

# The Wye Invader



***Frank Barton (Skipper)***

*The Wye Invader*

*Hereford to Sharpness*

*November 2012 to March 2013*

*Skippers Log*



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## The Wye Invader

### **Wye Invader retreats after 23 years**

Twenty three years after completing an “impossible voyage” navigating from Chepstow to Hereford, the 230 tonne barge Wye Invader has done the “impossible” and returned downstream to Chepstow, the River Severn and Sharpness. The 38 metre barge had begun her journey in April 1989 and I, skipper Frank Barton and my business partner Pat Hucker, had sailed her from Plymouth to Hereford. It was a challenge and adventure I set myself back then to navigate the waters of the Wye, which had been neglected for more than 100 years and to show everyone that navigation of the Wye deserved to be resurrected, to have the rocks and man made obstructions removed, and to be enjoyed by the people of Herefordshire and its visitors.

The barge suffered a lengthy grounding period due to the severe drought in the summer of 1989. When I finally sailed her into Hereford on 12 November 1989, the plan was to breathe life back into her as a floating restaurant and tourist attraction, by the old Wye Bridge near the city centre. Planning permission was granted by Hereford City Council on 9 May 1992, but what was about to unfold in this rural county of Herefordshire was a coming together of local anglers and fishermen, which transpired into a 23 year legal battle in which they ensured that I lost the right to moor the barge in Hereford City. Up until 2012 the barge had been moored on the outskirts of the city where it had been since 17 March 1997.

Just to clarify, Hereford is a manor and Crown Land, an ancient law which covers land and its use within the manor stating that fishing rights belong to the people of Hereford, which meant that as a citizen, I had by law, every right to be moored on the Wye in Hereford City. I also had the backing of

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local business people at the time, Mr and Mrs Heign, who had built and opened the Left Bank restaurant for the same reason as I, to transform the river frontage and bring life to the River Wye. However, Hereford is a beautiful but strange place at times and things don't always happen for the good of the city. Sadly, after 23 years the Wye Invader had to return back to the Severn for insurance purposes as the bottom of the barge was due for maintenance. I spent the summer in 1996 dredging the Wye by the old bridge with friends, to try to remove a number of obstructions and debris, this was supported and paid for by the former City Council. I just hope one day someone will give the river the attention and transformation it deserves.

There have been some interesting and very memorable moments on my journey of the River Wye, which have not been for the faint hearted, but experience, qualifications and the successful completion of many training courses, do mean I have sufficient knowledge of sailing and navigating the River Wye, River Severn, and coastal waters, I'm not a novice despite what some people may think.

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### **Barge leaves Hereford mooring 2012**

***Monday 26 November 2012***

Today marks the final departure of the barge from its Hereford mooring, where it's been for more than eleven years. It's been a long and arduous journey in more ways than one to get this far and it's with some sadness it's now time for her to leave. However, it's a requirement that every so many years the barge is surveyed to check she is seaworthy, so I made the move off the mooring just above Rotherwas island (at the back of the Rotherwas Estate) to just below, with the assistance of Andy. By late afternoon the ropes were sorted and secured for the night and at 2200 hours we went for a pint at the pub.

The next day, Tuesday, at 0830 hours we visited Holme Lacy Bridge to check the water level to see if there was enough water but it was too high to get through comfortably. It was 4.25 meters above normal level, tomorrow it would probably be okay.

It was now Wednesday 0830 hours, Andy and I checked Holme Lacy Bridge and decided that it should be okay to go through on Thursday. That lunchtime on Wednesday at 1100 hours I briefed my crew of two on safety including the use of life jackets (no-one was to be on deck without one), a man over board 'what to do', mission, and admin. After a coffee, we discussed navigating the Bunch of Carrots corner, Owen's corner, the River Lugg, where it joins the River Wye, and the mooring above Holme Lacy Bridge. At around 1200 hours I started up the engine, the crew cast off, and we turned the barge just below the island. We had only just set off, Andy was on the bow rudder and half way round Bunch of Carrots corner the barge caught on the river bed, this could have



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been serious if the rudder had been damaged meaning it could be completely useless. We had to turn the boat to inspect the damage, which was no mean feat and fortunately it was found to be minor. We managed to lift the bow rudder into its position under the barge.

It's was now 1400 hours and we decided to carry on and go astern the half a mile to Owen's corner, which required us to turn a full 90 degree left bend. This was not a straight forward manoeuvre and it had taken a lot of practice previously to get it just right. About 100 metres downstream when the stern was about midstream with the bow just short of the bank, I select forward propulsion to slow the barge. Whilst doing this it pushed the stern into the corner of the right bank and with the engine ticking over in forward propulsion, the barge was held just short of the bank. I used the force of the river to turn the barge using the full river width to turn the bows in, I then powered on and we had passed the first serious obstacle. For the next two and half miles there were no more problems and the river was about 50 metres wide.

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### **Holme Lacy Bridge with 8 inches to spare!**

It was now about 1500 hours, we were now one mile above Holme Lacy Bridge and we could see the bridge across the fields to the right. It was time to turn the boat and find a mooring for the night, I put the engine prop into full astern to slow the barge down for half a mile, similar to applying the brakes on a vehicle, I put the bow into the river bank between some small trees and used them to hold the bow, allowing the river current to turn the boat. To keep the bow against the bank, the barge was kept in forward population until the turn was completed. We were now facing upstream and it was time to select astern population and she started to go astern dragging her bow down the left bank looking downstream, as planned. We moored the boat to a large tree, put the gang plank ashore and secured her for the night.

That night we undertook a further inspection of Holme Lacy Bridge but there was still too much water, we hoped it'd be okay by the following day. At 1730 hours we cooked a meal, had a few whiskey's and a coffee. By 2330 hours we were ready for bed, it was minus five degrees outside. In the cabin Andy claimed the bench seat and Paul ended up sleeping in the arm chair next to the wood burning stove. I got the back bunk because as the skipper there are a few perks!

I got up early at 0430 hours to check the barge was still secured to it's mooring. The moonlight shone and the temperature was freezing, everything was covered in frost, so I fetched more coal and wood for the fire then got back to my bunk. At 0800 hours I was up again and went down to the hold to put some water on the gas stove for a coffee and gave the crew a kick to say it's time for breakfast. It was still very

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cold with ice on the decks, the water in the fields had iced over too. Andy and I went to inspect Holme Lacy Bridge again and using a measuring tape there was eight inches to spare, it was too tight, so Andy suggested removing the barge cabin. We removed the cabin and this improved the air draft by four inches – yes just four inches but it would be enough!

That day we left the mooring to go up stream and we turned the boat on the left bank, looking down stream just above the River Lugg. This was to allow her stern to settle in the trees and hold her. By going astern against the bank the river current turned the barge for us, something I had learned through experience. As we completed the turn I had the power on for the half a mile down to the bridge, which improved the steerage on the approach to the bridge, and safely through the centre arch.

0930 hours on Thursday.

Today's adventure begins when we cleared Holme Lacy Bridge by just over 30 centimetre's, about 12 inches below the middle arch, that was the first bridge ticked off. There was still a lot of flood water in the river, a good two and half to three metres above normal level. We were about 20 miles from Ross-on-Wye and 36 miles from Symonds Yat, the next two miles were almost a pleasure to navigate, however, that was about to change!

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### **Fownhope corner tests our nerves!**

Just outside the village of Fownhope, the river turns through 90 degrees to the right and halves in width with trees overhanging from the left bank. The river also slopes left and, as we headed into the bend this in turn threw the barge into the bank, this was not good and on top of all this the river splits in flood and an island is formed on the right hand side. At this moment we were in the bend running parallel to the Fownhope Road, about 2 to 2.5 metres higher than the normal river level and in the tree branches. Andy was on the bow and dived for cover as a large tree branch came over the forward part of the bow and bounced up and along the deck hatch covers. It hit the deck in front of the wheel house, bounced up again and then came down into the wheel house between Paul and myself. We rolled out of the way and it disappeared over the stern. We got up on our feet just in time to set the barge up for the next right corner and cleared it with no problem – what a relief!

We were now on the last three to four mile run to the island at Ballingham where there are still remains of an old corn mill, the weir and lock site which unfortunately, form an obstruction most of the way across the river with the sluice down the right hand side. It was frosty in the shade and a blue sky overhead with the cabin off, so I stood ten foot above the river behind the wheel giving me an outstanding view, what a pleasure and a once in a lifetime experience I still remind myself.

1200 hours we were half a mile above Ballingham Weir and had to turn the boat to go down the sluice astern using our winch. Andy and Paul sorted the ropes to moor the barge, which would be at a mooring I found weeks ago when I was working out how to get past the island. We were about 500 meters above the island, I had slowed the barge to almost a

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stop and moved over to the right bank to start the turn. The bow touched the bank and we stopped for a moment, we were still in forward prop keeping the bows into the bank and the river started to push the stern out towards the far left bank and within 5 minutes we were moored up facing up stream. Paul got the coffee on and sorted a snack out, whilst Andy and I walked down the river for a final recce. After a short break I checked the engine and Andy and Paul removed part of the tree caught around the rudder.

At 1330 hours, we were heading astern towards Ballingham Island (the river was lower because of the weir) and I spotted a real problem. There were in my view only two options, to go over the weir, and for this we would need to have at least three metres of water above normal in order to clear the rudder safely without damaging the barge, the down side being it would smash the rudder if we could not clear it. There was also an air draft issue at Hoarwithy Bridge and the following bridge at Sellack, so we would have to wait about two or three days to lose water in the river.

Option two left us to go astern down the channel having to chainsaw some large branches that were in the way. The river should have been in a navigable state but sadly, no large vessels had been down the River Wye in more than 100 years to assist in navigation. This was our only sensible and safe option so we took it. I started the engine up and Paul and Andy cast off. We went astern keeping the bows just short of the bank, we got just above the sluice, about 30 metres from the stern, and we were almost in the entrance. I put her into forward gear and moved the bow to the bank with her stern just out from the bank. Andy used a ladder to get ashore with a winch cable and snapped it around the anchor tree. I eased off the engine and she started to go astern, Paul took the slack out of the cable, as the cable was released by Paul

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we then went astern until we got 20 metres past the entrance to the channel. At that point the barge started to go into the sluice until all 38 metres were in. By this time we had used 100 meters of cable wire rope, so it became necessary to secure the barge, rewind the cable, and start again. We went astern until we were about halfway down the channel which is obstructed by several large tree branches across it, at this point we had to cut the trees out of the way to finish passing the island. We had on board as part of the tool kit, an electric chainsaw so half an hour later at 1500 hours we had cleared the channel.

