

## Single handed boating

I cruise from early June to the end of September each year. This usually means up to 800 miles, 450 locks, plus swing and lift bridges, depending on the route. The vast majority of this cruising is single handed. Probably the most important issue is safety, especially around locks, swing and lift bridges. As you probably realise, these sites are inherently very dangerous and littered with trip hazards. However, the only difference for a single handed boater compared to a boat with crew is the lack of support if something goes wrong. So, there is a case for extra vigilance on the part of the single handed boater.

Otherwise, there isn't in my opinion, much difference whether there is crew, or not, except that the single hander has to do everything. It is, though, a good idea to have a routine. For locks: moor up, check lock status, operate paddles as necessary, open gates, drive boat into lock, climb the ladder if going up, tie up the boat giving plenty of rope if going down, operate paddles, open gates, climb down ladder if going down, drive boat out of lock and moor, return to lock and close gates.

On some canals, for example, the Huddersfield, mooring along the bank may not be a possibility as at most locks it isn't possible to get close to the bank, and, generally there is nothing to moor to anyway. Under these circumstances it is necessary to attach the bow rope to the bridge, or lock and climb onto the side of the lock. Then operate the lock, pass the boat through and moor the stern rope to the lock or bridge, climb onto the side again, close the lock gates and reboard the boat. A variant of this procedure often needs to be followed when operating swing bridges on the Yorkshire side of the Leeds and Liverpool canal, where most bridges are not provided with any mooring options on the operating mechanism side of the canal. Obviously this procedure can be a bit challenging, but that is what makes cruising so interesting. Inevitably, the single handed boater has just completed the above procedure when another boat approaches together with ample crew on board!!

In general though, swing and lift bridges are a doddle compared with locks: moor up, open the bridge, drive boat through, moor up, return to bridge and close up. Some bridges are on quite busy roads, so that traffic hold up is inevitable. My experience is that the vast majority of drivers are not only understanding but enjoy watching the bridge being operated. Unfortunately this attitude is not entirely universal, I have been verbally abused on several occasions for holding up traffic for a few minutes, despite seeing no approaching traffic before starting to open the bridge.

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If it's one of those flamin' awkward ones where a single handed boater has to be on both sides of the canal at once, my best tip is wait for somebody else to come along!

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For swing bridges with the lift mechanism on the opposite side to the towpath I have found the following works quite well:

Approaching the swing bridge, alight on the towpath side then take the bow rope across the bridge. Secure the bow rope and raise the bridge, Pull the boat through the bridge placing the bow rope back on the boat once through. Take the stern rope and secure. Lower the

bridge. Get back on the stern and move off. It sounds convoluted but having tried several methods this has to be the simplest and most efficient.

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I have been through at least three quarters of the locks on the network, many of them more than once.

Here are my thoughts.

1) make sure you know how to tie a boatman's hitch quickly and competently and know when it won't hold.

It is very important to use a knot which won't jam if pulled tight.

2) secure the boat using a centre line (have one which reaches beyond the stern by about 10 feet) to the bollards at the extreme lower end of the lock to keep the boat from moving forward when the lock is filling more than a couple of feet forward of bottom of the gates.

3) going down have a centre line loose on the side of the lock.

4) being old, arthritic and fat I avoid the ladders, stepping off the boat as it enters the lock through the lower gates. Carry a long light boat hook so you can get the centre line, check the boat if necessary and make it fast.

5) Going down pull the boat just clear of the bottom gates using the centre line. Shut the gates and walk down the steps to join the boat. Be aware of wind and side streams.

6) NEVER WALK OR TAKE A STEP BACKWARDS NEAR A LOCK.

One size doesn't fit all, all this works for me.

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Re single handed boating, I have been doing it for 10 years and thought I'd share a couple of hard earned tips.

Locks: I mostly use narrow rather than broad locks and my method is as follows: when going uphill I gently bring the boat up to the front gate and leave her on tick over, using a tiller string to keep the rudder straight. I open one paddle for 5 turns and wait. My boat will go back just a few inches and then settle again on the gate. I can then wind the paddles straight up and she will stay put. I open the gate, cruise her to the mouth of the lock where, unless its windy she will stay while I close the gate.

Downhill the same except she is out of gear. That way, when the water equalised she magically backs off the gates by herself so I can open them. Although this method means using the lock ladders which needs great care, I believe it is the safest method as it means no ropes, no hauling the boat and she is always as far from the cill as it is possible to be.

