

Three Hours of Sit-down Comedy

Waterside A 27 February 2011

“A man who is tired of portages is tired of life”- Samuel Johnson

“ I can resist everything except soft wet black gritty mud”- Oscar Wilde

“What’s your name- Huckleberry Finn?”- Gary Harper

“I’ve got hypothermia in my feet”- Isla Johnson (no relation)

“You like trees, don’t you?”- Colette Johnson (related to Isla but probably not to Samuel)

And another thing Colette said was, “that water’s a funny colour”. Well yes it was grey-green, and all the rivers and canals we’d crossed on the way to Great Bedwyn were brimful of brown liquid, but the Kennet and Avon looked OK to me, just normal wavy reflection of clouds, grass and trees thinking about spring. I scooped a handful out, beautifully clear. Chalk country, isn’t it?

Colette and Helen had planned to do the Watersides and Thamesides together, but Helen had to pull out because of an injury. I’d planned to do the races in K1 (“you’re mad”, said Kathryn, “mental” said Becca). In a rare light bulb moment, I asked Colette if she’d like to do Waterside A with me. So there we were, getting in the Toucan under a bridge, with a few minutes to spare before the stampede of four hundred paddlers. We had been out once before, in a Condor about a year ago. Practice? Training? Who needs them? Er, maybe we do. I got in the back; Colette got most of the way into the front, and looked distinctly uncomfortable. Those boats aren’t called Toucans ‘cos two can fit in them, not without messing about with the footrest, so we went for Plan B. Me in the front, not recommended, ask Ray! “There’s a sort of stick thing between your feet,” said Colette, “you have to wiggle it to make the boat go round corners”. We wobbled a lot, paddled slowly away, wobbled a bit less, put in a very cautious turn, and proceeded gently towards the start line. It was a bit disappointing, I’d been hoping to learn a few Northumbrian swear words, but all we got was “****”, very much Bog Standard English.

The start was a most civilised affair. In some of these events, it’s like a race just to get on the start line. This year people had been given set times to book in and to start, so we didn’t have nervous paddlers hanging back and bullies shoving them aside. We got away in the middle of a group of three K2s, and gradually became more confident as we got used to the balance of the boat.

Being in the front was a novelty, we kept finding ourselves inexplicably entwined in willow, alder and hawthorn, hence the comment about trees. It used to get on Ray’s nerves, I think, especially going down a wide river, hugging the bank when the fastest flow was out in the middle. Put it down to a misspent middle age playing a video game called Scramble. The idea was to pilot a plane through a city, over skyscrapers,

under overhanging cliffs, between enemy aircraft, dodging bombs and flak and collecting fuel by zapping fuel dumps. I got quite good at it, nothing like the teenagers who had more leisure time and brain cells, but the hedge-hopping and tree-surfing became a habit on the water, too. Not such a good idea, because even on a canal, the middle has deeper water, so is faster. Well, I sorted that problem out, and we were going quite well for a few miles, then Colette had trouble with a shoulder. She was following my stroke, difficult as my natural rate is much slower than hers, but also I don't get the paddle high enough, especially on the left side. She was unconsciously doing the same dodgy stroke. So I tried very hard to put in a symmetrical, higher stroke at a faster rate. Must have made some difference as she got more comfortable and there was more banter from the back of the boat. Going past a mansion in Hungerford: "Hey Chris please will you buy me that house?" "Sure, would you like the one next door as well?"

Men in white coats will tell you that after the age of sixteen your brain cells start to die off and it gets more difficult to learn new facts or skills. If you believe that you'll believe anything. More like it's a case of use it or lose it. OK so we'll never be quite as good as Ben Brown and Ivan Lawler, but that's no reason not to try to improve our performance.

So we need to sharpen up our portages. Colette says she wants to lose two stone and learn to run. Me too. With better portaging technique we could have knocked at least half an hour off our time. What we did for this race was, I got out first and either held the boat or helped Colette out on to the bank and ran (oh all right then, did a fast walk/slow jog) along the lock. Then I got in first and held the bank. I learned a lot about the structure of those banks. Even where there's a nasty overhang, there is always a gap somewhere between the woodwork and the concrete and if you shove your fingers in hard enough, the boat keeps still. That wet gritty mud was useful, too: I found I could claw my way into it, like a little kid squishing plasticine, and that gave a very useful grip.

And what of the other paddlers? Sometimes we kept up with other boats on the water, getting the occasional wash and friendly conversation, but they always pulled away from us at the locks. Isla and Dom overtook us after a few miles and finished in a little over two and a half hours, not shabby. It was her first long race and Dom doesn't rate himself as a long distance man. Their kit was an interesting shade of brown as both had fallen foul of the mud with Isla going flat on her back early on, and then the pair of them doing a sort of horizontal cakewalk during the long portage of Dun Mill Lock. Tasha and Becca came past a bit later, with the happy smiles of people who love what they are doing and are quietly confident about it. As for the twins, well, as they flew by I yelled "Quick! Get on their wash!" They had the grace to smile. I can do brute force and ignorance, but those two have efficiency and elegance. We finished in about three hours; they did it in two. We feebly struggle; they in glory shine. You get the picture.

Under the Newbury bypass the canal was choppy for no obvious reason. Jeremy from Tonbridge, who had exchanged friendly greetings with us as he overtook us, was floundering about doing slap supports. "Power through it!" I yelled. When we got to the same place, suddenly it was all lurch-wobble-slap. "You told Jeremy to paddle through it and now you're doing slaps!" So, you have a problem with hypocrisy? Near

the low bridge in Newbury a K2 came past. "That is a fast boat," I observed. Colette seemed to find that amusing. "What's the joke?" "That is Ben Brown and Ivan Lawler".

It's possible to learn from listening to other K2 crews. A bloke about my age was saying to a young lad in front of him, "Don't force the pace, save some for later". That is the Law of Conservation of Energy, makes sense to me. At a portage a front admiral of maybe sixteen was yelling at his partner, "you're not following me, you need to do what I do!" only less politely. I nearly asked him, "Does that include shouting and swearing at your mates?" Some of these guys should only do K1. Then they can be captain, engineer, stoker, navigator, lookout and helmsman all in one and if something goes wrong there is only one person to blame.

We made it to Newbury, tired and wet, from rain and sweat, not the unthinkable. It's always a pleasure getting changed into warm, clean dry clothes. In what other sport, somebody asked, could you share a corner of a freezing cold car park with a world champion?

Isla and Dom seemed undamaged but slept most of the way back to Banbury. As a graduate of the Huck Finn School of Sartorial Elegance I can assure you that wandering around barefoot in the winter can be quite soothing, especially if you have painful blisters on the tops of your toes. As for Colette, here is a quote from her e-mail: "If you want comedy value you should have a photo of the bruises on the inside of my legs, not quite sure where from but I guess from my love affair with wooden lock planks and little white bollards."

Thanks to everyone for a splendid day out, not forgetting Chris who did the driving and kept appearing at locks brandishing giant chocolate buttons in our faces. Who's up for Waterside B?

Chris Jones 28 February 2011