival, few vessels appear to venture this far upstream.

The stretch of river from Willington Lock to Great Barford Lock is certainly a good deal more overgrown than I remembered it, and while one view is that this is dangerous, for me the maturing flora adds further to the river's charm and mystery. Nevertheless, in some places, where reeds and branches really obstruct the channel, two cruisers cannot pass safely and care is needed.

Lock upgrade

The 12 locks from Cardington to St Ives have all been upgraded since *Sea Bird* and I passed through them two decades or so ago, with the character of St Neots Lock having changed more than any other, due to it having been extended and a residential development built around it. Nonetheless, it remains a very attractive spot.

All guillotine-gates at locks are now electrically operated, which not only saves a good deal of effort but a built-in delay reduces the risk of damage to the lock or boats when they are filled too quickly. Inevitably, locking times are increased slightly, but to grumble about this would be churlish. After all, I was no longer partaking in my marathon cruise.

It is noticeable that landing stages have improved over the years too. Non-slip surfaces, ample bollards and longer pontoons make for a simpler and safer mooring experience, while an abundance of fencing and warning signs further illustrate the Environment Agency's commitment to health and safety. However, EA does seem to be overly keen on signage. It is hard, for example, to understand how a sign warning of a drop is helpful when the drop itself is much easier to see. Some observers might regard



Above: A narrowboat on the Old West River.
Above right: Useful signposts?



signposts at each confluence as a waste of money too, as navigators have managed without them for generations.

Fewer boats on the move

Cruising through Cambridgeshire's meadows and pastures, I couldn't help feel that the river has changed little. Some moorings have disappeared, others have been created, and the marinas and boat clubs largely look the same. It is only when I considered how the river is being used that I really began to notice a difference.

This became apparent at Hartford Marina, which used to be the domain of the fibreglass cruiser. Now narrowboats rule the roost, a fact confirmed to me by Peter Swinson, who has moored his Fairline Mirage cruiser there since 1985. "Back then, the boats were mainly day-boats and wooden and GRP cruisers," Peter told me. Now, most people at the marina have narrowboats and wide-beams.

EA records show that the number of licensed craft on the river has increased by around 400 since my 1998 voyage, and its lock traffic and vessel length data also suggests a rise in narrowboat numbers. In spite of this, I saw few moving boats of any kind on the 29 miles between Bedford and St Ives – one or two hire-craft, perhaps, and around seven or eight privately owned plastic and steel boats.

Stationary at St Ives

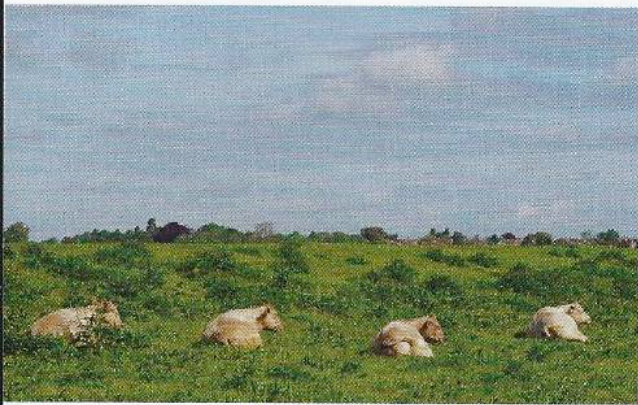
When I arrived at St Ives, I had the opportunity to find out more about cruising habits on the river from Alastair Gray, brokerage manager at Jones Boatyard. He has seen the marina expand from 100 to 170 berths since 1998 and annual boat sales increase from 100 to 150. In spite of this, he says that the number of customers that actually use the river is "astonishingly low".

"When I first started, the car park would fill up on Friday and the marina would empty, with berth holders spending

Below left: Mike and Merlot at Bedford.

Below: St Neots Lock has changed a great deal over recent decades.





Above: Cattle on the banks of the Old West River.
Top right: Approaching Ely.
Right: Passing through Ely.
Far right: A hire-boat at St Ives.



the whole weekend out using their boats. Now the car park starts filling up on the Saturday, and by Sunday it is full, but so is the marina. The boats are all hooked up, with TVs, microwaves and every other facility under the sun. People are coming down to their boats, experiencing the environment, but not necessarily cruising."

Due to heavy rain over the previous two days, the river level below St Ives Lock had risen several inches overnight and was still rising as I set out on the second day of my trip. I was concerned that by the time I arrived at the last, and only manned, lock at Earith I would not be able to get through due to the high water level. A delay would be unwelcome as *Merlot* had to be back at Bridge Boatyard by Sunday. Thankfully, I made it through Hermitage Lock, but only after a 45-minute wait as the lock-keeper had to attend to a faulty lock elsewhere.

Onto the Old West River

Once downstream of Hermitage Lock, the Great Ouse becomes the Old West River until its confluence with the Cam at Pope's Corner. Although flat, the Fens countryside is just as appealing as the rolling slopes of Bedfordshire, with livestock grazing at the water's edge and birds of prey surveying the banks from above. Here, more than anywhere else on the river, liveaboard communities dot the landscape, due in part to the modest mooring rates in the region.

I entered Ely mid-morning on a sunny Saturday to find it humming with activity, as motor cruisers, narrowboats, canoes and rowing boats plied its waters, and walkers, cyclists and anglers made full use of its riverbanks.

Changes at Denver

Continuing my lock-free passage through a landscape that appeared unchanged from my 1998 visit, I arrived at Denver where there has been a significant alteration – a new lock giving access to the Relief Channel. This extra 10½ miles of navigable waterway, which provides a direct route to King's Lynn, opened in 2001 and can accommodate two 70ft narrowboats.



My outbound journey came to an end at Denver and on this occasion it had taken 22 hours, spread over three days. But of course, there was no longer any need for me to make haste, and it was gratifying to find that the river was just as unspoilt as all those years ago. Cruising cultures may have changed since then, but whether it's three days, three weeks or three years, there could never be enough time to explore all that this superlative river has to offer.

Above: *Merlot* coming alongside at Denver to complete the journey.

BRIDGE BOATYARD

Founded in 1972 by Chris and Phil's father Ken, the Bridge Boatyard originally produced fibreglass day-boats and motor cruisers, which it sold and hired. It now has a hire fleet of 12 GRP cruisers and four narrowboats, and also operates four additional narrowboats on behalf of Black

Prince Holidays. *Merlot* is one of the latter – a 47ft cruiser-stern narrowboat powered by a 37hp three-cylinder Canaline engine and offering accommodation for four people. The boat has a full-sized oven and grill, electric toilet with holding tank, microwave, TV and shoreline connection.