

# Sort of a Scout canoe

Canoe touring was perhaps at its best after the war when construction materials for canvas craft, cars and fuel all became more readily available. People wanted to get into the great outdoors and travel in the countryside.

Access restrictions were still largely a thing of the future. Arthur Green was a later convert but wrote down his experiences as a book which was never published. We now present it as a reminder of times when life was slower and simpler but enjoyed every bit as much.

## Chapter 3 - The land of nationalists

Next day breakfast was taken on the run and we were down in the town doing our essential shopping; it being Wednesday, we were out of almost everything. A sunny day was to make our rest from the exertions of canoeing something to be savoured. Our call at the butcher's was memorable.

'We'd like a piece of steak about so by so and this thick,' I requested.

'Certainly, Sir,' and he proceeded to cut from a piece of beef.

'That's not steak,' said Charles.

'Oh, yes, it is,' replied the butcher.

'My mam told me that cut was silverside,' insisted Charles.

'Your mam tells you too ruddy much, grumbled the butcher and proceeded to cut another piece, this time from the steak bone.

'I know how much a pound it is an' all,' needled Charles.

'That'll be twelve bob,' said the butcher, and don't bring him when you come next time.' The car was taken and refuelled and parked behind the post office whilst we sent off the mandatory postcards to anxious parents and longsuffering wife then our thoughts returned to food, this time of the quick variety, as, for some time, appetite had been whetted by the tantalizing odour of fish and chips but where was the elusive vendor? At last we ran it to ground up a little alley. We joined the queue in the shop and joined the bunter.

'Are your knees cold, boyo?'

'No,' I replied, 'Would you like to feel 'em?'

'Bit old for the Boy Scout lark, gov'nor,' was the next sally.

'Not if you enjoy it,' I countered.

'Are you the ones camping by the bridge above the park,' came from behind the counter.

'Yes, on Mr Powell's land,' I confirmed.

'We were up there on Sunday after chapel. Cozy you looked then.'

'We are most comfortable, thank you.'

'How many then, love? It was our turn.

'Cod and chips three times, please,' I asked.

'That'll be nine bob, then. Ta!'

'Cheerioh!' The taste of those chips still lingers in the memory and they kept us going until the evening. The rest of the day was spent reconnoitring for a campsite as near to Pontymoel as we could find but at least fifteen miles down the canal from Pont-y-parc. Sites we could find without any trouble but no-one seemed to know who farmed the land. It was amazing how little the locals were prepared to tell a stranger about the tenancy or ownership of the fields in the area. Being very tenacious, we ran one farmer to earth and arranged to camp on his land. It meant walking up a long steep hill and through a muddy farmyard to fetch water but we had not a great deal of choice if we were to camp by the canal.

There being plenty of time before we returned to camp, our road took us on to the Heads of the Valleys road and into Merthyr Tydfil; it was halfday closing and the place was deserted.

'Does anybody live here?' asked Charles.

'Yes, it's a big place,' I replied.

'Where are they all, then? I can't see anybody about, not even a cat or dog,' came next.

'This is the town centre and it is halfday closing,' I informed.

'It doesn't look as if they ever open,' said Paul. 'It looks like a film set for *How green was my valley*; it was on the telly the other week.'

'Don't be daft; you must have heard of it. They've a rugby team,' I explained.

'I've heard of them but never thought the place was like this,' conceded Paul.

'When do they come round and collect the gas lamps for the night?' shied Charles.

'Don't let the locals hear you, my lad,' I scolded.

'Not much chance of that,' was his last word and that from someone

who lives in Rotherham. Whilst the cook was tending his pots we had a gentle walk along the bank in the cool of the evening. The canal bank is rarely silent but at this time of the day the small nocturnal animals and insects can be heard going about their quest for food. Our return almost coincided with the rattle of a spoon on a plate announcing the meal. The steak was tender and the rest of the meal up to standard; once the washing up was done we were off to bed ready for another early start. When we crawled out of the tent the sky was overcast and we didn't like the look of the weather. After a hurried breakfast we quickly packed and set off towards Mamhilad. In the event the expected drizzle did not arrive, the overcast turned out to be a heat haze and soon there was a hot sunny day for us to enjoy. The five miles run to Gilwern prepared us for a rest and Charles decided to shop for presents and would not be diverted. There was at that time a very good hardware shop in the village and displayed in the window was a beautiful Aladdin table lamp with an attractive ruby shade but, in view of the canoes' being loaded, it was left where it was. I have often regretted not making the purchase when power cuts have necessitated the Tilley being lit as it would have been more eyeable on the lounge table. I could have called for it on the Saturday but it was forgotten. The lunch was bought from the Co-op and eaten sitting in the canoes as soon as we had passed under the Heads of the Valleys road and out of range of the traffic noises. Our next landmark was the BWB yard at Govilon, where we caged a *Watenways News*.

From then on the scenery became varied and magnificent when, after a tentative exploration of Cwm Llanwenarth and a dive under an old railway track, the canal lay along what amounts to a shelf halfway up a mountain called Blorenge. Below us lay Llanfoist and it was at this point that the disastrous breach was to occur a few years later and nearly sound the death knell of the waterway. However, we were oblivious to all such and went on our merry way to view the town of Abergavenny, looking like a toy, in the midst of a patchwork of fields with tree lined hedgerows in the valley below. Every little cwm put its kink in the canal, adding variety to the scene, with the mountains providing an overall backdrop. The fauna generally is prolific and provided interest and amusement at all times; one of the duck family, which even Charles could not identify, treated us to a marvellous display of playing lame and keeping about five yards in front. We could not find her brood and, therefore, she must have succeeded in her endeavours to distract us. The sunshine persisted and the scene changed like a kaleidoscope at each bend. It was hard to resist the temptation to stop and explore every nook and cranny but fifteen miles a day it had to be for the Chief Scout and we pressed on, vowing to come back some other time and take a leisurely look at all the interesting parts. As we passed a boat moored to the towpath, out of the steerer's hatch came an empty beer can, to be neatly fielded by Charles.

'Ey up,' he shouted, 'Is this yours?' and promptly shied the can back. A head popped up through the hatch just at the right moment to receive the can on the end of the nose. I will not record the subsequent conversation but Charles won the round by a nose.

Shortly after Goytre Wharf the steep hillside was left behind and the canal wound through lovely rolling countryside dotted with pretty stone built farms and houses, the waterway alternately in shallow cuttings or over low embankments. Occasionally the canal opened out into a pool or wide and on either side appeared attractive places in parklike fields which would make ideal camping spots for the canoeist. As I have mentioned previously, it is difficult to find out who farms the land unless vast amounts are spent in the local lubricating many throats. When the ICI nylon fibres factory appeared on our left we knew that we were approaching our resting place for the night at Troed-y-Rhiew Farm. Our campsite was decided by where it was possible to disembark, as the banks were lined with either brambles or places churned up by drinking cows. We found a place where we could step onto the