

Some Tales from the Barges



A few years ago, I saw an advertisement on Crewseekers for a skipper of an activity barge on the Caledonian Canal. As I do not pay to be a member of Crewseekers any more, a quick internet search revealed the name of the organisation, as there were not too many barge operators on the Caledonian Canal in those days. Caledonian Discovery was the name of the operation and they had two barges, Fingal of Caledonia and Ros Crana, both much larger vessels than I had skippered before, being approximately 130 foot and 140 foot respectively.

As is my usual modus operandi, I had emailed the company to offer my services for holiday and sickness cover, and had received a reply from Martin, the Principal, suggesting we meet aboard Fingal. I met the barge when it was on one of its weekly trips and went through a few boat handling exercises, including a manoverboard by the Williamson method. Martin offered me the job of skipper for the season but I explained that I was not looking for a full time role, only a few weeks, at most.

So for the past few years, I have been skippering, mainly on the Ros Crana, for two to six weeks every year.

Ros Crana was the second barge Martin acquired and converted, and is 44m long with a 5m beam. She fills up the locks on the canal, from end to end and across half the width, although in her original form, as a working freight barge on the continent, she was 3m longer. This extra length was removed by cutting it out of the middle and, if you look carefully enough, you can still find the weld where she was put back together. One of her big advantages over Fingal, is a 360 degree bow thruster which, if used properly, can make her move sideways and help with other difficult situations.

The following are a few of the passengers who made a bigger impression on me although all the people I have met on the barges, have been unfailingly pleasant and polite.

The Professor

Quite a few years ago, early on when I started on the barges, I was skipper for a week's "Classic Cruise", which entails trying out all the activities on offer, walking, cycling, canoeing and sailing. After the first couple of days, I noticed that one of the passengers was not joining in any of the activities, but rather sitting on board reading a book whilst the others were off the boat. On the third day, I noticed him sitting alone in the dining area, reading, and went over for a chat. After a few pleasantries, I asked if he was enjoying himself and he replied that his wife was the one who wanted

to join in all active pursuits but he was quite content, indeed, even happy, to be reading and enjoying the tranquillity. When we got round to what he did at work, he explained that he was a professor whose main topic of research was giraffe placentas. From what little I was able to understand, this had something to do with how giraffe placentas related to dinosaurs but, even today, I am still pretty vague on the subject. In any event, it was a complete conversation stopper. What could I say in reply? Anyway, we got on fine and said our goodbyes at the end of the week. It was only after telling this story to someone else, that I was given a different slant on the event. This person suggested that, as he wanted to enjoy the peace and quiet, he might have said what he did, just to shut me up and get rid of me. I agreed, it was a possibility.

The Bargee

In 2018, I only skippered for a couple of weeks of Classic Cruises aboard Ros Crana, but I was privileged to meet Joop, a Dutchman who had made a very late booking. He was extremely keen to help with all aspects of the barge operation and during the course of the week, I discovered why. Joop, who, I think, was in his seventies, had been brought up on working barges and fitted the definition of the Scots word, *thrawn*, being short, fit, muscular and determined. Large families often occupied the living quarters in the stern of these vessels, with a hydraulic derrick used to lift a small car on, and off the aft deck. After growing up and skippering his own barge, he moved on to be an instructor in barge school. He spent many hours in the wheelhouse with me, swapping stories and experiences. It was a little daunting as it sometimes felt as if I was one of his students, especially when I heard muttered comments of good, after a tricky manoeuvre successfully executed. He did, however, teach me how to properly hold the mooring lines in order to be able to lasso the shoreside bollards, a very useful skill on a boat with high topsides. When he left the barge, he said he was off to Finland to help deliver a yacht to somewhere in Europe. Another one with salt water in his veins.

The Commander

During 2019, I was skippering another Classic Cruise and one of our passengers was very keen to help and spent quite a few hours in the wheelhouse with me. Peter had been in the Royal Navy for 44 years and had achieved the rank of Commander at retirement, but still had the sea in his blood. A very nice man and I was happy to let him take the helm whenever he wanted although I reserved the more tricky manoeuvring to myself. We were chatting one day, in the wheelhouse, and I related to him a story I had been told by a Cromarty Boat Club member, so I asked him if he knew if it was true. The story involved the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, when it had made passage through the Pentland Firth, and it being the only place in the world where it had dipped its flight deck into the water. I thought the tale might have been apocryphal, to highlight just how bad a stretch of water, the Firth could be. However, the Commander knew differently and he told the story of when he was but a lowly Lieutenant, he had served aboard the *Ark Royal*. He was on the bridge for a passage through the Firth and, before entering the treacherous waters, the Captain had called on the navigator for a course, which was duly given with a recommendation for a speed of 10 knots. The Captain thanked the navigator and gave the order that this course be executed but with a speed of 20 knots. Not too long later, the ship did indeed dip its flight deck into the Firth and the Captain then turned to the navigator and said that his suggestion had been correct and ordered speed to be reduced to 10 knots.

Gwyn
14/10/19.