We had now passed Ballingham Island and we stopped for coffee to consider how to turn her to face downstream. We needed to turn so we that could go through the remains of the railway bridge forward, about 100 metres down the right bank we found an area of small bushes and trees on the bank to go astern into. I let the river turn the barge whilst the engine was running astern to hold the stern against the bank, which should have been straightforward with a few careful manoeuvres. However, we had made the turn 300 metres below the island to find the two outside arches of the rail bridge were blocked with fallen trees, so the only option was to go through the centre as the bows were facing downstream at a 45 degree angle. To do this I put the barge into forward gear with the wheel hard over and down the river we went. On the right there was a man and woman eating their lunch, so we said good afternoon, I think perhaps they could not quite believe what they were seeing – a 130 foot barge sailing past!

We were now just half a mile from Hoarwithy, the river was wide and flat with very few trees on either side. The bridge came into view and we knew we needed the same air draft as Holme Lacy Bridge, which was about one foot. I slowed the barge down almost to a stop to check the air draft by sight,

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we would almost drift through, I increased the speed when the bows were clear and that was bridge number two ticked off, we were now clear of Hoarwithy. It would be dark about 1630 hours so we needed to find a night stop just above Sellack Suspension Bridge. We needed 13 foot of air draft to clear this bridge but we didn't have enough room today, the sun was setting over Hoarwithy and Sellback Bridge was about one mile ahead.

We were just about out of the bend on the right side and spotted a large pile of rocks and concrete jutting out across the river, the barge was almost on top of it so we quickly went full astern put the wheel hard over port and just missed the rocks and I could see the bridge at Sellack half a mile in front. We had to turn her, so I checked we had enough width clearance, giving instruction to the crew, Andy and Paul to get the ropes ready. She slowed touching the bank and almost stopped, Andy tied a rope round a large tree as the river turned us. I put her into forward gear to keep the bow into the bank, we slowed down and stopped facing up stream. Andy informed me by radio that the bows were now secure and the ropes were in place.

All three of us walked to Sellack Bridge to measure the amount of clearance under the bridge, we needed more than 13 foot to get under the bridge. By the time we got back to the boat it was dark, the moon was just rising and it was freezing cold so we started dinner. Before we ate we put the cabin sides back up, the plastic cover on the roof, stoked the cabin fire and went down into the hold. Andy had got the food on, baked potatoes, tins of stew, and lots of hot coffee to wash it down. At 1930 hours we headed back to the cabin after dinner for a debrief on the day's journey and discussed the next leg to Ross. It was 2300 hours and after a few whiskies it was sleeping bag time.

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### **Clear Sellack Bridge with one foot to spare!**

#### ***Friday 0600 hours***

I checked the fire and topped it up and a few hours later at 0800 hours I put the coffee on, the decks were covered in ice and it was very cold, the crew decided to get out of their sleeping bags when the coffee arrived. Our next leg of the journey was from Sellack Bridge to Ross, about 14 miles. At 0900 hours we took the cabin roof and sides down again, checked the engine and gear box oil levels and water in the engine. By 1030 hours the ice was cleared from the decks I started the engine, Andy and Paul cast off the bow and stern mooring lines. Sellack Bridge was quarter of a mile astern, the engine was just warm at 80 degrees, so I selected astern population with 500 engine revs and we started moving down the middle of the river astern, towards the bridge just about river speed, I suppose you might say reverse steerage.

A lady walking her dog stopped on the bridge to take some photos as we cleared Sellack Bridge with one foot to spare, after the bridge I tried to turn the barge but it was not possible because the right bank had no trees and bushes or holes in the bank to go astern into. We went a further half a mile down to the next left corner and put her into the bank in reverse gear, we were now held by the bushes and the corner, letting the river push and turn the bows. We had completed the turn so I increased the engine speed to just over 1000 engine revs, Ross on Wye here we come! The next ten miles were a dream, as we went downstream the fields were covered in white frost, it was a beautiful morning with blue skies.



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Just above a place called Hole in the Wall, there is a sharp right bend where the river narrows. I set the barge bows at about 30 degrees across the river, which only required a small amount of rudder. As soon as I could see through the bend I increased her revs and put the wheel over to the right (starboard), the boat handled as though it was enjoying the day out. We were now on a one and half mile straight towards Hole in the Wall, which is the remains of an old mill weir, and an island with lots of large rocks in the river on the right hand side. On these long straight wide parts of the Wye we seem to be going fairly fast, what I tried to do was slow the barge whilst keeping on the desired course by every now and then putting the gear in reverse, operating astern population, but keeping the rudder in the same position. The river was still eight to ten foot above normal but steady it was not going down too quick which in turn allowed us to go over a lot of salmon cribs, large piles of unmarked rocks placed under the water by salmon fishermen to try and replicate holes in the river for fish to rest in. It's not until you see the river in summer that you realise how much rubbish there is in the form of unmarked underwater obstructions, a real nightmare!

As the barge got closer to the weir at Hole in the Wall I lined her up to go over it, we were about a third of the way from the right hand bank skirting past the large trees on the island. There were more large rocks under the water and the water course at this point had been altered to favour the fishing beat on the right bank. One of the local farmers stood in his field on the right gave us a wave, so we shouted good afternoon and he waved back again.

The next suspension bridge was coming up, we passed under it with one foot to spare, just a couple of miles to Ross. It was about 1300 hours, Andy checked the engine room then went

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down into the hold and put on the coffee while we were on the move, the coffee went down well. A wide right hand bend was coming up in the river and the river also started to speed up half way below the downstream side of the top bend. We could see the gradient of the river and how it was falling away and getting faster, this was not going to be easy. As the barge got closer to the top of the approaching bend I put her bows close to the right bank and started to move stern over to the left, so we could cut the corner, I then put her stern into the left bank with power on when I saw the exit was clear. We were almost out of the bend when the engine stalled, "O shit" I said, although I think I might have said something a little stronger!

I found out later that we had gone over a mud bank and the prop got stuck in the mud, which in turn stalled the engine. We had a problem, I tried to start the engine but it wouldn't start. There was no time to waste, we were in the middle of the river with no running engine, so I went down into the hold quickly and put the battery jump leads on from the eight KVA generator to the engine battery. I started it up and ran back up out of the engine room, pressed the main engine start button and hoped for the best - the engine fired up, by this time we were out of the first bend running down the left bank of the river under the tree branches. One large branch had just ripped off the safety rails on the port stern section of the back cabin, Paul and Andy dived for cover and I had no choice but to duck at the same time, then I put the wheel over to starboard, hard right hand down with some power, this gave us back control and 200 metres in front of us was a skew railway bridge over a sharp left hand bend.

We could only go through the second arch from the right bank, which was just over 10 metres wide. The Wye Invader is 16 foot wide and 130 foot long, the only way was to move

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her bows just over half way towards the left bank so were moving at 45 degrees across the river until we could see through the second arch, I put on the power which straightened the stern out to go directly through the arch. We were now one and half miles above the road bridge at the bottom of the M50 motorway, Andy and Paul got below to check for any damage. Andy reported that the gangway had come loose below apart from this, and the damage to the cabin, we seemed to be in good order.

Half a mile above Ross Road Bridge we started to slow down by going astern. We must turn just above the bridge, I could see that the right bank was okay to use to turn against, so I slowed her almost to a stop then put her bows into the bank, while Andy put a rope around a tree, the river current took the barge round while we were moored to the tree. Once we had turned, we went back up stream to a large tree on the left bank, I held the boat in gear facing up stream against the tree. We had now selected to moor for the night just outside Ross, whilst Andy and Paul secured the gang plank I pulled the stop on the main engine and went below to turn off the fuel, what a day!

Its 1545 hours, the three of us were stood in the wheel house with the cabin still down and the sun starting to sink over the horizon. There was still frost on parts of the banks that had been in the shade all day. Andy said "we need to tidy up the barge, remove the leaves, branches, and sweep around the decks, as we'll soon have visitors", "Yes okay, good idea" I said, "Make a list of what needs doing to tidy up" I added.

Later that evening some ladies from the rowing club came along for a chat. Just after, Andy came out of the hold and brought to my attention that there was a leak on the star board side just forward of the cabin. We investigated further

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and tried to find where it was coming from. That evening we went about fixing the leak using various rubber inner tube shapes and sizes, lots of soft wood wedges, and sections of angle cut to go across the floors or ribs. We cleaned the rubbish and grease from the location, welded a steel angle bar about 14" by 1½" across the boat ribs and placed a rubber patch over the hole and split areas. We put a wooden block 4" by 2" over the steel plate, which sat on top of the damaged area and hammered two wedges between the steel welded bar and 4" by 2" block to apply pressure and reduce the water leak. We checked the bilge pump was okay, it was time for coffee.

Andy cooked the evening meal in the hold, it was very cold by 1800 hours so we put the cabin up and a plastic cover over the roof and Paul lit the fire in the back cabin. Later I checked the leaks which had slowed down and the bilge pump was doing its job. It was time to retire to the back cabin for a debrief on the day and discuss plans for tomorrow, Saturday. A few whiskies went down a treat. 2330 hours it was sleeping bag time, there would be more fun tomorrow. At 0100 hours I got up to check on the leak and that the bilge pumps were working properly and cutting in about every three hours for five minutes, it was all was okay.

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### **Rule nine applies lady rowers!**

Saturday morning at 0630 hours I got out of my sleeping bag, put on a heavy duty fleece and walked out of the wheel house. The moon was still up and the trees and barge were covered in frost, it was quiet and cold. I climbed down into the hold to check the water level in the bilges for damage caused due to the barge grounding above Ross. The level was okay and the pump was still coping. I went back up after inspection of the hold area to a warm cabin, took my boots off and waited for dawn about 0730 hours. It was time to get up at 0800 hours and I went back below into the hold to put the coffee on, three large mugs for me and the crew to take back into the cabin. I woke them up to discuss the morning's agenda, and for breakfast to be started, which was down to Andy, he rustled up bacon sandwiches and more coffee. We heard a noise outside, it was the first rowers from Ross Rowing Club coming by, so we said good morning and waved. At 0830 hours Andy and I walked down the bank to the motorway access bridge on the approach to the M50, then to Wilton River Bridge. This was for a final recce before we moved down the river to pass under the bridge and then onto Symonds Yat by last light today about 1630 hours. I had spent many hours looking at the river bridge in flood to get an idea of how the river goes through the arches, this was one of those moments of 'will it or won't it'.

