



CAPITAL CRUISE: Whisper's long journey reaches the Thames, and treats Max and Elaine to some of its world-famous sights, such as Battersea Power Station (below)

Whisper down the Thames



In our last edition, we followed **Max and Elaine Campbell's** 110-mile maiden voyage aboard their Australian kit-boat trailer sailer Whisper. And in a packed summer's cruising which hasn't allowed them yet to work on the rigging for the little yacht, this time we find the Cambridge couple sailing on under power into the nation's capital.



CITY SLICKER: Max takes time to have his photograph taken in the hectic three miles (and eleven bridges) through the centre of London

We were being swept down under Tower Bridge, doing about five mph through the water, but with the stream under us nearly doubling that over land.

The wash from half a dozen large boats was interacting, reflecting off banks and bridge piers and we were bobbing, swaying and plunging, all at once.

A very large, and potentially very fast, Thames Clipper close behind us had a chap standing on the bridge making pushing signs at us – he wanted us to move **RIGHT** over, and **RIGHT NOW**.

In the direction he wanted us to move was the irresistibly attractive south pier of the bridge, with a lot of water piled up against it. I compromised, by staying more-or-less where I was until I was through the bridge.

I could imagine the VHF traffic between Clipper captains, with much bandying about of words like “amateur”, “nuisance” and “danger to themselves and others”, but heck, we were bright yellow, they could see us, and we were keeping well over to the right where we could.

We were also keeping a good look out, including behind us, and we were making any course changes obvious. The trouble was that we were very small and we were travelling at the boaty sort of speed that boats have been travelling at since pre-history, whereas the Clippers wanted to get to their 28 knot top speed whenever their criss-cross course allowed.

They also expected all other river users to know which piers were theirs, and cross their path when they were approaching one.

Just about then, too, I was trying to follow the instructions of Jeremy, lock keeper at Limehouse Lock, as I had since the start of this trip, by phoning him so that he could get the lock ready for us.

This seemed important to us. In the photos we had seen that the lock entrance was a tiny gap in a huge stone wall. We had read about the back eddies, and we knew that in another hour there wouldn't be enough water over the cill.

We had run through the approach in our minds. We would go past, cross the river, then come back against the stream, turn in, take care of the back eddy, and come to rest against the two risers, said to be 20ft apart, in the middle of the lock.

And that is exactly how it happened, though we struggled to make way against the stream.

Jeremy was on the lockside, fingers on buttons, and once he had got us up to his level, he handed us our information pack, with our night's mooring in Limehouse basin marked, a note of the security code for the facilities, and tomorrow's passage plan all printed off. It was 7pm, a couple of hours past his normal working hours, and the passage plan involved leaving at 7.30am next morning, more than an hour before his normal start time.

I had spoken to him three or four times over the previous week, when he had been incredibly informative, and this whole service seemed worth a small tip – but he politely but firmly refused it.

We had travelled a significantly tidal river only once before, the Arun in West Sussex, and then, as in trying to plan this trip, I found it impossible to comprehend which bit flows which way and when.

For example, high tide at Richmond occurs about an hour after high tide at London Bridge but low water occurs between 3 and 3½ hours after low water at London Bridge. Put that together with the fact that you're actually moving between Richmond and London Bridge, and that the stream is affected by whether it's springs or neaps, and the amount

of flow over Teddington weir, and I think anyone would seek advice.

It was then I'd phoned Limehouse and first spoke to Jeremy.

“Leave Teddington at 1500 hours at the top of the tide, travel at normal narrow-boat cruising speed and you'll get to Limehouse at about 19.00,” he told me. “Phone us on the morning of the trip to confirm you're still coming, and phone us as you go under Tower Bridge, so we can ready the lock.”

So it had all gone exactly to plan – but it was still, to us, a significant adventure.

This was only the second trip we'd had in our self-built kit boat. Whisper was designed as a sailing boat – a gaff cutter, actually – and the principal use we envisage is under sail, but there was still work to be done to get her sailing.

But as we had got all the gear on board and she'd need a clean before we added the top coat of paint, we thought we would motor down another river, where we wouldn't want to sail anyway.

The whole point of a trailer-sailer, apart from avoiding mooring fees, is to allow visits to different areas – a way of boating we've got used to over the years using our canoe, in which we've explored 135 miles of the non-tidal Thames from Cricklade down to Teddington Lock, over the last five years or so.

I'd always wanted to go through the middle of London, past the Houses of Parliament and the London Eye, and we'd identified Limehouse Basin as a potential stopover when we visited it from the other side in the canoe, arriving via the River Lee and leaving via the Regents Canal, as reported in the July/August Anglia Afloat.

