

Eat, Sleep, Paddle - Part 2

Rapid Development Expedition - Around Wales 2011 with Coastal Spirit continued...

For those of you who missed Part 1 in the June issue, and those who need a reminder you are joining us on Day 7. This morning we waved goodbye to our support team – Sonja and Ozzy dog, and with boats loaded for 7 days, we start the next phase of our journey leaving behind the canals as we move into the sea. We started on the 2nd April, have paddled about 240km down the Shropshire Union, Stafford & Worcester, Severn Waterway, and into the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. We've made really good progress to date, but have just been told the sea lock won't be opening today and we need to get into the Severn Estuary, and quickly to make the most of the tide...

A little despondent the team - Roger, Sue, Paul and I, paddled off looking for an alternative. As we checked out a possible portage track, a British Waterways flatbed drove past. The man who'd moments earlier delivered the bad news, spotted us and was offering a solution; "Would this help?" Thank you, Thank you! We loaded the heavy boats on as quickly as possible, anxious not to miss the flow. Thanks to Michael Nash and Des Reece, of British Waterways we were delivered to a muddy slipway, with views of the Severn bridges way off in the distance. A bit of sliding around in the mud and once again we were all afloat, and heading for salty water, but this looked more like thick boiling chocolate. As I watched Roger break-in, I saw that we were definitely

back in a dynamic environment! Progress towards the bridges was quick, buoys, cardinal markers coming fast. We'd been paddling in an unassisted environment for a week and now we were travelling 4 times faster, and enjoying the ride! The speed became more apparent with the roar of the water, at the approaching bridge pillars - The Menai Straits on steroids! We clocked 19.2km/hr under the M4. As the pace slowed on the dropping tide Denny Island provided an ideal lunch spot, before continuing on to Clevedon and a busy British beach scene. We'd continued down the English side to avoid the Welsh Grounds (mud flats) and would cross the following day. A beautiful sunset, dinner on the slipway, a beer in the local and a bivvy spot at the top of the beach – what a great start to this phase of the journey.

So being on the sea brought with it a new schedule - working with the tides, and boat carries... which this morning meant there was time for a visit to the tea shop! Good winds and glassy seas aided our crossing from the English to the Welsh coast, passing Steep Holm and Flat Holm, and for me it was this crossing where transits finally made sense. Our first crossing complete, we lunched on Sully Island, and with some afternoon 'homework' set to occupy our minds (well it is a development expedition!), we journeyed on. Hoping for a camp spot round Breakspear Point, we continued on, using the last few hours of the tide... nothing but a nuclear power station, and what looked like a large tea cake in the sea... we carried on. Short beaches and steep cliffs... we wouldn't want to get trapped... and needed to think about getting off the next morning, which could be tricky with the wind direction. A small dip in the coastline highlighted a

potential site. The lack of suitable camp spots had extended our day, but Llantuid Fawr provided a small busy beach, ice creams for some, toilets being the more important option for others! It was a long carry, but we were already getting used to these. After dinner on the still busy beach, and selecting bivvy spots, the incoming tide continued to come in... after much watching, putting markers in the sand and finally checking the high water time, bivvy spots were re-selected on the boulder slope or rocky ledge! So after an awesome 52km day, 9 hours paddling, the team settled down.

Now Clevedon had had the usual night noises of a beach town after a sunny Friday, but we hadn't expected Llantuid Fawr to be the party central it appeared to be! It was a disturbed night! For me disturbed was an understatement... having an upset stomach at home isn't pleasant, but whilst bivving on the beach... not nice! Dealing with the lack of facilities was one thing, but I was more concerned about how my energy levels would be affected, and how to maintain input and energy without risking too much 'output'! Sharing the information with the team, well it's an important part of expeditioning, resulted in some breakfast food swaps, and awareness, that I may have less energy for the day, or need a quick stop! Fuelled with extra mugs of tea and a few extra calories for some (good egg butties apparently), we set off on a magical journey along the coastline. The team were now getting used to paddling loaded boats in 'more interesting' water and with some good surf landings we arrived at Kenfig Bay, in time to enjoy the afternoon sun on the dunes. Recovering from a few disturbed nights and some



Article: Diane Lee



good distance days, the restful afternoon would set us up for an early crossing to the Mumbles, ahead of the approaching low pressure system.

We'd now completed a third of our distance, so all being well we were on target.