As we stood on top of the second arch from the right bank, we put our tape measure over the side to the river below to measure how much air draft there was in the arch. We had enough clearance to back the barge through so I reckoned it was on. We went back via Wilton roundabout and popped into the shop for a bag full of rolls, cakes and crisps to keep us going on the journey. It's a wonder the girl behind the counter served us, I think we smelt a little of 'barge' - wood smoke,

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diesel and just old Dutch barge, my hands were black with anti-burglar paint that had been painted on to stop the vandals damaging the barge over the last ten years it had been in Hereford. We walked back to the mooring, at 1000 hours it was almost time to start down towards Wilton Bridge.

The previous afternoon we talked to the people from Ross Rowing Club, we were told they would be on the river and finished by 1030 hours. However, at 1020 hours their crew passed us by on their way up the river which was not very sporting of them after we had agreed a time, anyway, we waited for them to come back down. Eventually they came back down with a safety boat, so we started the engine and warmed it up and then moved out to the middle of the river, I selected astern propulsion to put it into reverse gear. We started to go astern under power, the bows were about a third of the way out from the right bank looking down stream, we could see the river as it passed under the bridge down towards Ross. It started to turn almost through 90 degrees, just past Ross Rowing Club, as the wheel house got just past Ross Rowing Club the bows were half way out in the river and we were going around a right hand corner, the bows were coming into the landing area of the Rowing Club and started to move towards one of the four ladies with their oars still in the water, Andy shouted to the crew of the four "pick your oars out of the water ladies", by this time the bows were about two foot from the tips of their oars. One of the rowers told them to leave their oars in the water, Andy let me know the situation on the radio, I really had only one option, put on more revs to quickly increase the speed to get past the rowers astern or go into them. As I looked over my shoulder we were just passing a large tree sticking out into the river, we cleared the rowers moored boat so I put the barge into forward gear and increased the revs, which slowed us and allowed the bow on the starboard side to bounce off the tree branch, which in turn

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pushed the bows back out into the current towards the opposite bank.

We were now making good progress astern having cleared the bend and the rowers, but more importantly we were running down the centre of the river towards Wilton Bridge having cleared the 90 degree bend. I still wondered why the lady rowers left their oars in the water, I think rule nine applies (or common sense should have prevailed) after all, we did wait until after 1030 hours as we had been told when I asked that all boats would be off the water by then. It was now 1130 hours and Wilton Bridge was about 100 metres astern. I slowed down the barge down to an almost stop and the bows were now just touching the river bank where a small stream comes into the Wye by Wilton Castle. I had just given Andy and Paul instructions to run out 30 metres of cable off the winch drum on the bows. Having done this Andy put the four metre ladder over the port side and climbed down onto the bank.

Paul dropped the steel cable over the bows to him, while Andy secured the cable around a tree which we had selected early that morning. The winch cable we were using had a snap shut catch which makes for quick ease of use to fasten or release. Andy was ashore and the barge was secured, Paul could now start to release the winch, winding the cable out allowing the barge, very slowly to go astern into the second arch near to the Wilton side of the river bridge. By this time a few people had realised what was going on and two reporters from the local press with cameras were taking photos. Andy was talking to some of the people on the bank, I was doing the same talking to the people on the bridge above me. The engine continued to tick over and I had the wheel while Paul continued to wind out the cable. It took about an hour for the barge to pass under the bridge, when the bows were level

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with the top side of the bridge I told Andy on my radio "let go of the steel cable". Paul started on fast wind to bring in the 75 metre or so cable onto the winch. Andy then walked down the bank, over the bridge downstream past the White Lion Pub to the river for a pick up back on the barge, I then went astern.

The barge came out of the second arch astern, into the middle of the River Wye. Paul continued to wind in the spare cable, I put more revs on and we were going astern under power but we seemed not to be going anywhere. The river was trying to take us back into the bridge arch and even with over two metres or seven foot of flood water on we were not held by the steel rope, it was the eddy (river going back on itself) that was doing this. The River Wye, going through the middle arches was doing six or seven knots at least, I found I was putting more revs on, 700 at tick over to 1000, the prop was biting the water and we almost popped out of the bridge. I then put the barge into forward gear keeping the revs on, we then slowed and I put the port bow into the White Lion side of the river.

I held her against the bank where Andy was stood waiting for a pick up, Paul put the ladder over the side and held it steady, while Andy climbed back up the ladder. They then continued to wind in the rest of the cable, while this was being done I set about turning the barge by allowing the bows to go out into the middle of the river and letting the stern go into the bank. The bow was now almost two thirds of the way round, so I put her into forward gear. We were now on the last sixteen miles to Symonds Yat at about ten knots. Not for the faint hearted was a little understatement perhaps! We were after all 130 foot long, 16 foot wide and we displaced 250 tonnes, we also passed under Wilton Bridge in about an hour with no incidents as planned.



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It was 1300 hours and we needed to get to Symonds Yat no later than 1630 hours when it would be dark. It actually started getting dark by about 1620 hours, so with about 16 miles left to go we had to press on as there was no time to waste. I had checked the river levels for today and we had an average of about eight foot of extra flood water on top of what was normal. This would allow us to have about three foot of clear water over most of the many man-made fishing obstacles, about 98 per cent of which are not marked. With the cabin roof off our air draft was 11 foot 8 inches, we had about 30 centimetres, or one foot, of clear air under the old railway bridge at Lower Lydbrook and Huntsman Bridge near Symonds Yat. Kern Bridge was three and half miles downstream and it had about 25 foot of clearance and three large arches, the centre arch being of choice because of its width, about 50 foot wide.

Wilton Bridge was now out of the way, we were two thirds of the way down the long straight after Ross on Wye, which is about a mile long. The winch cable was now wound onto its drum. Andy came back from the bows to the wheel house, I asked him "what's up?", he said "we have a problem", I asked him what he meant. Andy went on to explain that there were about 50 Canadian geese swimming in a 'V' formation ahead of the Wye Invader. I eased off the engine revs to slow the barge down as we came to the end of the long straight where the river takes a right turn. At that point the geese took off, flying in front of the barge and staying in a 'V' formation, what a sight, it was something I had not ever seen before. It was almost like having an escort (good luck perhaps!). The geese had now gone, the river was about 75 metres wide at this point, we started to turn right again as we came out of the corner, about 600 metres in front of the bows there was a tight (sharp) left bend of at least 90 degrees, the Wye loses some

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of its width, down to about 50 metres in the distance and we could see the A40 road going right to left across our front, ahead of us the river and road ran side by side for the next two miles or so.

We were losing height between here and Kern Bridge as the river falls more than two and a half metres in just over two and half miles. It was getting to feel like a ski slope, we were picking up speed and the river was getting much narrower with the trees overhanging it was getting fairly dangerous. Paul and Andy stayed on the bows with instruction not to take any risks and, if necessary to take cover in the forward cabin until we had passed the worst areas, the rule being there were to be no heroes.

My situation was slightly different, as on more than one occasion I had found myself watching Andy and Paul take cover into the forward cabin (or bunker as we had named it) and seeing large branches bounce up and along the hatch covers, springing up just in front of the wheelhouse then come down into the wheel house. I would roll out of their way trying to save the instrument panel again, watching the branches disappear over the stern, and then I'd have to jump up and check the position just in time to setup for the next corner.

As we headed down to Kern Bridge the river was straight and very narrow. To reduce speed I put the gear box into astern (propulsion) which helped to reduce the speed keeping the rudder on whatever course it was set on. The barge seemed happy and kept its set course, as we got closer to Pen Craig Court on the right bank, we were coming into a very sharp left bend so I positioned the bows almost touching the left bank and the stern about one third of the way from the right bank. As soon as the barge could see a line out I continued to reduce the speed as we had to stop and turn, in a distance of

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about one and half miles so we could go astern through Kern Bridge. There was a long left bend to contend with as well, there are also a great many man made obstructions down to the weir at Lower Lydbrook, plus the usual problem of overhanging trees to deal with. As we completed the bend by Pen Craig the river then ran for a mile fairly straight.

On the left there was a group of men and trucks, which looked like a shoot, who were having lunch, Andy shouted to someone on the bank, I then saw what all the fuss was about. A large black dog seemed to think the barge was a pheasant, he was swimming out towards us regardless of his owners whistling and was hell bent on being top dog. Almost at the last minute he turned back to climb the bank, had a good shake and watched us go by. We all shouted 'good afternoon' to those on the bank and they returned a wave as we went by fairly fast. We now had a half a mile to a wider part of the river for the turn, we must make the turn, if we missed it and went forward through the bridge the river falls away and drops over two metres in 500 metres. This would mean that we would end up being thrown into the right bank and onto a great number of large rocks, so it was not an option. We had to turn to have control of the speed and position of the stern and rudder, so with the barge in forward gear ticking over, we would be facing upstream. The stern was kept in the deep channel and the bows ran down the right bank almost out of the water.

I could make out Goodrich Court on the right bank about 500 metres in front of the bows. Downstream it got a little wider and this was where we must turn, so I put the barge full astern, I warned Andy and Paul to standby on the radio. We must have been doing five to seven knots. I moved the barge over to the right hand side of the river and selected astern

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propulsion, we were now slowing down as the extra-large prop was doing its job.

We were now almost at a stop alongside the right bank by two well-spaced Ash trees. Over the radio I asked Andy and Paul to put a rope around one of the trees, Andy selected the second tree. I still held the barge full astern against the right bank, Andy confirmed the mooring was secure so I let the stern go out into the river. Now I selected forward gear and kept her bow tight into the bank. We turned with about 15 meters spare as she cleared the left bank, which was just enough. We had almost completed turning so I eased off on the engine revs and we settled alongside the bank, facing up stream next to the right bank. Andy checked the mooring was secure and then I cut the engine.

