

The Wardington Rules of War. Further explorations of the Upper Cherwell. Dom Murphy

The A 361 is one of those roads that seems to pop up in unexpected places in various parts of the country, but the section I know best is the stretch between Daventry and Banbury. Coming down the hill from Chipping Warden to Wardington affords a view of a lovely old-fashioned patchwork of small fields, and in the middle of them and defining their boundaries, the Cherwell. A glance to the side as the road goes over the river at Hay's Bridge brings the inevitable thought, "I'd love to paddle that".

Mentioning such thoughts in the presence of Chris Jones has consequences. Consequences that found me standing by a riverbank on a cold, grey April day, having just stopped the freezing East wind from blowing my spraydeck across the road.

We launched at Trafford Bridge on the Aston to Culworth road. This lovely old bridge and its predecessors must have seen some sights in their time. Not only is on the Welsh Lane, one of the oldest of the drove roads, and far older than the Roman roads, but it was the site of a battle in the Wars of the Roses in 1469. No skirmishes when we were there, apart from a brief fracas between a pair of ducks, and we zipped underneath on a surprisingly wide bit of river.

The first mile or so was a delight. Water deep enough to get a full paddle stroke in, and wide enough for two boats abreast, no obstructions apart from a very low girder bridge which even Jonesy decided to portage. The reason for the unexpected volume of water became apparent when we rounded a bend and found a dam forming the eastern end of a large ornamental lake at Edgcote House, home of the Courage family. The river disappeared off to the right over a weir. No chance of shooting with a four foot drop into about three inches of water, so it was a tricky portage onto the narrow lip of the dam, then down through some pretty woodland and back onto the river.

The next section was tortuous. The river now was much narrower and much shallower. There were numerous sections of stony shallows which barely contained enough water to float a boat. If they'd had more water in them they'd have been rapids, but after jerking, scraping and hauling our way over the fifth of them, we decided that "crapids" was a better description, so crapids they became.

We eventually reached Home Farm at Edgcote, where the overflow from the lake fed back into the Cherwell, which made for a nice few yards of whitish water. After that, the river regained a bit of depth, and picked up speed. An old arch bridge at Edgcote was chocked with wood and other debris, which took some time and a little ingenuity to get through. This was the first of three pretty bridges taking footpaths and farm tracks over the river – really good construction and pretty as a picture.

The river now cut deeply into the sandy banks and sheltered us completely from the wind. On almost every outside bend there were kingfisher holes bored into the top of the cliff, and water vole holes at the bottom. Chris encountered a kingfisher coming round a bend – hard to say who was the more startled.

Lots of meanders now, and the river widened out into a beautiful stretch which was sheer joy to paddle, especially when we caught sight of the A361 and all the poor car-bound saps whizzing along it whilst we were out paddling. Hay's Bridge soon came in sight, and a sturdy sight it was too: a good thing with all those pantechnicons rumbling over it on their way to and from Appletree. The bridge's two arches provided a bit of fun, with pursuit races and other fooling around. Then onward to the weir at Hay's Mill. There was unfinished business here. This was the weir which had thwarted us in our upstream explorations from the club – only about two feet high, but sheer banks either side – nowhere to get out and portage up it. Going down was no problem of course, unless, like me, you got the nose of your boat caught on a rock. I sat there for a while enjoying the sensation of water filling my cockpit before wriggling free.

After this, we were on familiar territory; twisty, turny, plenty of obstructions to battle over, under or through. We had to climb out of the boats for a few, but we never touched the river banks, so technically not portages according to the Jonesy rules. Chris made four additions to his collection of rescued plastic ducks; refugees from the Chipping Warden duck race, presumably. He'll soon have enough to start a rescue centre. I bet bath night is fun.

Back to the club, a change of clothes, then a walk over the footpaths back toward Trafford Bridge. At Wardington, we came across a strange plaque in a field:

Many *gwomes* have, through ease of temporal access, found themselves locked in nearly constant battle with their neighbors. Relatively evenly matched, the casualties mount and mount. So, in the case of the *gwomes* between what is now the Thames (then the Aosekan Channel) and the Wheel of Faith (the essentially pie shaped *gwomes*, all theocracies, centered near linear Leeds), a truce was declared (by agreement, different *gwomes* take credit on different years for suggesting it) and solutions discussed.

What they concluded was that a form of high-powered tranquilizer should be used in battle, so that soldiers would not be killed. However, if you experienced that incapacitation, you were dead to your people. Any attempt to reconnect, even eye contact or a wave, would lead to instant death and the slaughter of your whole family. Instead, you were exiled to a *gwome* that did not border your former home (and there were complicated rules and negotiations for this) with nothing but what you had on you. Collectively, these agreements are known as the Wardington Rules of War.

Turns out that some weird American guy, several sardines short of a tin has constructed an entire fantasy world which he's called Kymaerica, and has placed these spoof commemorative plaques at various sites around the world. Deeply strange, and a peculiar end to a lovely morning's paddling.