At 5.00am it was damp and grey. The extensive fog wasn't planned and the distance to the sea wasn't either! By 6.15am, with a mix of apprehension and excitement we were ready to launch into the misty atmospheric conditions. The obligatory wake up splash was delivered by the surf, and we headed into the gloom on a bearing to the Mumbles 18km away. The plan was to paddle for an hour and then make a decision to continue or return. Some issues and unease meant the decision to return was made. Within an hour the boats were back up the beach, tents up and the team resting. By noon the team were ready to hit town! The blustery 8km round trip was made worthwhile by chip butties, toasties, ice creams and a chance to pick up fresh bread and refill water carriers. The wind had picked up F4/5 and the forecast suggested a lie in! We woke to a sunny fresh, breezy morning and the wind had dropped leaving behind a large swell, although as promised the wind picked up again. The day was filled relaxing and refuelling... A walk along the beach, some clearing of litter from the dunes, reading, snoozing, eating... and planning! Texts to Sonja and signal for the Blackberry meant we were able to get a detailed forecast, and it looked like we'd be here for yet another day.

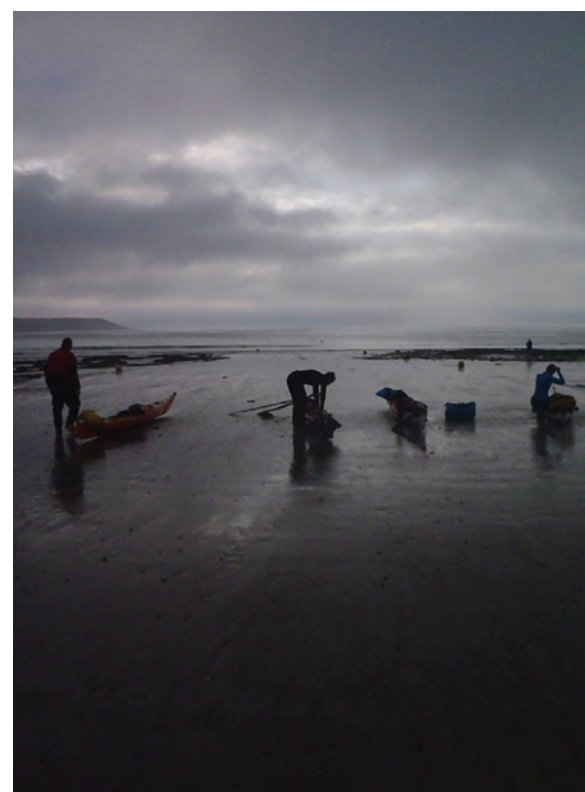
So all this rest gives me time to tell you more about those loaded boats...! Everyone develops their own process, but for me the important things are: being able to pack my tent/bivvy kit last, which means they're first out if it's raining – so nothing else needs to come out until somewhere dry is ready. So they live in the bow, where the tent poles will fit easily. My jet boil and brew kit are easily accessible and in this case live in the day hatch with my food, more about food later, but it's good to consider the weight and volume in your choice as well as the cooking time and desirability etc. Storing food here keeps the weight close to me and other heavy stuff – water lives under my thighs. There's an emergency bag with additional flares etc. behind my seat, and everything else get shared bow & stern. I enjoy the packing 'game' and easily managed to carry everything in my North Shore Atlantic LV. We shared 2 trolleys between the team for the long beaches and I had the wheels behind my feet, this made getting in and out a little different, but they were no problem. This trip was also the first time I'd used a deck bag – which contained everything I needed for the day: sunscreen, food, camera, so I had no need to open any hatches at sea, and also carried the GPS, tracker, solar charger. Others in the team carried lunch and other essentials, easily accessible in the cockpit. Everyone has their own method, this is what worked for me on this trip, but it's always worth experimenting! Anyway back to Kenfig Bay...

Despite the idyllic camp spot and close facilities after another 'rest' day, this time

wet and windy, the team are keen to move on. Final visits are made to Porthcawl for supplies and treats. The weather seems to be improving.

Day 13... Would we be lucky? We woke to "It's a go!" an hour earlier than expected! Soon boats were packed and we were ready to launch once again! Mixed sets of 2m surf greeted the team and within half an hour all had made it through and were recovering from the thrashing! Onwards across the grey swelling sea and soon The Mumbles came into sight...with the promise of fish & chips and mugs of tea. The 18km crossing complete and whilst the team were busy enjoying the rewards, a few of the boats were a little too keen to continue were rescued by Anthony and Rachel – thank you! Refuelled we travelled on along the Gower seeing our first porpoise, the water clarity finally improving. At Porth Eynon, the Carreglwyd campsite offered showers, and enabled a recharge of the Blackberry. After brews, showers, dinner (not necessarily in that order), and a beer in the local pub, an early night was in order ready for the next crossing from Worms Head to Caldey Island. So whilst not without event, day 13 saw us back on the water. Now for the part of the coastline I was most looking forward to; onwards to Pembroke.