Paul offered to put the coffee on and sorted out the pot noodles, Andy checked below in the hold starting with the bilge pump, which was coping with the water from the damage sustained above Ross. The temporary repairs were fine, I went into the engine room checked the oil, diesel, topped up the oilers for the prop shaft, and checked the temperature of its two large shell bearings. It was all fine so I give one final twist of the grease pump for the stern gland. It was time for a half hour break, the coffee and pot noodles were ready so we went down into the hold to eat them and to keep warm. Just as we stopped it started to rain and hail stones bounced off the decks! It was about this time of day (according to the article published in the local paper the Forest Review) we were thought to have run aground. The simple truth was that we needed to turn before Kern Bridge to check the barge, after all, the engine and gear box are over 50 years old and the Wye Invader has been sat on her bottom for almost 23 years, break over we set about going on to lower Lydbrook.

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We were still ten miles from Symonds Yat and about two and half hours before last light. The river at this location is only 50 metres wide, to get clear of the bank and out into the midstream, I engaged forward propulsion and the barge moved out and started upstream into the centre of the river, I looked over the stern and we were now ready to engage rear prop. Downstream of us looking over the rear cabin was a long right bend, we could see Kern Bridge and its centre arch. To my right on the hill was Goodrich Castle, as we started going astern because of the length of the barge I engaged forward propulsion, this allowed the barge to reassert its position midstream. We were almost round the right bend, the middle arch was over to the right, I had no choice but to engage forward gear propulsion and reposition the barge near to the right bank. We were now about 50 metres from the centre arch, the bows were slightly off to the left, so I put more revs on to bring her into line with the middle arch. I used the large pile of flood deposited wood around the pier to push and bounce the bows over to the right, which in turn allowed us to exit Kern Bridge midstream, with bows following down the right bank, spot on as planned.

The next 100 metres we kept the stern midstream using the forward and astern propulsion as necessary, this was to safely drop astern over the rocks and trees and man made rubbish in this part of the navigation. I believe there is an old saying that goes something like this...if you are going downstream and you think you are going to ground, you should put her about if you think she is going to smell the bottom i.e. go astern with caution. That's pretty much how we dealt with this situation.(simply by going about, if you reduce your

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speed from six or maybe seven knots to almost zero you have control).

As we left the rapids downstream of the barge, it was about one and half miles of straight and very narrow river with overhanging trees on each side. There was no chance to turn until we got to lower Lydbrook. To keep the bows out of the trees, we had (using reverse steering) to go faster astern than the rivers speed. To achieve this on top of the rudder, I put a piece of tube with a pointer to indicate the position of the rudder at all times, so at a glance, before increasing revs or changing direction I would know the position of the stern rudder and its relevance to the river situation. Fifteen minutes after leaving Kern Bridge rapids we could see the hotel and pub on the left bank and the top of the weir was our turning point. I slowed the barge by operating forward propulsion, putting the stern over to the right side of the weir. We were almost at a stop and the stern was just touching the bank right on top of the weir itself, held by small trees and bushes. Andy and Paul talked to the people on the footpath next to the hotel just a few metres in front of them, as they are stood on the bows telling me how much clearance we had, just enough between the barge and bank. I put the barge into astern propulsion which held the stern into the hole in the bank between the trees.

We were across lower Lydbrook Weir, however, we did have about six foot of water under the keel as it were. We completed the turn on time, ready and pointing the correct way for the next problem. To cap it all, the old railway bridge half a mile downstream of the weir that we had just passed was on a left bend. The first thing I noticed was the fall away from the weir towards a long left corner half a mile downstream. We could see the slope of the river was similar to Kern Bridge but without the rocks and trees spread about in

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it, what we couldn't see was the old metal tube rail bridge just round the corner half a mile away. However it was there and we were moving fairly quick towards it, this was the last real obstacle before the five miles down to Symonds Yat.

It was now about 1520 hours and it getting dark just after 1600 hours. I positioned the barge with the bows a little to the left of centre to the stern, about quarter of the way from the right bank. We maintained position with a small amount of speed, so we just had steerage, Andy and Paul saw the bridge first, Andy started to give me details of what was forward of the bows, then I saw that we were about 200 meters from the bridge. There were three arches from the right to the left, it was a small arch with a large rock downstream of it, next to a 50 foot centre arch with spectators stood on the top. The third arch towards the left was small and on the inside of the bend, I only had a few seconds to position the approach. I put the power on for the bow to go through close to the right hand bridge pier of the middle arch, the river started to push us across to the left, as we exited the bridge we were about 30 degrees toward the left bank.

I looked up through the bridge platform to see five or six walkers looking down as we passed under them. I said good afternoon but they didn't answer back, I put the wheel hard over to starboard and put on lots of extra revs, 600 to just under 1000. This almost straightaway pushed the stern towards the left bank and brought the bows over to the right bank. As we squared up midstream I eased off the power, the river had changed sides. On the right hand side were the meadows and the left bank was steeper with the Yat Rock towering above. The Wye was deeper here and Huntsman's Bridge was about two miles downstream. The Wye Invader seemed happy, we must have been doing five or six knots at least. Each corner we came to she went round as though on

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rails, what a pleasure. I think it's fair to say the last 40 miles were not for the faint hearted and saying this was a different ball game would be an understatement!

I informed Andy and Paul that we still had Huntsman Bridge and two ferry ropes to deal with. We should arrive at Symonds Yat at about 1600 hours, I hadn't told Paul and Andy that we just might have some help with the ferry ropes as time was getting on. I was hoping for a call to say the cavalry had arrived in the form of two friends, Paddy and Tony. I spoke to them whilst going under Wilton Bridge, Paddy said he would try to locate Tony to also lend a hand at the Ferry Inn and the Saracen's Head ferry site. A few minutes later over the radio we received a call, "Wye Invader this is P1, what's your location?", I informed him of our location, one mile above Huntsman Bridge, P1 returned the call saying, "you'll have to slow down, I'm on my way to Tony's location", Tony being one of the Symonds Yat pleasure boat skippers of 60 years standing.

I returned the call to P1 and asked "what's your time requirement?", P1 replied that it was 15 minutes. I slowed the barge to almost a stop in the midstream and finished the radio communication with P1 asking him to inform me as soon as the ferry rope had been dropped (the ferry ropes are 25mm steel ropes secured to steel structures on each bank). P1 replied "yes understood out".



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### **A moment in history**

By now Huntsman Bridge was a few hundred metres ahead. Andy stood by the forward cabin. Paul came astern to ask, "are we slowing down to go under the bridge"? My answer was "we have about one foot of clearance in the centre arch Paul. If we slow down we lose steerage and we can't afford to. We need to be in the centre as the arch is lower on each side". A few minutes later we passed under Huntsman's Bridge with just about one foot to spare. The river was approximately 75 meters wide just by the bridge. The next half a mile was straight then we started into the last left bend before the Ferry Inn and its ferry roped across the river. Just as we come out of the bend there was an old church on the right bank and on the left was a long low muddy bank. I warned Andy and Paul to standby for going about. I started to slow the barge to almost a stop. The barge nosed into the mud, full astern on the engine, and we stopped. Andy and Paul put a rope round a tree, we were now going towards the Ferry Inn stern first. Paddy and Tony, who were call sign PI, came up on my radio. They were informing me that the ferry rope was down and clear, and that they were on their way back to Symonds Yat East to lower the second ferry rope outside the Saracen's Pub. "Roger that" I said. As we passed the Ferry Inn the river started to push the bows towards the right bank. To avoid catching the ferry mooring I put more rev's on the engine to increase the speed astern. Taking advantage of the rivers width with the increase of speed astern and the river turning to the right meant the barge sat mid-stream just clearing the ferry mooring by five or six meters. One more small right turn and we would be quarter of a mile to the first RV point. The Saracens Head Pub came into view, so astern we went down the last few hundred

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meters.

Paul was on the starboard side near the bows. Due to the length of the barge the current started to push the forward part of the barge into the bank and tree branches. Just at that moment a large branch came over the side of the hold area just forward of the wheel house on the starboard side. Paul failed to see it but Andy spotted it and so do I. Andy pulled Paul onto the deck as the branch came over the two of them. It was 45 miles of grief with trees, ice, rapids, bridges, and under water fishing obstructions (piles of rock not marked). To have someone hurt, injured, in the last 200 meters would put the cap on it as they say. "For Christ's sake stay sharp as we do not need a repeat of that", I said over the internal radio. The rear cabin was just passing the Saracens ferry site and the bows came into line with the pub. I put her into forward propulsion, we slowed to a stop and started to move the bows first towards the old landing wharf outside the pub. I nosed the barge very gently to stop to allow Andy and Paul to throw the ropes ashore to Tony and Paddy. They secured the ropes on a fence, not the ferry structure, and put the gang plank down. I stopped the engine.

Not in 150 years had a commercial boat of any sort come down the river from Hereford. Now I can see why! As I stepped off the gang plank there was man who did not appear happy with one of the mooring ropes secured to what he said was "his fence". I made a point of going over to talk to him to say sorry about that. I got the crew to secure it to the ferry structure where it should have been in the first place. He then invited me into his parent's bed and breakfast, Garth Cottage. He took one look at my hands, black with anti-burglar paint, grease and just lots of old Dutch barge and offered me a pot of hand cleaner. It did not make a lot of difference; however,

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over the next few weeks we became good friends with him and his parents.

Later he helped us out as one of the crew from Symonds Yat to Monmouth. We went off to the Saracen's Head where a small group of friends and others were there with several pints of beer. It was sort of a moment in history feeling that the three of us had done what many people said was impossible. It's fair to say the 46 miles from Hereford to Symonds Yat was not for the faint hearted. My crew of two, Andy and Paul, gave there all under very difficult conditions with the river in flood below freezing, day and night, and a river that had not been maintained for navigation in over 150 years. The old barge gave her best, she was not found wanting and gave an excellent account of herself. This was the first RV check point and we still had to get over the rapids, past the rocks in the river at Red Brooke and below, pass through Chepstow and up the seven to Sharpness, perhaps a little over 60 miles. However, this was far enough until after Christmas!

Later we left the Saracen's Head, checked on the water leaks from the damage above Ross. The water had slowed to almost a stop. We returned to the Saracen's Head at about 2000 hours as I had promised to pay for all the drinks, plus whatever Andy and Paul liked on the menu. We found a table next to the wood burning stove. At about 1130 hours we left to go back to the barge having had a pleasant night out. As we stepped back on board the gang plank was covered in frost. It was back to reality and a safety reminder. No-one needed to go for a swim down the rapids at midnight.

