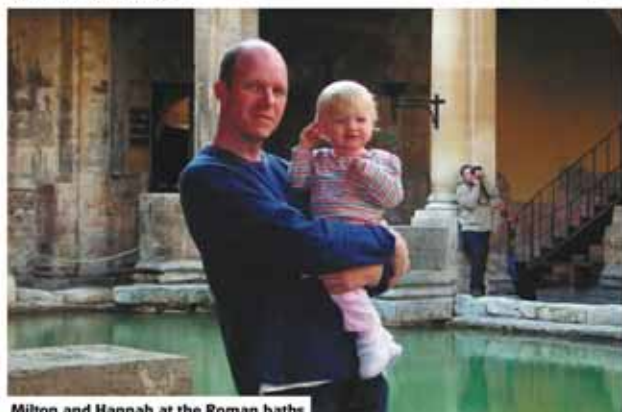


Milton takes the tiller



Roman baths



Milton and Hannah at the Roman baths



Milton, Tracy and Hannah on the Red Tailed Finch on the Kennet and Avon Canal

Watching the world drift by

It is life in the slow lane, but after a week canal boating on the newly restored Kennet and Avon Canal, novice skipper MILTON LINDSAY says there's a lot to be said for seeing the world drift by.

They say it's a small world but I discovered a narrow one as well after trying my hand at canal boating. But even if the living space is only six feet wide, there's still plenty to be said for life in the slow lane.

This novice skipper's maiden voyage was a leisurely 12-mile cruise to the historic city of Bath, starting on the Monday afternoon and returning to Hilperton Marina by breakfast time on the Friday morning.

After watching an instructional video and listening to an on-board briefing, it was with a mixture of trepidation and excitement that I assumed control of the 49-foot-long Red Tailed Finch, accompanied by my crew - partner Tracy, brother Paul and my baby daughter Hannah.

Up ahead lay a variety of alien challenges, in the form of locks, aqueducts, and swing bridges, all common features on the 87-mile long Kennet and Avon Canal, which links Reading with Bristol. But first I needed to master the basics - the tiller, for steering and the throttle for power.

Although I was under instruction to go no faster than walking pace of four miles an hour (to preserve the banks and escape the wrath of other canal users) - trying to keep the boat on the straight and narrow, especially when faced with oncoming traffic or vessels on either side of the narrow waterway, was no mean feat. It was a steep learning curve but without incident or admonishment. Who would have thought such a seemingly sedate pursuit could produce such adrenalin rushes!

However once I got the hang of pushing the tiller right to go left and vice versa, I was able to develop some canal sense, relax, and enjoy watching the world go by in glorious technicolour slow motion.

While potting along I absorbed the breathtaking hues of the early autumn foliage and marvelled at the abundant wildlife. I saw numerous kingfishers and herons, as well as the lesser-spotted jogs and common dog walkers, all drawn by the unique ambience along the

towpath of one of Britain's most scenic rural canal stretches.

Prior to embarking on the trip, steering a safe passage through the locks had been one of my biggest worries. And being shown photographs of boats that had sunk after being caught on the sills of the water-filled chambers at our briefing did little to ease my concern.

So I was glad to get the first lock under my belt before night fell. All went smoothly as we went through the entirely logical sequence of opening and closing gates and filling and emptying the chambers as we took the first key step on our descent of the Avon Valley.

It was quite hard physical work, cranking open the antiquated sluices with what looked like car starting handles and pushing the gates, but all part of the adventure.

It meant that we could all sleep more easily in our beds when we, somewhat conveniently moored up outside the village pub at Bradford on Avon.

Despite its classic appearance our four-berth boat was a bit of a wolf in sheep's clothing - with all the mod cons required for 21st Century living, including an excellent central heating system with radiators, and there was even a corner bath.

It meant we were all suitably refreshed for the following day's challenges which included going through the Avoncliff Aqueduct, which required a precision right angle manoeuvre - a feat I surprisingly achieved first time.

Eventually we reached the biggest obstacle barring our way to the World Heritage city of Bath, which had almost acquired mythical status in my mind, as I had previously only glimpsed the golden glow of its outstanding architecture from a high-speed train on the way to Bristol some years ago.

To enter the city we had to descend what amounts to a staircase of eight locks. Fortunately we had a clear run, with no other boats waiting to come up the flight, but even so, the procedure took around four hours - not that I was counting. This was a holiday which was all about escaping from the constraints of my clock-dominated, deadline driven life, and giving myself time to smell the coffee.

The final step was the Bath deep lock - one of the deepest in Britain with a total rise and fall of 18 feet 8 inches. Once through the system we made our way on to the River Avon and into the delightful heart of Bath, where we moored.

The following day, bathed in unseasonal brilliant sunshine, we soon found our land legs with a

leisurely stroll through one of the most photogenic cities in Britain. Our short sightseeing tour included a trip to the internationally famous Roman spa baths, founded around natural hot springs around the Fifth Century AD; as well as visit to the renowned Royal Crescent of Georgian town houses, hailed as masterpieces of Palladian design.

These images of my personal Mecca remained in my mind on the return leg of the journey, where armed with valuable experience, I was able to relax even more, knowing exactly what lay ahead, even if we were now doing everything in reverse.

The only hiccup was when, after a sudden loss of power, I had to plunge my arm into the icy water to free the propeller which had bizarrely managed to chew up someone's underpants!

I made it back to base early on the Friday morning deeply satisfied at the success of my maiden voyage and determined to repeat a thoroughly enjoyable experience by exploring some more of the 3000 miles of Britain's canal and navigable waterways network, which exists in a kind of parallel universe, frequented only by those in the know.

Originally established as industrial highways in the 18th Century, canal fortunes waned after the mid-19th Century arrival of the railways which were able to move freight more quickly. The passing of the 1968 Transport Act, which recognised the recreational potential of the nationalised canals and rivers, paved the way for vital new investment and the once neglected routes are enjoying a new golden age - this time for leisure use.

The 200-year-old Kennet and Avon Canal was officially reopened by the Queen in 1990 after being restored with the aid of a £25m Lottery grant, and is going from strength to strength. Long may it continue to do so!

travel facts

Milton Lindsay's trip, costing £482 was with the Drifters, a consortium of award-winning UK holiday boat companies. For details of pricing visit www.drifters.co.uk or call 08457 626252. A discount on canal boat breaks can be obtained by quoting Castle Wharf promotions/147. The offer is £50 off a part week; £100 off a full week; £250 off two weeks. For great ideas on enjoying the waterways visit: www.waterscape.com.