



The sheltered waters of Cardiff Bay

Watchet to Gloucester

You can sail the Bristol Channel, River Severn and Sharpness Canal all the way to Gloucester – but you need careful passage planning, as local sailor Bob Hitchings explains

Sail to Gloucester? But Gloucester's inland, surely? True, but it is served by the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal which was built in 1827 to take ships into the heart of the city, avoiding a dangerous stretch of the River Severn. It's possible to take a sailing boat right up the canal as the only lifting bridges are at the entrance to Gloucester docks themselves. All other bridges swing and are handled by bridge operators who, in most cases, still wind them by hand. Once in the canal there are no other locks.

We were starting our summer cruise to Gloucester aboard *Jazzical*, my 1983 Sadler 26, and we – me, my wife Fran and our border collie Jessie – left Watchet Marina

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bob Hitchings is a retired teacher who has been messing about in boats since his father presented him with a canvas canoe on

Christmas Day when he was 11. He keeps his Sadler 26 *Jazzical* at Watchet Marina.

five minutes after the sill dropped.

We headed out into the Bristol Channel where the seas, normally short and choppy, were, well, short and choppy. The weather was good with a westerly Force 3, so with the sails set for a beam reach we headed due north. With three days before the spring tide the current in the Bristol Channel would do the rest and easily allow us to make 8 knots towards Lavernock Point 15 miles away. With luck we would be able to make the final couple of miles to Cardiff on the slack tide.

We rounded the Rannie port-hand buoy and Penarth Pier came into view. It was from here in my childhood and youth that we caught the White Funnel Fleet paddle steamers, *Cardiff Queen* and *Bristol Queen*, for jaunts to Weston-Super-Mare, Ilfracombe and once to Lundy. Sadly these fine vessels have now long gone, although the paddle steamer *Waverley* makes an occasional trip down memory lane and the MV *Balmoral* does regular trips up and down the Bristol Channel in the summer.

At the Outer Wrack cardinal we called Cardiff Bay's Barrage Control on Ch18 to request a lock in. Directed to lock No2 we

headed down the buoyed channel to the outer lock pool and, once inside the towering lock, we made sure to tie a good bowline to resist the Niagara Falls that cascades through the gate when the sluices are opened.

A night stop in Cardiff

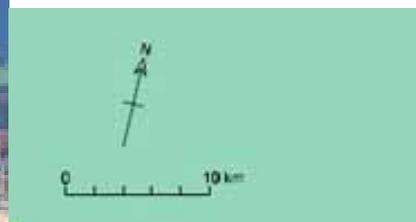
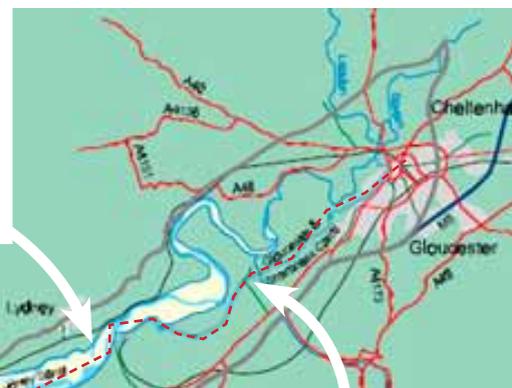
The passage plan was to overnight in Cardiff, then to Portishead and on up the River Severn under the two grand bridges to lock in to Sharpness and motor gracefully to Gloucester, stopping overnight on the canal. It would be easily possible to go straight to Gloucester from Sharpness without stopping, but we fancied a canal holiday for a change.

There are plenty of marinas and clubs to visit in Cardiff Bay, but we generally stay at Cardiff Yacht Club because it is only a 10-minute walk to Mermaid Quay with its range of pubs, restaurants and shops. If you leave the club for the bright lights of Mermaid Quay you'll need a key to get back in, and these can be obtained from the bar for a deposit.

You can either walk to Mermaid Quay or sail to one of the parking meters on the pontoons. Here is also home of the Welsh



Jazzical tucked up in the harbour at Lydney



Fran and Jessie on the Sharpness Canal



Locking through the barrage into Cardiff Bay



Jazzical moored on the Gloucester & Sharpness canal

Assembly, the Millennium Centre Concert Hall and the wonderfully gothic Custom House. A walk around the perimeter of the barrage takes you past the *Dr Who* Experience, the Terra Nova memorial commemorating the departure of Captain Scott on his last voyage in 1910, to see the locks from land and perhaps a salmon or sea trout leaping up the salmon ladder.

Cardiff Bay is fed by the Rivers Taff and Ely: there was a time when I used to fish the Taff, and it was so black with coal dust that it was rumoured the fish wore mining helmets. The port was then a tidal mud flat, but in 1999 the barrage was completed and transformed the area. Mines closed in the Welsh Valleys, the Taff cleared and it is now a clean, vibrant river. You can take the water bus return to Mermaid Quay, but don't leave it too late – the last one is at 4.30pm.

Heading for Sharpness

The next morning we locked out at 0800 to get the tide to Portishead, from where we intended to travel up the Severn to Sharpness. There are some unpleasant sandbanks in Cardiff grounds which are

best avoided, and then you need to follow the various buoys of all types up the river to Portishead. Watch out for shipping movements to and from Avonmouth which can appear surprisingly quickly. You might need to anchor for a while in The Hole outside Portishead while awaiting the lock into the harbour.

All the harbours in the Bristol Channel and River Severn, apart from Cardiff and Swansea to some degree, are subject to tidal gates usually giving about 2-2½ hours either side of HW. Portishead, Cardiff, Watchet, Swansea and Padstow have locked or gated access to their marinas, and a locked marina is being built this year at Porthcawl. The other harbours dry out and boats need to take the ground or lie alongside.

