



Symonds Yat – 24th October 2010

I blame Richard Somerset – he suggested at the 2009 AGM that Alan Ebbage, newly elected as club chairman might be a ‘one trick pony’ from a kayaking perspective. He laid down a challenge that over the next twelve months Alan should add to his flat-water racing skills and try both Open Canoeing and kayaking on moving water, as befits the Chairman of a multi-discipline club such as ours.

As his wife and fellow-paddler, I, of course, have ‘come along for the ride’. Over the summer we attained one-star in Open Canoe and are now working towards two-star, and have been on a few river trips with Brian Biffin. We have even just about got the hang of rolling (in Odiham pool). But this weekend saw our first foray onto moving water as we joined Paul Jeffs’ trip to Symonds Yat.

We arrived at this stunning location at 10am and the temperature in the shade of the car park was only 3°C. The more experienced paddlers were fully kitted out in dry suits and as I pulled on various miscellaneous layers in the hope of staying warm and dry, the sun came into the valley. Lunch was squashed between air-bags and the seat, and I wolfed a banana, slightly envious of those we had seen pulling into the café up the road for breakfast (yes, you were spotted!).

After a briefing and kit-check with Paul we got on the water and I soon understood what ‘paddles over the ferry wire’ meant (it took me three attempts). As white-water novices, Alan and I were paired with the experience of Paul Mant and Richard Boreham, and as I paddled to the brink of the rapid my heart was in my mouth as Richard headed down stream closely followed by me. What a rush! I believe this water is only grade 2, but considering the scariest water I have paddled on is the Wey, it seemed pretty big and fast to me, and I was delighted to make it to the eddy at the bottom

of the island still connected to the boat in all the right places, and with my head higher than my bottom.

The morning taught me loads of new skills; reading the movement of the water, using eddies, breaking in and out of the current and ferry glides (is it me, or does 'ferry glide' conjure up an image of something relaxed and gentle, rather than my manic paddling against the onslaught of water to try to get across the river without losing ground?).

I was in awe of the experienced paddlers who made it look so easy, and was also hugely impressed by the speed and efficiency in the way they reacted to people from our group who capsized (this wasn't exclusive to the novices, by the way!). Despite my nerves and initial apprehension, I never once felt unsafe in the hands of our patient coaches. I should also mention Brian impressively tackling the rapids in his Open Canoe and dispelling any thoughts I may have had about Open Canoeing being 'tame'.

We stopped at the island for lunch and as we looked across at rocks which had protruded out of the water providing us a little backwater eddy in the morning, we realised the water was rising quite fast and covering some of these features. There had been heavy rain about 24 hours earlier, and it brought home that we shouldn't take the conditions for granted, despite seemingly good weather. It made the afternoon session considerably more challenging, especially for those of us with less skill and technique who had to paddle furiously against the current just to stay in one place, resulting in tired arms and aching backs. We walked the kayaks back upstream to a point above the rapids, from where we paddled back up to the car park.

My thanks go to Paul Jeffs for organising the trip and ensuring an ideal balance of coaches and other experienced paddlers to those who were newer and complete novices to white water, and also to Paul Mant and Richard Boreham who coached and encouraged Alan and me, and ensured our safety at all times. Thanks also to the younger but very impressive Andrew and Nick, who offered advice and encouragement and never once made us feel ridiculous, although I am certain many non-paddlers would think that we should really be at least thirty years younger to be doing something like this for the first time.

I only wish I was!

Caroline Ebbage

25/10/10