We enjoyed the 30km crossing in mixed conditions and after a further 32km (10 hours paddling), we landed on beautiful Barrafundle beach. Great the sand would mean a comfortable night, but would require careful kit and tent management



to keep it off/out of hatches etc! Doing everything slowly and methodically seemed to help, but wet kit and sand - yuk!

A stunning coastline, amazing rock formations, paddling past routes I'd climbed and beaches I had visited provided the morning's scenery and some 'pushing the tide' making some headlands more interesting than others! We arrived at West Angle, and given 10 hours paddling the previous day, we stayed here for the afternoon. With kit spread out drying, and brews on, word soon spread around the friendly beach, and we found ourselves attending BBQ Bills 50th Birthday party bash! Well, who could refuse steak, beer and chocolate bananas?

Keen to make up the days we'd lost we had another long day planned and at 4am, Paul, Roger and myself were up - early enough to see the moon set and the sun rise, and allow a smooth ride through a slightly lumpy Jack Sound and onwards to Ramsay Island. We had 3 hours in the sun, waiting for the tide, before crossing to St David's Head and on into a thick mist along the north coast. An atmospheric journey at a slower pace brought us to Porthgain and a welcome cup of tea at The Shed, providing a great end to an awesome days paddling. I'm not putting any more detail about the day here because you really should go and see this for yourselves! I'm definitely going back! When you go, checkout the Pembrokeshire marine code: www.pembrokeshiremarinecode.org.uk

Porthgain was our planned rendezvous and resupply, and with the full team together

a further visit to The Shed was in order – this time for a fishy dinner! As we'd be seeing Sonja the next day, the re-supply was delayed and the same anticipation and apprehension that had built for Jack Sound was starting for Strumble Head. Nervous banter and some coaxing by Roger, "Come on you two it won't bite!" Hesitantly we paddled on and Strumble Head past without incident, however, experimenting and using back eddies and trying to make the most of the flows – unsuccessfully - Strumble Head soon seemed to be getting closer again! All useful lessons though! After some determined paddling, and positive thought, we tucked in closer to the coast and soon could see Sonja, Sue and Ozzy on the beach at Pwllgwaelod. A shorter, but harder day – thankfully there was a pub almost on the beach to aid recovery, and the afternoon was spent sorting kit and another 7 days of food.

More food – you say! From reading this you'll know we took opportunities to supplement with treats and jacket potatoes and bacon butties whenever available, but here's what I ate most days! Breakfast would be tea or hot chocolate and porridge (the stuff you just add hot water to), or Mountain Fuel's Morning Fuel if I knew we had a big day planned and often a hot cross bun or Welsh cakes as well! Throughout the day I'd eat bars - a variety of fruit bars, Natur bars, flapjack types, seven seed bars and my favourite coconut bars. On the canals I'd had wraps and tuna etc. but on the sea I stuffed my BA with lots of bars! Dinner – after more tea with condensed milk, would start with soup and noodles, or a pasta mug shot



and be followed by a couscous, pasta, rice or gnocchi based meal with a Look What We Found meal, or other sauce and additions – cashew nuts, sultanas, pine nuts etc. I'd taken malt loaf and custard, but possibly due to the warm weather didn't feel hungry enough to eat them. I'd have more drinks and hot choc before bed. Variety, texture, packaging and cooking times were my main considerations when choosing the food. I had taken more gas than I needed, and so along with a few other bits of surplus kit, the extra gas was also transferred to the support vehicle – no point carrying more weight than we had to! So back to the paddling...

Sue rejoined us and we left Pembroke for Cardigan Bay, seeing Dolphins on the way. Llangrannog was the first stop with bacon butties at the Shanti Sion, where we were also treated to cake and more tea - thank you! Feeling rather full we needed a rest on the beach before we could paddle anywhere and the re-stock of Welsh Cakes seemed rather unnecessary – for now anyway! New Quay (not the one in Cornwall), provided a much needed opportunity to rinse kit in the stream and offered options for bivvying - concrete fast becoming the preference for some. Tywyn was the aim for the next day, and we stayed out to make the most of the weak tidal assistance. Bigger waves provided good practice for paddling on a bearing, and I'd started to experiment with the GPS. Soon we were enjoying jacket potatoes in Tywyn. Another night on concrete – this time on the sea wall and promenade! The good weather enabled us to bivvy yet again, which as well as allowing a much quicker get away in the mornings, was also far less obvious.