Sharpness has a very restricted lock-in time and vessels are advised to arrive within 15 to 30 minutes of high water.

This means that the leg of the passage from Portishead has to be carefully planned to allow for this. It is necessary to book ahead by 24 hours – which can be done from Portishead – and to pay lock dues for Sharpness, which costs £25 each way.

Now came probably the most interesting and exciting leg of the cruise, from Portishead to Sharpness through The Shoots and under the two bridges which cross the Severn. We left Portishead three hours before HW, aiming to arrive at Sharpness about half an hour before HW as recommended by Peter Cumberland in the excellent *Bristol Channel and Severn Cruising Guide*.



It was a blustery day and the sky was grey and lowering, which gave a keen sense of drama as we approached the first bridge





ABOVE Gloucester Docks **RIGHT Fran's artistic interpretation of the docks**

under engine. We picked up the current known as The Shoots which sped us along at an amazing 11 knots under the first bridge, which is the new Second Severn Crossing. After then passing under the original upper suspension bridge the channel takes a sharp left then right turn and leads into the beautifully-named Slime Road. The western bank is wooded, but the eastern side is dominated by Oldbury Power Station.

Follow the channel buoys

There are some interesting little lighthouses on legs as you cross over and run up the western channel to Sharpness. On the whole the channel is well buoyed and Cumberland gives clear pilotage instructions. Soon we were radioing the friendly Sharpness lock-keeper to alert them of our arrival, and before long we were through the lock into the inner basin.

This basin is dominated by old silos, warehouses and cranes, and straddling it is a Meccano construction of a swing bridge. This is still hand-cranked by two men, who are probably glad of the fact it only opens nowadays to let through vessels with a mast, of which we were one. I don't know if the crankies welcomed the exercise!

As we reached the canal proper the sun came out and allowed for a relaxing cruise along the first part of the canal, which runs parallel with the river, and from here we could look out across the flats. A half-mile or so above Sharpness is a tower marking the eastern edge of the railway bridge across the Severn. This was destroyed in 1960 by two out-of-control barges laden with petrol which collided with the bridge and caught fire.

There are 18 bridges on the canal and eight of them have classic 19th century bridgemen's houses. We stopped at a canal-side pub for lunch – not the only time we did so – and a few miles later moored up near a swing bridge for the night. Not all

mooring spaces on the canal have bollards or rings, and it is wise to take a couple of long stakes to drive into the ground. There is no current to speak of and springs are not necessary, although we found that the canal shelved nearer the bank and we ran aground in several places (*Jazzical's* draught is 1.2m) before we found one to take us. A gangplank would be a useful addition.

The next day we headed on to Gloucester. We saw no other sailboats but plenty of canal barges, and we sounded a horn as we approached each swing bridge to alert the keeper who would then wind it open for us.

Radio ahead for the first large swing bridge at the last of the small canal bridges and be prepared for a wait at the swing and lifting bridges on the main roads into the docks. The approach is through some dilapidated – though still picturesque – old warehouses and dock buildings.

Gloucester Docks is a delight, and has been very tastefully restored. The warehouses have been converted into

living accommodation, shops, museums and several eating and drinking places. It is a short walk from the Gloucester Cathedral, museum and town centre.

You will need an Environment Agency Waterways key to use the toilet block, and this can be purchased for a few quid from the lock-keeper at the Severn lock.

Heading back downstream

On the return it is worth timing your exit at Sharpness so that you can spend an hour or more wandering around the dock area. It is still a commercial undertaking and, though not on the scale of days of yore, it has a working dry dock and small ships still unload coal, timber and other bulk cargo, so there are things to see.

Lydney was our next stop, about two miles almost directly across the river. Again, it is necessary to give up to 24 hours' notice of arrival. The lock-keeper was ready for us, and although the departure from Sharpness was in a terrific rainstorm the entry to Lydney was in bright sunshine! The river runs very fast past the entrance, which makes navigating the entry into the lock quite fun.

Lydney is another old port, though no longer trading, and the lock basin has been converted into a visitor's quay.

There are showers by arrangement with the local yacht club.

Lydney town for eateries and shops is about 1½ miles away, and en route you pass the main-line station and the Dean Forest Railway. Buses from Lydney will take you to the Forest of Dean and Chepstow with its ancient castle. Fran had to leave here and got the train home, leaving me weatherbound for several days. I ventured the 10-mile walk to Chepstow then caught the train back: it was a fine evening, and I watched some salmon fishermen wading out to a sandbank with poles and a net before settling down for a well-earned whisky.

Eventually the rain stopped, as it always does according to Mark Twain. I locked out of Lydney with help and advice from the harbour master. The return downriver is a breeze, and you can comfortably make Portishead or Cardiff on one tide. 



Useful information

CARDIFF BAY

www.cardiffharbour.com

PORTISHEAD QUAYS MARINA

www.quaymarinas.com/Marinas/PortisheadQuays/

GLOUCESTER & SHARPNESS CANAL

For a short-term canal licence, go to the website <http://canalrivertrust.org.uk> and follow the links 'Boating' and then 'Licensing', or tel: 03030 404040

FOR SHARPNESS DOCKS

<http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/sharpness-port> or call Sharpness Pier Head, tel: 01453 511968

LYDNEY DOCKS

Harbour master, tel: 01684 864388, VHF Ch37. For charges, lock times and useful numbers, go to the website www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/recreation/130929.aspx