

More single-handed boating advice

The following aspects of solo boating do not appear to have been touched on by previous contributors, which I find very useful and mention them below.

SAFETY. When walking around lock sides and crossing gates, always be aware of where you put your feet and never chance a green or slippery surface. Never wear any loose clothing or carry the windlass in your belt which might catch on something when locking. If you can hook it through your clothing and over your shoulder it is out of the way and conveniently to hand.

LOCKS AND MOORING UP. On approaching a lock layby use the centre line to tie the boat securely to a bollard some way back from the centre of the boat, before putting tiller strings in place to hold the tiller in the straight ahead position. Engage gear at tick over speed so that the propeller is just turning to push the boat forward and it will stay there. Occasionally the bow will come away from the bank if the lock has to be emptied, but it will return of its own accord. Even better if a bowline is tied at the end of the line and dropped over a convenient bollard further back. If there are rings instead of bollards, the bowline can still be used through the ring with a mooring pin slotted through the loop of line. There is a fast way of tying the knot and it always reliable and easy to untie. Beware of using a piling hook, for if the line goes slack for any reason, it could pull through the ring.

The same technique can assist before attaching fore and aft lines when mooring up for the night. Tiller strings are often a great help on wide rivers making the need to hold the tiller constantly during a long cruise and gives you a moment to pop into the cabin on a long straight reach with no other boats in sight. This cannot be achieved on a canal and you will either have to moor up or stop the boat in a clear straight pound.

ASCENDING SINGLE LOCKS. Tie up as mentioned before and walk up to the bottom gates, before gently drawing off any water remaining in the lock. The off side lock gate is eased open with the beam to about 10 inches and needs to be maintained open before standing over the gap and pushing it the rest of the way with your foot, obviously holding tight to the towpath gate rail with both hands. The towpath gate can then be opened in the usual way and you will be still on the same side as your boat.

The following method was used by the old hands of taking the boat up a single lock. As the boat passes through the bottom gates, take it out of gear and let it slowly enter the chamber while you step off the stern with windlass and walk up to the top gate. Do not close the bottom gates at this stage. When the bow of the boat is about 6 to 10ft from the top cill, draw about half a paddle on one side. This will achieve three things:-

1. The boat will stop at or very close to the cill.

2. The water coming into the chamber will hold the boat in that position.
3. It makes the bottom gates easier to close.

The top paddles are then drawn as normal to raise the boat to the top.

The above method works on all the single locks going up to Birmingham and most others that I have used, except on the Aylesbury Arm where the boat has to be just in gear to keep it on the forward cill.

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1. Wear an automatically inflated life jacket when operating locks or using tunnels. No one intends to fall in, but if/when you do the chances are that there won't be anyone else around to help you and if you hit your head on the way in you could be disorientated or unconscious. I know that the CRT recommend generally the wearing of life jackets, but it doubly applies to a single hander. It can also be interesting to be mistaken for a member of staff or volunteer!
 2. Assess and plan how you are going to carry out an operation, eg operate a lock, before you start. Each lock is different and the location of bollards, ladders, etc can affect how you tackle it.
 3. Watch your boat the whole time to ensure that it isn't getting snagged or hung up on gates, cills, etc.
 4. Read and learn from the stories of the professional boaters of the past, eg the Idle Women, there are a lot of useful tips to be found there.
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