Sunday at about 0400 hours I got up to check the hold for water leaks and there was not enough to need to start up the

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bilge pumps. It was very cold so I checked the fire in cabin was still going and then got back into my sleeping bag. We got up at 0800 hours, put the coffee on, and had breakfast. One of the owners of the pub stopped by and asked, "would you boys like bacon sandwiches"? to which we answered "yes please", fifteen minutes later a large pack of sandwiches arrived still piping hot, it was a nice way to start the day. The barge walkways and gang plank were iced up until about 1030 hours. When the sun showed itself over on the side of the Wye Valley by 1100 hours, it was safe to get on with putting the cabin back up and cleaning all the branches and leaves off various parts of the hold and decks as the Wye Invader would be moored in a very public place, outside the Saracen's Head at Symonds Yat. By 1600 hours all equipment on board was sorted and locked away, Paul's father Fred came and offered us a lift back to Hereford. The landlord, one of the owners of the Saracen's Head, phoned round the residents later confirming that they were happy for the barge to stay outside the pub for a while. Andy and I dropped by every two days after work to check on water leaks and bilge pumps.

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### **Christmas in the Wye Valley**

#### ***Saturday, 7 December***

We moved her two hundred metres further down the river to just above the rapids because the banks were a lot steeper. We moored her to two large trees on top of the bank, we also took advantage of an old wharf about fifty metres upstream from the trees. The water was deflected out into midstream by the stone structure of the wharf and it came back up the bank to form an eddy, so it didn't matter how much water came down the river, the barge sat at ease on its mooring. Over Christmas we had two five metre floods, Symonds Yat was cut off and the roads were flooded, but she sat their quiet at ease, it seemed I must have learnt in the last twenty years something about mooring boats in spate rivers that flood often.

A few days before Christmas I was invited to stay in Falmouth for Christmas week, to my surprise when we arrived at the house we were staying in, it was directly opposite Falmouth Harbour. As I looked out of the windows to my left was the anchorage the Wye Invader occupied twenty three years ago, almost to the week. A coastguard cutter patrol boat was moored on the same mooring for the whole week.

Christmas in the Wye Valley came and went. The river was in flood most of the week, Andy rang me in Falmouth every two to three days with a sit rep on the barge. At one time the only way he could check the barge was to go to Symonds Yat West and look across the river from the opposite side to the Saracen's Head. The New Year was the first time we could

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get on board to check the water in the hold bilges, there was no more than three to four inches which was fine. The pumps could not take any more out, so all in all the barge had sat for ten days and everything was fine.

It was January, the time to start preparation for the final move out of the Wye Valley, with step one getting over the rapids. The general opinion of the public walking by and those who had made a special journey to give me the benefit of their wisdom on the matter was - we were stuffed (technical barge term!), it was not possible, so most expected the barge still to be there next Autumn. By the end of January preparation to go astern over the rapids was well underway. Paul had left the crew to be replaced by Mark, Robin and Steve, who would assist Andy with the ropes and winch from the bows to bank.

We went stern first on three metres of flood water for about one hundred meters or so until we had passed the obstruction placed in what was the fairway, by the British Canoe Union with land drainage consent from the Environment Agency and planning consent from Herefordshire Council. This joint effort by these parties had in affect at this point cut the river in half with hundreds of tons of granite that they placed on the remains of the old lock site and weir at what was an old iron foundry going back well before the year 1630, when the new weir lock and foundry were modernised. However back to the problem in hand, which was getting over this unmarked pile of rocks (the rapids) before the summer arrived and we could be stuck for want of water until at least until Autumn.

It's the Saturday towards the end of January, Andy, the crew and myself slip released the Wye Invader from its Christmas moorings and started to release the deck winch back slowly twenty five metres at a time securing the barge with the bow line, rewinding the steel rope onto the winch, and starting over

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again.

Three hours later we were sat on top of the rapids without enough water to go over astern this time, so we would need a fresh flood of at least three and a half metres to clear it safely, however we now had a workable plan and only required the correct amount of 3.5 metres of water or more in the next week or so, to have enough draft to get over the next obstacle, the rapids.

In the next few weeks we had two more large floods at short notice but I could not get the crew together in time to take advantage of them. Then, towards the end of February we had heavy local rain which produced a three and a half metre fresh flood. This time I had a full crew from the last Saturday in February and into the first week of March if required. By 1030 on Saturday 23 February morning, we had Robin and Steve on shore releasing and securing the steel rope and bow line as required. Andy was on the bow with Mark working with the ropes and I was stood in the wheel house with the engine ticking over on standby just in case, keeping the stern out from the bank to avoid the sometimes large over hanging tree branches. We made good progress and by 1330 hours and were over the top of the weir and half way down the other side.

We still had perhaps 200 metres to clear the underwater canoeing and fishing obstructions. Mark was holding the steel cable on the hand winch with 25 metres out up the rapids which allowed Andy to ease the rope to let enough slack. This meant that Robin could release the D shackle then joining the loop at the end round a large tree. This then allowed the rope to be released and it should have gone down close to the bank, but instead the rope was taken out in the current down to the outside of the barge, port side. There was quite a

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lot of water on, about two and half metres passing under the barge, the volume was so great this in turn was turning the prop. About ten metres of the released rope wound itself round the prop shaft between the stern gland and the backside of the propeller in less than thirty seconds and the prop stopped turning, I knew straight away what had happened and stopped the engine.

This was grief we could do without, bearing in mind where we were, a nightmare! The crew could not see there was a problem, I knew there was and we were stuck out on the down side of the weir with the water going down. I quickly explained to Andy and Mark what was going on and told them to cut away the bow line over the port side, put a loop in the new end of rope and get it to the shore crew to secure the barge. That done we carried out an inspection of the prop and rudder area from the stern cabin roof, the conclusion was that the water was too fast and cold to attempt clearing the rope from round the prop shaft and it would be dark in about two hours, so we had to move down the river the last 200 metres without any engine support. I kept the stern away from the bank and we used the hand winch and bow rope as safely as possible. By 1600 hours we were over the rapids and downstream well clear of the underwater obstructions. We set out about securing the barge and putting the gangplank ashore, once it was all secure the crew left for home. We might have rope round the prop but we were over the new weir (rapids – canoe slalom) and no-one had got hurt. The prop would have to wait until Monday afternoon or Tuesday when there would be less water coming down the river.

Monday 25 February, we still had eight to ten foot of flood water under the barge. At about 1330 hours Andy and I stopped by to see what could be done about the rope round the prop. The first thing we did was to fix a ladder over the



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stern gear down onto the rudder, to have a close inspection of the problem. Whichever way we looked at it there was too much water passing the prop, plus it was very cold. We tried to cut away what we could reach but after about one and half minutes of cutting we swapped, as the water was too quick and cold for one person to keep this up. There had to be a better way so we climbed back up the stern, dried off and had a coffee, this was not going to be easy.

On Tuesday at 1400 hours we arrived at the barge to find that the river was well down and clear. When we got on board we could see in the river bed, towards the stern, was a fishing croy. If the river went down any lower the barge would be stuck on the rocks. We had to spend about an hour to reposition by going astern to clear this; we then get on with trying to clear the rope from round the prop. We seemed to make good progress for the first half hour or so and we pulled out about three meters of rope. We were then back to using the hacksaw and Stanley knife. By 1530 hours we had had enough, so we had a coffee, tried to get warm and secured the boat. Tomorrow is another day I thought.

That evening, Tuesday at 2330 hours and with a large tumbler of 18 year old Glenlivet in hand, Plan A became clear to me. We had two dinghies on board and we could simply place the ladder down the starboard side, between the bank and barge just forward of the wheel house and put the dinghies over the side. We could change into a wet suite, gloves and life jacket and let the dinghies go astern on the rope until we were positioned alongside the rudder, once secured we could then use a hacksaw to cut away the remainder of the rope.

It was Wednesday at 1400 hours back on board the Wye Invader. We put Plan A into operation and about one hour later the job was done, all the rope was removed from the prop and I started the engine putting her in gear and everything was okay. We cleared away the equipment ready

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for the next stop in Monmouth, water permitting in a few days. The water was still cold but being in the dinghies low to the water made the job easier. Before I started down the Wye I spent weeks running through what if situations, this being one of them, but sometimes you can't see the wood for the trees, as they say, I think when we left the barge that afternoon it was one of those occasions. I took the trouble to mark the water level height, to move off astern and turn we would need another half a metre on top of one and half metres. Rain was forecast for Thursday and Friday, however, I couldn't get enough crew at that short notice, and by Saturday afternoon the river was up to three and half metres and rising well above normal.

On Sunday the water was about four and a half metres. My estimate was that we would have two metres down the river by midday Wednesday and we would need an extra one person to make up a crew of three in total. For some weeks now we had parked the car at the bed and breakfast/hotel at Garth Cottage. Mark, the chef and son of the owners had said he was happy to assist so I asked if he could help out, Mark said yes and became a crew member for the trip to Monmouth which was planned for Wednesday midday providing I had the river levels correct down to two metres to get under the Biblings Bridge and pipe across the river at Ganaru.

The week came and the river as I said, was about four and half metres above normal. By Monday afternoon we were down to about two and half metres, all we needed to lose was about another half metre, and come Wednesday we had it.

Andy was responsible for Mark's safety, with easy access to the bunker to shelter in, which was to the rear of the anchor winding gear. I knew that now we were over Symonds Yat Rapids, every mile would be a pleasure compared to the River Wye above it.

We were about half way to Chepstow and Monmouth was just less than six miles away. All we had to do was turn the barge,

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all 130 foot of her, in a river channel no more the 50 meters wide with large branches hanging over the river in flood. Having walked up and down the river bank over Biblings Bridge previously, I had measured the air draft under the suspended pipe over the river, it was now time to put one's money where one's mouth is, as they say.

