

Aster day 7 - The Final leg

We left Gurgey at 8.30 am. Untying was a time-consuming business because we were perched on the end of the floating pontoons overhanging by half a boat length. We had a long rope attached to long-disused bollard up on the bank, further ropes tied to the concrete quay to which the pontoons were attached and a boat pole jammed in the river bed and lashed to a bollard on the boat to keep the bow away from the bank.

We'd taken on guests for our final day, all supporters and enthusiasts for Project Aster. These included Danielle Moullet, curator of the Musée de la Batellerie de Saint-Jean-de-Losne, former barge skippers, a musician who writes and sings songs of the waterways. Our guests more than doubled our number. It was fabulous to see the support but sad in a way that this was the final day of a great adventure for the nine crew-members who had laughed, worked and suffered together depending on whether things had gone well or badly. Anybody who showed interest steered the boat for a spell, crew and guests alike. For the inexperienced it was a thrill to be handling this wonderful, historic barge. She may be rough around the edges but she is still a proud (albeit on occasion temperamental) old lady who has allowed mere mortals to lead her on. For others, bargees with decades of experience handling large boats, it was less the size, more the nostalgia and history attached to Aster that I hope gave them a reminder of their skills and way of life.

But throughout, whoever was at the helm, somehow Aster has always been in charge. She could always spring a surprise. We have to remember that she has not moved for well over a decade – she is entitled to be grumpy. Ascending the lock at Ecuelles was rather traumatic. The fore and aft wash of the incoming water tested Asters bollards to their limits, particularly at the stern where they actually lifted slightly each time substantial strain was put on them. Those on the rear deck feared the whole bollard assembly may part company with the ship. Our escort boat, Cornelia Helena, was further back in the lock and actually snapped a bow line during one surge.

It was a breezy day, cooling as the temperature reached the high twenties. The huge French Tricolour snapped at it's staff from the stern, as did the hand-sewn 'Aster' flag on the bow. She made a steady 7 kilometres per hour against a slight current, pretty impressive really as Aster was previously operated on the Canal Du Universals and never as fast as that or for such a sustained period. The gearbox throughout the trip became extremely hot and engine oil needed to be topped up from time to time but she ploughed on as the reassuring throb of old engine thumped back echoes back from riverside trees.

The pivotal role in crewing Aster is naturally the person at the helm at any given moment but everybody played a part. Crewing Aster is not a one-person job – her 3 motors (main engine, generator and compressor) only run if we tend them and she will only go where we tell her to. If we bump a wall, we all take a share of the blame – it's certainly not the boat's fault.

Danielle Moullet gave Patricia Gerard some candles. One was lit every morning and left to burn throughout the day in the saloon to keep us safe. Well, it worked, we made it.

Motoring under the bridge and past the quay at St. Jean de Losne was an experience I shall never forget. I have spoken to two others who shed tears, 'tough guys' the three of us – I didn't need to speak with the remaining crew. The welcome was amazing and I hope Aster now realizes we mean her no harm.

Footnote:

These trip reports have been cobbled together by Jo May on behalf of 'Admiral' Charles Gerard and all the crew of Aster. We would collectively like to sincerely thank Barnaby and Anne Capel-Dunn for translating the reports into French and Jean-Pierre from bateau Tabatha for updating the Musee web site with both these and all the photographs taken along the way.