The only problem I have ever had with this method is from other boaters who, without checking with me, have whipped both paddles up while I am still climbing the ladder! That causes my boat to disappear from under me and then ram the lock gates! So my top tip is

when you encounter a lone boater, please ask if they would like assistance before rendering it! I love it when people ask.

Oh and a tip for other lone boaters: never ever use the fact you are single handed as an excuse for leaving gates open or paddles up. It shows the rest of us up in a really bad light! If you can't work a lock properly alone, then you shouldn't be single handing!

Re lift and swing bridges, I absolutely love finding the mechanism for working the bridge on the towpath side. However the vast majority are not, so I cruise up to the bridge and point my bow at the non-towpath side. With windlass or key in hand I walk to the front either inside my boat or down the gunwales and get off with my bow rope. Usually there will be one bollard to tie to, but sometimes it's a tree, or even standing on my rope! I never tie to the bridge itself as I can see the dangers. Then I lift or swing the bridge, climb back onboard and steer her through. I then use my stern rope to attach to anything I can find while I drop the bridge and step back on my stern. She will tend to swing about a bit, tied only to bow or stern but I always manage to straighten her up ok when going through the bridge or when leaving. I have found the occasional lift bridge that annoyingly won't stay up on its own while I steer the boat through. My only option then is to wait till another boat comes along. I would never use anything to try and wedge the bridge open as the danger is obvious.

Last tip is for mooring up. I use my centre rope first (I have 2, one either side, just long enough to reach my stern but not so long that if they fall in, they reach my rudder!) I secure her temporarily with that if possible. Then do bow and stern. If there is nothing to tie the centre rope to, then I always secure the bow first as I can always walk down my gunwales and use the engine to bring the stern in. If you tie the stern first and your bow blows out, it's much harder to get it back in.

I could go on (and on, and on) but I don't want to bore you! I would just say that I'll be 60 next year and I absolutely love lone boating. Yes, I have to think things through carefully and make safety my priority, but I have cruised narrow and broad canals as well as rivers, and ten years on I am still here to tell the tale!

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There is a wonderful booklet available which gives advice on every aspect of single handed boating.

"Going it Alone" by Colin Edmundson (absolutely no connection!) is in my view definitive on the subject, and should be on the shelf of every boater who considers going it alone.

I've been largely single handed for many years over a variety of waterways, and his advice has been invaluable.

I thoroughly recommend it.

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Having been a single-handed boater for 8 years (2006 to 2014), I learned some tricks from experienced boaters and developed one of my own.

1) Travelling upstream on a double locks canal (assuming that you are the only boat using the lock)

Open the one gate on the (normally) Port (left) side of your boat. Have the centre line to hand at the stern. The steps at the lock will also be on your left. "GENTLY - GENTLY" into the lock, and as the helmsman approaches the entrance, knock the boat out of gear. take the end of the centre line, step ashore and walk up the steps, rope in hand making sure it does not snag anywhere on the gate and drop it around a bollard. The boat will come gently to a halt on the left side of the lock where the mooring line can be fixed. Proceed as normal to fill the lock.

2) Self developed. Manual swing bridges. Moor on the lay bye before the bridge. Take a plastic bottle (with a handle and stopper) partially filled with water for weight, a spare length of line, and the long pole from the roof, all to the bridge on the towpath side. Tie one end of the line to the upright on the bridge which will be over the canal when the bridge is open, and the other end to the plastic bottle. Place both on the bridge to be at hand when passing through.

Swing the bridge open from the towpath side and push it fully open with the long pole. Return to your boat and "gentle" through the bridge, taking the stern towards the bridge as you pass through. Pick up the bottle (rope attached) and chuck it behind you onto the towpath.

Moor on the lay bye after the bridge and pull the bridge closed by the rope. JOB DONE.

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In the summer we met a boater approaching a lock that we left ready for him, I then went to walk away as I didn't realise he was alone. I'm probably not the only one who would be willing to help but I need to know he is alone so that I can offer assistance.

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Here's what I do when going uphill in a wide lock.

- 1) In addition to my normal bow line, I have a second bow line which is tied to long light line (heaving line) that lies along the roof of the boat.
- 2) When I get off the boat (up the ladder at the downstream end of the lock) I take the end of the light line with me up the ladder, after throwing up a stern line if I want one, and a windlass.
- 3) I can then pull in the light line from the lock side, and so secure the bow line to a bollard. It's OK to tie the rope off if going uphill, one should never do it when going down.
- 4) I'd normally aim to tie the boat to a bollard around the centre of the lock, this stops the boat surging forwards into the top gates or swinging across to clout the wall on the other side of the lock. The stern line can be used to keep the boat clear of the bottom gates.