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### **Obstruction ahead!**

***Wednesday 6 February, 1200 hours***

Andy parked the car outside Garth Cottage. Mark saw us arrive and walked down the steps from the house, lifted the security fence to the car park and we put the transport inside the fence. We discussed the weather, it was cold and wet as the three of us walked down past the rapids towards the barge mooring. Ten minutes later we were on board, Andy and Mark set about releasing the steel winch rope, repositioning the forward spring so it could be released from on board. I checked the engine, gear box and oil, and topped up the prop shaft oilers. The main prop shaft has oil bottles with adjustable drip feeds to each bearing cap, they are old fashioned but they work. The engine coolant was okay so I started the engine to run it up to temperature. The gang plank was released, secured on board and we had a safety brief mainly for Marks benefit and a check the personal radios were working. A final word from me to the crew to remind them to stay safe and take no risks, with an extra warning to Mark that if he was in any trouble to get into the bunker for safety.

Back in the wheelhouse I put a message out on the radio to the crew for them to let go of the forward mooring line, as the engine took up the slack the barge eased forward. Andy pulled in the bow line and we were now sat below Symonds Yat rapids held against two metres of flood ready to go about. It's probably the first time in 150 years that a boat of this size has been in this situation. [Note: the lock at Symonds Yat was reported to have been thrown down in the news in the Hereford Journal of 1824]. About 100 metres from of our position, on the right bank looking downstream is a part of the bank area that is wider than the 40 metres or so where we were by perhaps another ten metres, this is where I intended

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to go about. Over the summer I had walked this stretch of the river when it was low on water, so I knew there were no rocks in the area of the river bank that had been chosen. I suppose you could say "this was the moment of truth".

I had to go astern for about fifty metres to turn, a little to the left looking downstream, just on the bend a large tree branch sticking out. The stern just missed the branch but the bows bounced off into the middle of the river, so I put her into forward propulsion. This in turn lined the barge up facing upstream on the right bank (note the right and left banks are always looking downstream). We were now just above the turning point, I let the stern go into the recessed area then went astern, which pulled us into the hole in the right bank. The trees held the stern almost like being moored. The speed of the water started to turn the barge and as we got half way across the river the turning speed increased. Andy told Mark to get below into the bunker for cover, Andy followed a few moments later. At this point we had to hold our position to keep her going astern into the bank, we had now completed three quarters of the turn, so I selected forward propulsion increasing the engine speed up to about 850 revs and we managed to shake ourselves free of the branches and small bushes. A few moments later we had completed the turn and were going down the centre of the Wye at about eight knots towards the Bibling Bridge.

Andy and Mark were out of the bunker by now and Andy was on the radio giving information about the obstructions ahead of us, it's almost as though we had escaped and were making a run for the border. In front of us was a long straight of about one and a quarter miles getting narrower and faster as we lost height. We were back on the ski slope again and every now and then I put the engine into reverse propulsion keeping the same course but slowing the barge down. The Bibling Bridge

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was not too far away, perhaps 400 metres and I had already started to position the bow close to the right bank leaving just over half a mile of the river spare to position the stern near the left bank. We were now under the bridge with the bows almost touching the trees on the right bank and with the stern about two thirds towards the left bank. As we passed under the bridge the left bank just below us was cut away, which allowed the stern more room to manoeuvre. In those few seconds we could see round the bend, I put the wheel hard over and increased the revs, it was almost as though we were on rails. The barge went round the Bibling's Corner heading into a part of the Wye that's very deep with large rocks popping out of the river without warning.

By now we were just above the island and on the left running alongside the river was the old rail track which was now a walk/cycle path and we had just passed a guy on his cycle who seemed a little surprised. We waved and he just stopped and looked in astonishment, well I suppose it's perhaps not something you would see too often. By now all the crew members were soaked to the skin with water dripping off my cap and out of my pockets, Andy and Mark were just as wet. We had been on the move for about quarter of an hour, as we got closer to the island the river was held back by it. Although I could see a way past it to the left I had to increase the rev's to pass over the restricted part of the channel, the river seemed to be going back against itself.

Having passed the island, the old railway station was on the right bank and a few hundred metres forward was the water pipe over the river, which was one of the reasons the cabin was removed to increase air draft. We checked it early that morning with a long tape measure with about one foot to spare near the centre, a little more to the left. I slowed the barge as we approached the pipe over the river and we

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cleared it with about one foot to spare, I then started setting the barge up to go round the almost right angled left bend ahead. This bend we thought was going to be a problem, we were at about 45 degrees across the river with the bows close to the left bank and the stern just right of centre and, as we got closer we could start to see round the corner. As the bend opened up I started to increase the speed which improved the steerage and the stern ended up about 20 metres from the right bank. We cleared the large rock on the outside of the bend and were now out of the corner and on the last two miles down to Monmouth. The rain still tried to dampen our spirits but there was not a chance with Monmouth only five minutes away, at the end of the long straight it had been a pleasure apart from the rain.

I could see Monmouth bridge perhaps half a mile ahead, I spoke to Andy and Mark by radio to warn them to be ready. The river was still two metres above normal and fast, so I started to put the prop into astern propulsion to slow us down until we were almost at a stop running close to the right bank. I then put the bows into the right bank and as we stopped. Andy jumped ashore, we kept the power on keeping the bows into the bank and the current took the stern round, and within probably three minutes we had turned and were facing up stream. We were just above the rowing club and needed to be on the old wharf just below, so I selected astern prop and with a little help from the river, we slowly went astern past Monmouth rowing club and its steps. I put her into forward propulsion ahead, the bow moved to the left, port and went gently forwards touching the Wharf. Mark passed the bow line spring to Andy who passed it through to one of the mooring rings on the wharf to be secured back on board, I eased off the engine to check we were moored properly and then stopped the engine.

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### **Monmouth 23 years on - “this ones on me”!**

The last time we were here was 23 years ago and not a lot had changed. From just below Symonds Yat to Monmouth took about 35 minutes, in fact, by the time we moored up some of the people following us by car had only just arrived. Apart from the rain, the trip down was a real pleasure and from Monmouth I could almost smell the sea air. Our next stop was Brockweir on the tidal section of the river 12 miles downstream, this weekend all being well. Now Andy was talking to one or two well-wishers and Mark had put on his meal, I just enjoyed the moment and checked over the old girl (barge) again. She has been more than up to the task asked of her and a pleasure to handle.

Time moved on and it was now 1530 hours so we set about re-assembling the wheel house and making the barge secure. The rain had stopped so we put extra mooring ropes forward on the bows and at the stern, all secured. We left Garth Cottage at Symonds Yat just after 1200 hours, Mark's mother kindly offered to retrieve us from Monmouth by car from Aldi's car park just over the Monmouth bridge. We arranged a time at about 1730 hours to meet her in the car park, by the time we had walked over the bridge, Mark's mother was at the pick-up RV, we apologised to her for still being soaking wet, the three of us and our wet kit got in the car. We went back to Symonds Yat and Andy and I then picked up my car and left for Hereford. We were now well placed having covered about 52 of the 75 miles to Chepstow and only had about 13 miles to go to Brockweir on the tidal section next week.



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The following Thursday I had planned to check on the Wye Invader in the afternoon, but I was tied up at work so Andy went down at about 1330 hours, he rang me with a situation report. As he had gone under the A40 to the wharf/rowing club he was met with one rather large Dutch barge almost sat on top of the wharf. The river had risen about four metres, so instead of walking along and on top of the wharf looking down onto the hatch covers, the water was just short of flooding over the wharf, so we could walk along the top of the wharf looking up at the barge and see how large the barge is and walk alongside the whole 38 metres of her. The air draft at the stern wheelhouse area was about four metres and when stood at the side it looked quite large. After Andy had reported the situation, he then asked was there anything he could do, I explained that the flash flood would peak in about two hours and this was the end result of all Wednesday's rain. The more water the better for us because the bridge was downstream and it became a dam when the arches filled up and could not take any more water, this in turn slowed the speed of the river and allowed the barge to sit at ease on its mooring.

It's quite common to have local flash floods on the River Wye, a water rise of between two and four metres can happen within a few hours. Andy stayed by the barge for the next couple of hours mainly to put at ease people's concerns about whether the mooring was secure, which of course it was, and at about 1630 hours he rang back and confirmed the flood had peaked, the Environment Agency land rover had gone and he was about to leave for Hereford.

Friday 8 February, I contacted the crew, Mark, Robin and Steve who were up for Saturday afternoon and Sunday to go down the last 13 miles to Brockweir and they arrived at last light on Saturday at 1700 hours. They went below down into the hold where I had set up one air bed, two camp beds and a

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three seater settee as well as a table and chairs as a mess room. When they were settled in we all met up in the cabin under the wheel house, I gave them a safety brief and talk on how I saw Sunday going as far as their role as crew under Andy's instructions on the bows, including the use of the crew's two channel radios, call signs, life jacket and man over board. When we were underway no-one was to walk on the outer gangways, safe passage forward or astern was through the hold via the two secure steps, exit out was by way of secure steps on the starboard side just forward of the wheelhouse.

It was about 2035 hours and I recalled the last run ashore was 23 years and 6 months ago, so I said to the crew "this ones on me, I don't think I'm going to be around in another 23 years-time" so we walked across the A40 into town, almost into the centre by the police station. We went into one of the local pubs and ordered our pints, when we had first arrived at the pub there was only one security person on the door and half an hour later when we left there were three (strange!), perhaps the crew of the Wye Invader having a run ashore was the reason, after all it was 23 years since our last visit! The last stop was one of the hotels in the square by the Town Hall, we left at about 0030 hours. The bar staff were very pleasant and the bar area was warm and comfortable, so I didn't feel too bad about opening up my wallet again, the crew soon got used to the idea of not paying for their own drinks so they had, as you might say, a good run ashore. Back to the barge at 0130 hours where most of the area was covered in frost and the river was still about two metres and steady.

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### **A crowd of several hundred gathered at Monmouth Bridge**

#### ***Sunday morning 17 February 0800 hours***

I put the coffee and breakfast on and gave the crew a shout. I wanted to get things on the move by about 0930 hours before too many people turned up to witness something they would probably never see again on the River Wye. Before we made a start the cabin sides of the wheelhouse and roof panels had to be removed, this was done whilst the barge was moored on two ropes through the steel mooring rings secured into the stone blocks that made up the wharf. The river was still high and one rope was stuck on the lower forward ring in the wharf.