From previous trips, we also knew that Penton Hook Marina offered a good slipway and somewhere to park the car and trailer,



COSMOPOLITAN: Elaine relaxes against the surprisingly beautiful skyline of the Limehouse basin at night

and at 15 miles above Teddington, which is as far inland as the tide reaches, it offered the prospect of a nice stress-free cruise for the first day.

Ours is only the second Secret Class boat to be launched in the UK, and the first has so far only had one outing, on Rutland Water. So as we approached a pontoon in Shepperton Marina, looking for a chandlers that could sell us gas for our foghorn, we were more than a little surprised when the chap getting ready to take our lines called over: "I know what that is, it's a Secret, from Derek at Scruffie Marine."

The clue was in the Aussie accent, but the coincidence was remarkable.

Nathan was now working at Shepperton, but had previously worked for Scruffie, the originators of the kit, in Australia, and had sailed a Secret, which is more than I had. We spent about an hour there – and left with a complimentary foghorn refill! We moored for the first night at Kingston, opposite the town, where ants invaded the boat within minutes of our arrival, presumably by climbing the mooring lines.

The next day we only had to get to Teddington for 3pm, so had plenty of time to re-read the downstream version of the British Waterways publication, London Tideway Handbook, which we downloaded from www.waterscape.com/canals-and-rivers/river-thames

We had followed its advice on sound signals and we had a print-off of what they all meant; and we had an anchor ready to go, with 35m of chain and warp securely attached to the boat.

Available also as an upstream version, this handbook shows each bridge in turn, in silhouette profile, with the correct arches marked.

No licence is needed to use the river below

Teddington, which is managed by the Port of London Authority. At Richmond there is a sluice, a half-tide barrier lifted clear of the water to allow unrestricted passage for a couple of hours either side of high water. Outside these hours, when the sluice is closed, passage is via the lock.

In the 12 miles down to Vauxhall Bridge we passed under 16 bridges, looking for the two amber lights or a bale of straw (which indicates limited headroom) over the arches, and were aware of the strength of the stream as we passed buoys and moored craft.

From Vauxhall Bridge for the three miles to Tower Bridge, though, everything gets very busy indeed. There are huge amounts of traffic – not only the Clippers, but also traditional tourist boats. The stream increases, both because of the time since high water, and because the river narrows.

The sights whisk past before you can take it all in. Millbank (Labour Party HQ), MI6, the Houses of Parliament, the London Eye, the South Bank, the Shell Centre, the Tower of London, the Tate gallery, HMS Belfast.

You are always negotiating a bridge; there are 11 famous ones in those three miles.

Then suddenly, past Tower Bridge, it all calms down. There isn't another bridge until the Queen Elizabeth 2 bridge taking the M25 over the river, about 15 miles away, and the only notable buildings are the cluster three miles ahead around Canary Wharf.

There is less traffic in a wider river – though now they do tend to move very fast indeed.

Next morning we decided to leave before 7.45am to catch the last of the ebb downriver. Even just ticking over to maintain steerage, we went past Canary Wharf in a 270 degree loop.

Over the years, we had watched the skyline of East London changing. Every time we had driven south from Cambridge, we were able

to see the progress from half way down the M11, but down at its base, Canary Wharf didn't seem anything like as big.

The quality of the buildings and their fittings was striking, though. Beautifully dressed cobbles with sunken uplighters; carved stone pillars; the fine-leaved dark green grass well watered and manicured; the olive trees in tubs sharing a perfect browse line; all the bulbs lit.

Then it was on past the Millennium Dome, Bow Creek, through the Thames Barrier, and past the Woolwich Free Ferry, a good seven miles, before we turned slightly before the tide did, in fear of being swept down to Southend.

The second time through central London was less stressful, though we did get five short blasts from an oncoming Thames Clipper when we went to pass port-to-port as she was trying to get into a pier and apparently wanted us to cross her bows.

We knew the meaning of this sound signal – "I do not understand your intentions: keep clear" – but as we had the tide under us, and couldn't have turned to go across her, we made it abundantly clear that we intended to pass port-to-port and stood on, so she had to wait for a few seconds.

The tide swept us up the river so fast that we arrived at Richmond before the sluice opened, and rather than go through the lock we were asked to wait 20 minutes or so as the tide caught up, then in no time at all we were back through Teddington and on to the constant and restful waters of the non tidal river.

We still can't quite say that we've explored the whole of the Thames, but we hope to travel the lower tideway below Woolwich and under the M25 under sail when the boat is finished. But we would recommend our trip through the heart of the capital to anyone. But be sure to be like a boy scout – prepared.