

bole of an alder with our painters in our hands and drag the canoes out through a nettle patch. There were about thirty acres to choose from so a sheltered spot was picked under a hedge close to a bridge with open meadowland in view from the tent doorway. It was a beautiful, calm evening and, once the inner men had been satisfied, we crossed the bridge, walked along the towpath, down a leafy lane and into the local pub where we met our farmer friend. As we sat in the bar, no-one seemed to mind the two lads sitting there drinking lemonade; a tourist arrived and started sounding off about 'They ought to send 'em all back.'



'Send who back?' asked one of the farm hands. 'Them,' he said, thumbing over his shoulder towards a lad sitting in the corner.

'Send him back where?' enquired our friend. 'Wherever these darkies come from,' he replied. 'The lad you are pointing at was born and bred in this village and we very much resent your implications. You will be well advised to save that sort of talk for your own cronies and on your own muckheap,' said the landlord. 'Close the door when you go, boyo.' It helped to liven our evening but we did not enjoy it as much as the inebriates choir led by the lovely tenor voice of the subject of the conversation, even though his Welsh was far beyond us. Afterwards the farmer told the story of the rabid Welsh nationalist who was in the pub one evening.

'We should declare unilateral independence,' he advised. 'Oh,' came from the spectator, 'and where shall we have the border posts then?'

'On the traditional line of Offa's Dyke,' quoth he. 'That's no good, boyo; it's got to be the other side of Birmingham. There's at least thirty thousand of our lot there, you know.' We had thought that the hum of the air conditioning unit at the factory over the canal would keep us awake but this was forgotten when we heard the coal trains clattering along the nearby line at seven minute intervals. Weariness blotted out both in the end and we were in the arms of Morpheus until the bright sun woke us to find that the cold night had soaked the flysheet with dew.

A message to deliver

There was no hurry over the meal as the flysheet had to be dry before we packed so that it could remain untouched for the rest of the season and the following winter. At last we were off only to be plagued by the prevailing wind funnelling down the Usk valley until we entered the shelter of the more wooded reaches. Our enjoyment of the sunshine and the scenery (it looks different coming the other way) and the sounds of the countryside drowsily humming in the background was complete although we could not identify all the squeaking animals, buzzing insects or even the make of farm tractor popping away in the distance. By lunchtime our progress had not been spectacular as Charles had been indulging in his favourite pastime of looking about him so we left the canoes at Parc-y-Brain Upper Bridge and walked the short distance down a narrow lane to the tiny village of Penperleni to see if there were any postcards for sale. These were obtained from an equally tiny post office where we borrowed the post office official pen and wrote them out before posting them. We had noticed a tea place on the main road and, as the Chief Scout had said nothing against it, we partook of lunch at the Rose Café.

'A pot of tea for three and something on toast three times, please,' I asked.

'Very good; are you hiking then?' 'No, we are canoeing on the canal.' 'Are you going anywhere near Goytre Wharf? They are not on the telephone yet and they have asked us to provide teas for some of their hirers on Saturday but didn't put the time on.' We were glad of an excuse to call at Goytre Wharf and be nosey and I acquiesced.

'Yes we will only be too pleased to carry a message,' we promised. The something on toast was delicious and followed by homemade cakes and bosun's tea.

'How much then?' 'That will be ten shillings and sixpence, if you please.'

Here you are then. Cheerio,' we called as our tracks turned towards the canoes. Soon we arrived at Goytre Wharf and the then proprietors were young and enthusiastic. They thanked us for the message but were a little nonplussed as they could not forecast at what time their hirers would arrive. The premises were guarded by a huge and no doubt

fierce Pyrenean mountain dog and they struggled this into a back room whilst we looked round and eventually made our miserable purchases. I bought the first of many canalia tea towels and have been a sucker for these ever since. As the day wore on Charles, who was the younger of the two and who was doing his solo, became more and more tired, so much so that he swapped places with his elder brother and continued as my crew for the rest of the passage back to camp. His chances of a Chief Scout Award had diminished but this was not of vital importance to him although the enjoyment of the holiday was. Charles had not been the only dawdler and we made the day spin out, arriving back at camp just as the sun was setting and the evening chill made us shiver.

Visitation at the gallop

You may imagine our shock at finding a huge four foot long tear in the canvas of the extension to the trailer tent and chaos inside where table, camp kitchen and camp bed were all overturned and trampled. One of the Welsh cobs, chased by some children we later discovered, had entered without knocking and had a good old prance around. We righted the overturned furniture and, finding very little damage in that department, Charles soon had a meal under way, using the larger of the torches for lighting. Paul held the Tilley so that I could see to sew up the tear in the canvas, a repair essential as it was used as a bedroom. The job took two and a half hours and the meal had to be kept warm until we were finished; after that caper the grub tasted like ambrosia.

The fish

The rest of the holiday would have been an anticlimax had it not been for the fish. Charles had spent a lot of time fishing when there was nothing else which interested him and, although his tackle was a bit on the simple side, he should have caught some of the plentiful fish. None thought that he would ever catch anything because he would frequently lift the bait out of the water 'to see if there was a fish on the end.' It was carefully explained that the bait should be left in until the float bobbed and then gently raise the rod tip to strike the fish before winding it in to the net. The penny must have eventually dropped because the next evening Paul and I were reading after an adequate dinner when a loud yell was heard from the direction of the cut.

'Uncle Arthur, Uncle Arthur, Uncle Arthur, quick, quick.' Panic raged as we both thought that he had fallen in and stuck in the mud. There was no danger of his drowning in deep water as he swam like a fish. When we reached the bank he was running towards us but kept dipping his hands in the canal and holding his wrist, once more panic. 'Has he cut his wrist on some glass?' I voiced my fears aloud to Paul.

'I don't think so,' said Paul. 'He hates the sight of blood and would be lying down screaming by now if he had.' By this time Charles had closed the distance and arrived breathless almost.

'I've caught one,' he exclaimed. 'Innit a big 'un?' He produced a perch about four inches long; this was what he had been dipping in the cut to keep it alive.

'At least you've caught one and we will verify the fact when you get home.' The fish was returned, luckily unharmed, to the water and, with luck, to grow into a real big 'un.

The expert cook

The time had arrived and we packed up the gear ready for the trip home, first to Rotherham and then, for me, back to Sutton Coldfield. Their mother greeted us with 'Did you both have a good time?'

'Yes, Mum. Can we go again next year?' 'You'll have to ask your Uncle Arthur.' 'Can we, Uncle?' 'Yes' if you are good lads.' 'What did you have to eat?' asked Madelaine. 'Meat every day and cauliflower and broad beans and...' At this Madelaine broke in.

'But you don't like broad beans or cauliflower.' 'I like 'em how Uncle Arthur showed us how to cook 'em.' 'I'll ask him the secret,' said Madelaine with a glint in her eye as I beat a hasty retreat towards the car to unpack the boys' gear. You will understand when you know that Madelaine is a domestic science teacher.

Arthur Green