Monmouth Rowing Club were out early as you would expect on a cold clear Sunday morning. Some weeks before we had stopped by and explained about the barge. Robin, one of the shore party had a problem with pulling through one of the forward mooring ropes, so he spoke to the club safety boat who came to his assistance by offering him a lift round the wharf and just forward of the barge. The rope was cleared, the steel cable was relocated and Mark started to release the winch allowing us back towards the bridge, to be more precise, the second arch from the right (town side) which was about three quarters of the way from the wharf towards the bridge. We stopped and rewound the steel cable ready to go again. By this time the stern was about twenty metres from entering the second arch and I was stood in the wheelhouse.

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The main engine was ticking over at about 600 revs and Mark was still winding out the steel cable off the winch, the stern was now just under the top side of the bridge arch. The cable was slack, as at Wilton Bridge, Ross-on-Wye, the river water was flowing upstream through the arch, I put the barge into reverse gear (astern prop) to pull us through and downstream against the flow of the river. Twenty metres later, at about 1100 hours we were through Monmouth Bridge and Robin released the steel rope and Mark and Andy pulled in the slack onto the winch.

By now we had several hundred people stood watching in amazement waiting for the next move, so we obliged by ferry gliding the barge, all 250 tonnes and 130 foot long, across the downstream side of the bridge to the other side. Robin was waiting to take a mooring spring (rope) to a large tree. It was now about 1130 hours and time for a coffee and biscuits, it was a job well done so far. The sun was out with not a cloud to be seen but it was cold. I had stopped the engine as we were going to be here for half to three quarters of an hour while the tea and coffee was made. I set about checking the engine room oil levels, prop shaft and oilers fuel, this was because when we moved we could be going for up to two hours to Brockweir and we didn't want to stop until we got there.

The river below Monmouth was wide and fairly shallow, about 1.75 metres however, half a mile downstream the Monnow flowed into the River Wye which was still in flood. From below Monmouth Island we had almost four metres of water which was enough to go over most of the large stones and rocks that could be seen in the summer, this was from the road which runs alongside of the river from just above Monmouth to Chepstow and out into the Seven. The tea and

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coffee was soon finished and it was time to go after a final check.

I started the engine, carried out a radio check and put the barge in gear and we moved forward to slacken off the bow line and the barge was cast off, the slack was pulled in and the next 13 miles was up to me. We were on the left bank facing up stream, I eased forward to push the stern out into the river then went astern by easing the revs on the main engine. The river then took us astern slowly with the bows sliding down the bank but, because of the length of the barge, I had to get the bows out from the bank. Just astern there was a deep hole in the left bank so I put the barge into forward propulsion which in turn put the starboard stern quarter into the hole. I eased off the revs, the river started to take the bow out away from the bank, the stern was held by the hole in the bank just long enough for the bows to be port side of ahead. It was time to increase the revs and push the barge out into the pool or what would have been when Monmouth was a port, up to and just after the First World War (the port area was about the same size as Gloucester dock by the lock - over 100 metres square).

The barge was moving out into the river and forward towards the A40 town side of the river. As we got closer to the bridge the bows passed the third arch and the force of water coming down through the arch started to turn the bows downstream. I quickly put the barge into astern prop which allowed for the water going up the second arch (as I mentioned as we came astern through the second arch and the river current was in fact going upstream, almost an eddy). This situation turned us very quickly so we were now facing downstream, I put her in forward propulsion having turned the barge on a sixpence as it were and now we were going downstream between the island and the back of the Rugby Club. A few hundred metres

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ahead, the river started to turn left and the Monnow came in from the right. I increased the revs to speed up the engine to overcome the turbulence caused by the river Monnow flood water. There was now four metres of flood water, the downside to this being that if we got too close to the banks we were into some very large tree branches. However, on the positive side we were above most of the rocks and unmarked fishing croy's (piles of rock put in by various angling clubs) but this would not help with the very large boulders above Redbrook two miles further down the river.

As we come round the left bend below the Monnow, there were the remains of two railway bridges and one still across the river. We were sailing south east with the sun straight ahead in our faces and in the distance we could see Redbrook. There was just about one and half miles to go before the bend which was the marker for the area of river with three or four very large boulders, some standing three to four metres high out of the river bed. The boulders were covered in flood water but we could see the disturbance of water round them and if we were to hit one we could lose the barge.

Plan A was to slow the barge line up close to the left bank with the bows just off the left of the biggest and nearest boulder (between the left bank and boulder was about ten metres), increase the engine speed improving the steerage then move between the bank and boulder out to the middle of the river. This would position us so we were ready to go through the skew bridge on the next bend. Well that's about how we got past one of the most dangerous parts of the river much to the relief of a lot of people on the shore. The crew came back on the radio with "nice one skipper". In that situation if you had seen the river at summer level, as I have, you would have no other option than this one. There was no time for plan B,

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simply because of the volume of water and necessary safe speed for steerage to ensure the barge was manoeuvred past the obstructions. After all, we were on four metres of flood water at Redbrook.

We only had one chance and we took it. About half a mile in front was Redbrook rail bridge on a corner where the river turns almost 90 degrees to the right, just as you leave the bridge the turn was completed within about 100 metres downstream of the bridge. If the turn was not completed within a few seconds of passing under the arch, you'd find yourself, boat and all on the village green and the road running alongside the left bank, just below the bridge. However, if you take the trouble to stand downstream on the Redbrook side you would notice the two sets of bridge piers nearest to the left bank are set back and upstream of the right hand set of bridge piers, so as you go through the second arch the port side of your boat is clear of the underside of the bridge first. You would also notice the left river bank is cut away next to the village green, so the port side of your boat is clear for you to go hard to starboard and increase your revs and speed to have steerage to get round the 90 degree bend, just below the bridge. Now back to the task in hand, we had cleared the rocks above Redbrook and were out towards the right bank trying to line up on the bridge piers of the second arch from the left bank. Because of the bend we could see four piers, there were two nearest to us and two behind downstream and we were lined up to go through the centre of the arch.

The two upstream piers were almost a V formation and were the opening to the V. Halfway down the V put us lined up in the centre of the bridge arch. In this situation I put the barge to right of centre of the V formation of the piers, this was to take advantage of the left hand piers being set back so we had a good chance of getting round the 90 degree corner. We

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were now on the last 200 metres above the bridge, just right of centre of the second arch from the left bank. We were doing about six to seven knots and I had slowed down the barge as much as I could with going astern. Usually the river at this point was a shallow rapid in the summer, today we had four metres of flood water on and it was like a ski slope as we went into the bridge arch and cleared the downstream pier on the left of the arch. It was hard to starboard on the wheel at the same time as increasing the engine speed. We were only inches away from the right hand piers but square in the arch itself. Now we were through and the stern was clear with the extra speed giving us the steerage we needed. Within a few seconds I could see the bend downstream open out so I increased the rev's speed. We passed through the skew bridge at Redbrooke with four metres of flood water on and above all the large rocks and boulders that can be seen at low summer level. The corner was very tight but the barge was well healed over. The Wye Invader is not a spring chicken anymore, she's about eighty years old.

Andy put the crew below to check on damage and bilge pumps. Just below the bridge on the port-side the village green followed by the car parking places we passed in a few seconds. Then we reached the thirty mile per hour road sign, which meant we were on the last 10 miles to Brockweir with wide, straight water and a small bend at Llandogo. Three and a half miles downstream of us was Biggs Weir Bridge and as we got closer it was lined with cars and people waving and shouting. We passed under the bridge, looked back and, there were people everywhere.

We had only about six miles to go, so about twenty minutes, later the river started to get a lot narrower. Llandogo on the right was passed and I could see Brockweir Bridge a mile or so downstream. I started to put the barge into astern



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propulsion to slow down just a few hundred metres above Brockweir Bridge. We were almost at a stop, the river got a little wider, just enough to be able to turn and as the bows ran close to the right bank we stopped. With the help of Robin, Mark and Steve, a rope was put round one of the large trees on the bank. Once in place the river started to turn the barge so I kept it in forward propulsion to make sure the bows were in contact with the right bank, very quickly we made the turn. We were facing up stream alongside the bank, the crew under Andy secured the mooring and I cut the main engine. The fourteen miles from Monmouth were completed in one and a quarter hours. Compared to the river at Ross-on-Wye this was a real pleasure to navigate. On Sunday 27 February the crew left to go home and a bit later Andy and I left for Hereford, job almost done.

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### **High tide needed at Brockweir**

We were moored at Brockweir, on the top end of the Wye's tidal reach but had a problem that we didn't experience 23 years ago. Namely, as the tide goes out because of the bank shape, the bows catch sometimes half way down. As the tide ebbs the stern moves out into the channel putting the barge at about 45 degrees down the bank with the starboard stern section up to almost the engine room port holes in the water, this was not a good situation to be in, this in fact was a problem that was common on the Seven and the Wye over 100 years ago. The solution was two 20 foot by four inch poles secured on, so one just by the wheel house and the other by the forward cabin hold area, with fastened rope bindings just enough to secure them. The shore side was secured into the bank with six foot stakes and lashed to tree roots with enough room to flex. If the tide went out it would mean the barge stayed the same distance from the bank and in the deep channel.

Over the next two weeks we travelled back to Brockweir every two to three days stopping onboard on Saturday nights. Saturday and Sunday were spent checking equipment, topping up diesel for the main engine and just getting ready for the move to Sharpness. The move would be possible when there was a tide with enough height of water so we could turn just above Brockweir Bridge. The river at Brockweir is narrow so with the barge being 38 metres and over five metres beam, we needed a high tide to turn and go about outside the confines of the narrow channel, we should have that in a few weeks.

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Over the next two weeks we became frequent visitors to the Brockweir Country Inn as it was only 200 metres downstream of the barge mooring and just over the bridge in Brockweir. The bar staff were always pleasant, as were the locals, perhaps more to the point the beer was spot on and very drinkable. We arrived at Brockweir on Sunday 17 February, having on the Monday prior, spoken to Steve Beacham from Sharpness Shipyard and Dry Dock. I had phoned Steve and arranged to visit him on site to discuss the dry docking of the barge which was required to be completed for the insurance cover for maintenance purposes, as stated in the last surveyor's report. I also phoned Gloucester Harbour Trustees at Sharpness to inform them of the progress of the Wye Invader and that we were moored at Brockweir, just inside their area of influence a few miles downstream of Biggsweir Bridge. I spoke to the Harbour Master, Mike Johnson who said he had been watching the progress down the Wye with interest, and that one or two things had changed in the last 23 years. No-one had expected the Wye Invader to do the return journey.