With the GPS set for Aberdaron, and my fingers crossed that it was going to work, we started out on our 49km crossing! Initially grey and breezy, the day brightened and soon we were making good progress across a glassy sea with only gannets and a few other sea birds for company. The hourly breaks came and went surprisingly quickly and we were soon halfway... and now I needed a wee! So after some basic instructions and with some team support and much giggling – success and relief! The GPS provided expected arrival time, speed, distance and other info as well as direction and proved a useful motivator. Aberdaron was busy and, with kit drying in the sun, we headed for tea and ice creams to pass the time, waiting for the tide so we could get through Bardsey Sound and on to Porth Oer (Whistling Sands). As we pushed through, I was beginning to understand

the need for good rock hopping skills! As we carried boats and kit up the squeaky sand, Sonja and Ozzy appeared. They usually managed to find us, and we looked forwards to their supportive and encouraging visits. Tonight Sonja had prepared a surprise BBQ! What a treat! Thank you!

Checking the forecast, we were now starting to look further ahead, and counting the days. It now felt like we were heading homewards and we crossed from Trefor with a light following sea to Llandwyn Island. We were on Angelsey and completing this could be a reality! We paddled on to Abberfraw, but later after being moved on, paddled in the dark to Cable Bay. I was keen to do some night paddling and enjoyed the sensation – it felt silky smooth and as if we were travelling super fast. At Cable Bay we quickly sorted bivvys, trying to ignore the sandflies.

Day 22 Three of us left a damp and sandy beach, Sue would be finishing here, and going to get some much needed attention for a previous shoulder injury that was causing problems. As we paddled out the mood was improved by a magical moment – dolphins, and putting on wet sandy kit didn't matter anymore! We met Justine and Barry, who were joining us for the day and in far more typical Welsh weather we paddled through Penryn Mawr and on to South stack, both bigger than I'd previously experienced. I was aware how much I'd learnt! The Skerries lived up to their reputation – whoop, whoop! After a hot chocolate break we joined the North Coast conveyor belt to Porthgwichiaid, arriving just as the day brightened up. What a day! 70km, tide races, wind... weeks before I'd never had contemplated such a day! Just when we thought it couldn't get better - Sonja and Ozzy dog came over the hill, bringing cake and Easter eggs!

Craig joined us the following morning and as Justine and Barry paddled off (thanks for coming!), we headed out to get the tide and on across to the Orme. After a short break more coffee and treats we left Craig in the bustle of a sunny Easter Sunday at Llandudno and paddled on looking for what was going to be our last night! Llandulas provided a great spot and Paul had picked up bargain beers on the way!

We were really going to do this! What had made it happen...?

Roger's research and careful planning choosing April (remember that month of sunny days!); the build up, starting the previous July with 3 training weekends,

and Sonja's mentoring, providing encouragement, practical advice and supportive chasing - helping to prepare us (see Sonja's website www.coachingwales.co.uk). Having lighter tides for the crux points and bigger tides to help in the areas of weaker tidal assistance. Starting in the canals had enabled a steady progression and on the water – the hourly breaks of 5 mins ensured food and water intake, and enabled any adjustments to be made without creating faff time. A positive approach and believing we could do it, along with all the support and encouragement from friends, family etc. There are of course a number of people involved in making it happen and thanks must go to: Look What We Found – pre cooked vacuum packed food, Peak UK for their support, Natur in Llanberis for their RAW energy bars, Justine Curgenven for loaning her set of maps, and supporting Sonja, supporting us! Ray Goodwin for advice and information on the River Dee and Bristol Channel, Mark Tozer and Barry Shaw for loan of trolleys, UCLan for the loan of GPS and SPOT. Personal team thanks: Paul – 'thanks to Lucy for holding the fort at home, Darren Walker for the loan of kit', Di – 'Loel Collins for some 'big' days out and Pete Firth for some late night boat fettling.' All those who have helped, assisted and encouraged...

So Day 24 and the final morning - we really are going to do this. Taking it wide past Rhyl and Prestatyn to avoid the sand banks and onto the Point of Air, we turned in the Dee Estuary. The weather was changing and the westerly chased us in allowing us to travel between 4-6 knots. There had been no rain for days and we had tidal assistance and wind all the way! The shallow channel creating some exciting moments, keeping us concentrating to the end! As we paddled under the last bridge with only 1.5 km, was I going to cry? What a mix of emotions - sadness it was coming to an end, and that the purpose in our daily routine would be over, excitement at achieving the goal, and where would all I had learnt take me next?

Up the muddy slipway with the water rising and wind increasing – we'd done it! Celebrations! This time we really had earned the bubbly!

If you're inspired visit Coastal Spirit website www.coastalspirit.com or contact info@coastalspirit.com. See what plans they have for next year's rapid development expedition.