Here's a not very good photo that shows just after step 2. (River Nene). [https://nbsg.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/dsc\\_2031.jpg](https://nbsg.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/dsc_2031.jpg)

My other tip is that I now wear a lifejacket all the time at locks, or mooring, when single handed. This is because a lot of the locks I use are very isolated and one could wait hours if not days for someone to come past.

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Single-handed boating:

IMHO – it's all about safety; you have no backup. So – planning; before and during the journey assessment; what are potential courses of action, what are the risks, what are the potential outcomes, mitigation: what alternatives are there?

What are the main areas of risk?

Slips, trips, falls – what are the boat surfaces like (tidiness, slipperiness, size, slope), where's my equipment (ropes, windlasses, keys), what are the other surfaces like (distance, slipperiness, moveable, [hand/foot]hold availability and condition.

Other people and boats – what are they doing, what are their intentions (horn/light signals)

Particular things to start the trip:

Is your cabin top clean and clear of obstructions? Both for walking on and for seeing over.

Where are your ropes? (front attached to foredeck t-stud and flaked on foredeck or safely flaked on appropriate front cabin-top corner), back rope away from tiller/counter deck but within reach for mooring up, centre line(s) laid back along cabin top to rear.

Where are your glasses, maps, keys, comms kit (radio/phone) and windlasses? Also mooring paraphernalia?

Have you laid in sufficient rations for the trip at the steerers position? Plus entertainment and clothing options?

Are the boat hatches and doors closed but unlocked? Are precious/precarious/fragile objects properly stowed in case of bumps?

Are flames extinguished or properly contained?

[Not necessarily single-handed but should be done as a matter of course – engine checks before setting off]

If you're taking the opportunity of the alternator providing oodles of electricity have you got everything chargeable, charging. Have you turned on the washing machine/ dishwasher etc?

Do you know where you're going (or at least which direction)? Do you know what the weather forecast (3 hours – 1 week) is and are you equipped for this?

En voyage:

Operation of locks – everyone has a variant of operations but here's my take on it.

Don't let others dictate the speed of lock operations; negotiate. If you're not happy, call out.

If you're not on your boat in the lock then stay near to the paddles you're operating, but keep an eye on the boat movement and position.

If you are on the boat (because the other crew or lockkeeper is operating the paddles) then make sure you can contact them (horn etc) in an emergency.

Swing bridges – bane of a single-handers progress. If the bridge has off-side landings, all well and good. If not, more creativity is called for; if the swing is in the direction of travel then land the boat close to the bridge, lay the rear rope to the offside rear cabin top corner, lay the centre rope to the offside front cabin top corner.

Holding the front rope walk across the bridge and open it. Pull the boat over and forward using front and centre ropes. Once the rear rope is available pull the boat to a halt at the far end of the bridge, and tie it off loosely, close the bridge and re-cross it holding the rear rope, pull the boat to you, re-board and set off again.

If the swing is against the direction of travel proceed as above but be mindful of creating enough space to allow the bridge to swing – I generally tie the front rope to the bridge corner furthest forward and open the bridge before pulling the boat over/forward.

Mooring – don't ever jump the gap between the boat and edge! Step off with your centre line control the boat from the towpath. If you need help on wild moorings, throw a hammer and pin ashore before stepping off, then you can temporarily use the centre line to hold the boat whilst you consider how to get the front and rear pins/ropes set securely.

Gongoozlers – don't let them distract you from the current operation with the boat! Be positive in your (body) language and keep them away from bollards, pins, gates and other things you might need to access in a hurry.

Be aware of your mind and body - Are you tired, hungry or thirsty?

Are you cold, hot, wet? Focussed or distracted?

Be aware of your skills and experience – have you been this way before, is the voyage routine or does it contain novelties?

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Narrowboats are like cabbage patch dolls. Each one has its own unique personality and therefore how you handle your boat single handed is unique to the vessel in question but there are two things that a single handed boater should never be without:

1. A centre line long enough to make sure that you are never ashore without a rope but not so long that it can wrap around your propeller.

2. Home made cup-cakes with which to say thank you to all that come your aid and rescue. I also keep a hot kettle on the stove for cups of tea to go with the cakes. Saying thank you is so important.

I have lots of stories of single handed boating and how I learned the hard way but I would sum it up with this advice: NEVER rush, always maintain a pace the you are comfortable with and leaves you in control.

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