There was now a rule that vessels over 30 metres required a pilot on board whilst passing through the Harbour area and the fee was £350. On the passage from Monmouth to Brockweir, apart from the crew, we had a guest on board, Jim. I spoke to Jim and explained what the requirements of the Gloucester Harbour trustees were. Jim said that Fred, who had operated a sand recovery business for many years out of the River Seven from a wharf just below Chepstow on the River Wye, might be able to be a local Pilot on the passage to Sharpness, subject to the Harbour Master for Gloucester Harbour Trustees giving consent. A day or two later Jim confirmed Fred was happy to assist as Pilot and

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to come on board at his wharf below Chepstow for the passage to Sharpness the following Sunday morning.

High tide was about 1030 hours on the following Saturday 2 March, so it was decided that we would set off early on the Saturday morning to make the most of the daylight hours. At about 2100 hours on the Friday evening it was time for the last visit to what had become our local pub, the Brockweir Country Inn. A good evening was had by all and then on Saturday we got up at 0730 hours. It was very cold outside and frosty. The first job was putting the coffee on the stove, cooking breakfast, and then clearing the mooring poles. I checked and started the main engine, checked the oil and various other levels, then waited for the tide and our guest crew member, Jim. He would accompany us to Chepstow then to Sharpness along with Fred, as pilot on Sunday on the early morning tide.

At 0930 hours, Jim our guest crew member arrived and came on board. The tide was on its way in and the river seemed to stop flowing downstream for about 15 minutes. Then we could see the direction had changed, small amounts of debris, leaves and branches mainly, were flowing up stream, by this time only a single rope held the bows to the bank. The river was filling fairly quickly and the stern moved out into the flood putting the bow into the bank, and with the engine ticking over at about 500 revs nature was doing the rest. Now the barge was at right angles across the channel with the river bank slopping up at about 60 degrees. The rudder was flat against the stern so it was time to squeeze a little more clearance for the barge to complete its turn. Forward prop was selected, the bows moved forwards and also up the right bank. By now the stern was on its way upstream with the turn completed. The tide had risen by about two foot and it was time to let go of the

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forward mooring, increase the engine speed revs, adjust the wheel and we were now heading for the centre of Brockweir Bridge mid channel.

Next there was a fairly tight right bend then the left turn through Tintern itself with the problem of local mooring buoys midstream. So as not to foul the prop shaft I kept the stern just on the inside or outside of centre, depending on the corner. 200 metres forward, in the near distance the old rail bridge sat across the river. With the wheel house cabin still up we had about two foot spare air draft, had we been held up for any reason the cabin would have to be removed.

We had just passed under the old rail bridge below Tintern, a few minutes later Tintern Abbey passed on the right. We were stood three metres above the river in the wheel house on almost a full high tide. This was a view of the Abbey that had not been seen since just after the First World War when large boat building stopped on the River Wye. The river was now 50 to 60 metres wide and the tide was still rising. We were 20 minutes into the passage to Chepstow and Andy, who had been stood on the bows since leaving Tintern came astern to the Wheelhouse. He went below into the engine room checked on the oil drips to the prop shaft bearing caps and confirmed it was all okay, then he went below into the hold to make coffee. Five minutes later the coffee and biscuits arrived, we were about half way to Chepstow and the tide had turned and we were making better speed. I eased back on the engine revs to slow our speed over the ground.

We still had to get under Chepstow road bridge, where there could be an issue with air draft if we got there too soon. We were now on the last tight right hand corner before the long

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strait running down to towards Chepstow Castle. On the left bank we had just passed the very old remains of St James Church. As we came round the corner about two miles in the distance we could see the remains of the Castle, high on its limestone cliff. About half way down the strait two people in a rowing boat decided at the last minute to cross from left to right just ahead of the barge. The river was over 75 metres wide so we had the room to go to starboard of them with a quick turn of speed from our very large propeller to assist in avoiding an issue.

We were now two thirds of the way round the last bend and the Castle was high on the cliff to the right, the road bridge was perhaps 400 metres ahead of us. We spotted the Iron bridge in front, the arches of the bridge are rounded, Andy echoed my thoughts when he said he was not sure there was enough room or air draft under the middle arch. He was 30 metres ahead of me as I was on the wheel whilst he was on the bows. I slowed the barge to almost a stop to put Andy ashore on the left bank with a 10 metre tape measure. He then ran the 100 metres to the bridge centre, dropped the tape over the side down to the river below and confirmed that the air draft was about ten foot. By radio I told him to return ASAP for pick up as we were losing the tide. I could only get within five to six foot of the left bank, however we were now lower than the bank so Andy jumped the distance and Jim caught him, assisting him back on board. By this time the stern was downstream from Andy's pick up location. I put the barge into astern propulsion and this pulled the bows off the mud and I then put us into forward prop, so the bows went out into mid channel. I increased the speed and we moved upstream away towards the Castle. I spoke to Andy and Jim and we decided the safest course of action was to remove the cabin roof, so as to be clear of the underside of the road bridge without possible damage to the Wye Invader or the

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bridge.

To achieve this we had to take the barge upstream a few hundred metres to be clear of the bridge, as the tide was still on the ebb. We needed time to remove the cabin roof and also fold down the glass and wood sides, so the barge was moved upstream for about half a mile into a position midstream. At this point the rudder was put in the ahead position, the engine revs were set at 600 per minute and the barge sat at ease midstream. This allowed me to leave the wheel for short periods, giving the three of us time to do the necessary work to take down only enough of the rear cabin to give the extra foot of air draft to be sure of clearing the underside of the bridge. This was the last major obstacle on the River Wye and I wasn't going to screw that up for anybody. With the cabin down, as we were still facing up stream we needed to set about turning the barge round. This was done by allowing the stern to drop back into the mud against the left bank. The ebbing tide caught the bows pushing the stern back into the river bank mud, whilst at the same time I held the barge into the bank by being in astern propulsion and all within five minutes we had turned. We were in forward propulsion on our way to meet the bridge. As we approached the centre arch, we could clearly see the run of the bend on which the bridge is located. The river flows from right to left across the middle arch, so I positioned the barge to go close to the left side of the middle right pier, as we were about half way through the arch. We were just over half way across and running out of arch space, from right to left. I increased engine revs to about 1200, allowing us to clear the right side of the left middle pier with about five foot to spare. As we came out of the arch the bows were pointing about 20 degrees to port which allowed the bows to clear the local boat club moorings but only leaving me just enough room to put the wheel hard over to square us away from the left bank, this

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meant we could run down the river just left of centre and clearing the moorings.

We now had 300 metres to the old Chepstow wharf, where we had permission to moor for the night. I put the barge into astern propulsion, the tide was about half gone, and we passed under the road and rail bridges moving the bows over to the right side of the channel. I could now see the wharf and we were almost at a stop. The bows ran against the downstream mud bank of the old wharf, we turned and I kept the forward power on to keep the bows in to the bank. Jim and Andy were ready with the springs forward and then confirmed the moorings were secure, so I stopped the engine.

At 1330 hours there were about twelve to fifteen onlookers stood on the wharf. One of them pointed out to me that we had met 23 years earlier when he'd been part of a Customs and Excise Team that had come on board the Wye Invader at 0630 hours on Wednesday 24 March 1989 to conduct a search at Tintern whilst on our way up river to Hereford. Strange things happen on the River Wye, I never did get to the bottom of that incident, the barge had been stopped and searched at Plymouth on entry into the UK, Falmouth, Penzance, and Padstow.

It was now 1430 hours and we set about re-assembling the wheel house, which was soon finished. The sun was still shining and pleasantly warm. By 1530 hours the engine had been checked for oil, coolant, and so had the gear box, the prop shaft, bearing caps and the oilers had been refilled for the morning start on Sunday. We hoped to be away at about 0930 hours on the flood tide. The rest of the afternoon was spent talking to members of the public who stopped by just to have a chat. By about 1730 hours most of our guests had gone, so we set about cooking an evening meal.

We had promised we would stop by the Boat Inn for a few drinks with various well-wishers. As we left the barge at about 2000 hours, she was sat just below the top edge of the old wharf, so we stepped off the deck onto the wharf without a lot



## The Wye Invader

of trouble. However, as an afterthought I secured a five metre length of rope to our four metre ladder, which in turn was secured to the old steel ladder running down the face of the Wharf, I then dropped it into the water between the barge and the Wharf.

In the Boat Inn we were well looked after and by the time we left it was late and cold, with a frost on the ground. We soon got back to the wharf and at first glance the barge had disappeared but as we got closer to the edge we saw her sat on the mud, eight metres lower than when we had left five hours earlier. At this point I'm pleased to say the ladder that had been left on the rope was still there. However, we still had to climb down three metres of old wharf ladder, then secure the four metre ladder before anyone could get back on board. As there were no volunteers from the crew, I seemed to remember someone suggesting that perhaps I should lead by example!

## The Wye Invader

### Final leg from Chepstow

*Sunday, 3 March 2014, 0800 hours*

It's not an early start after last night's run ashore. A good night was had by the crew and the well-wishers, most of whom were local boating people. Now it's the last 12 miles or so down the River Wye to just downstream of the old Seven Bridge, then up to Sharpness on a flood tide. At 0915 hours the tide was on its way in, the barge was still high and dry and it was time to have a final check of the engine oil level and various other necessary pieces of equipment. We are almost afloat. 0930 hours - the tide almost smelled the bottom around the barge. It was time to start the engine and let her warm up. We were now floating. Jim and Fred arrived 15 minutes later. At 1030 hours it was time to get under way.

As we were moored facing up stream, we needed to go about. Andy lets go of the stern spring, which allowed the incoming tide to push the stern out from the bank. With the bows secure we completed the turn letting go of the forward spring, with the engine ticking over and in gear we moved out into midstream. The final part of the 90 mile passage from Hereford to Sharpness was under way. I had lost count of how many experts had said it was not possible to navigate the Wye Invader back down the river because of her size and displacement to Chepstow and then Sharpness. The journey had been under way for 15 minutes and ahead was the Old Severn Bridge. By the time we passed under it and then turned left into the River Seven, we would have travelled about three miles in just over 20 minutes against a flood tide. With the barge being carried by the tide and the engine at half speed we had covered the eight miles in about 50 minutes. We were about 20 minutes going through the lock and moored up in the dry dock at Sharpness by 1230 hours. Job done!

## The Wye Invader