

Wye bother!



Brian Biffin's Report:

For a 63rd birthday treat, most sane people would choose to have a slap up dinner party, go to the theatre ,spend a day in a spa...you get the idea.

My celebration was far more exotic. Up at 5am. Drive to Bulth Wells through the snow with Anne, Drysuit on and read my birthday card to the accompaniament of the B3C Choral Society. Chunk of Liz's latest cake, then spend the rest of the day negotiating grade 3 icefloes on the Wye, using the Prospector as sledge, with lines attached for the yakkers haul themselves across the ice.

Progress was rather slow! To round it off nicely we all hauled our boats some through snowy fields then 500m up a steep icy bank when the river had totally disappeared under the ice, and got a lift in a forester's Landrover to get the cars.

I think I've earned my 1* in Ice Canoeing!

A big thank you to Paul & Andrew, Liz, Richard and Nick, Jason, Garry and of course Anne for helping me celebrate a truly memorable birthday!

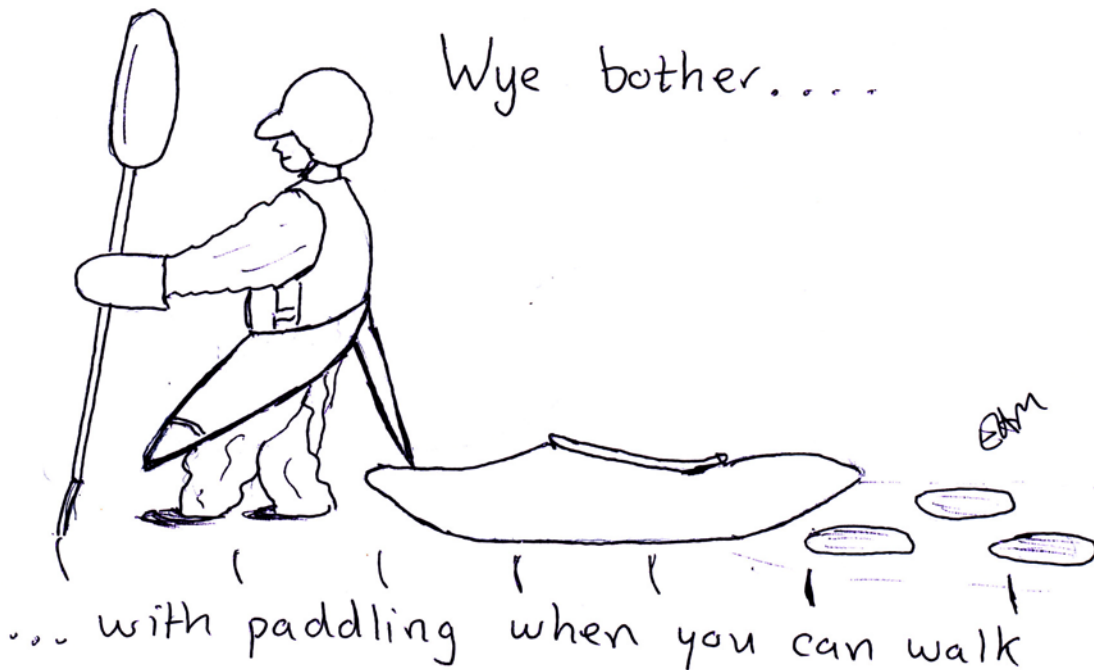
More photos:

http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/sredir?uname=brian.biffin&target=ALBUM&id=5547264896871093553&authkey=Gv1sRgCN6rvq6_7KDC8QE&invite=CN7D6-sB&feat=email

Brian



Liz Murnaghan's Report:



Paul and Brian have circulated a long list of trips for the winter. One that caught my eye was the Wye /Irfon trip, two sections of water that I hadn't paddled before. I got my "Weekend pass" stamped and watched the webcam links with interest. The weather at the start of December was cold, the South East had some snow and of course the country ground to a halt. The webcams still worked, showing some ice and snow, but Paul was still confident we could paddle. "There might be a bit of ice in some eddies" he said.

I was glad when Richard offered to collect me and my boat in his new Landrover though as the road outside my house was a bit icy. Travelling down the M4 the traffic reports on the radio said that the Police had advised people only to travel if their journey was really necessary.

Paul had got up even earlier to do a recce of the rivers from some key locations. As we sat in the café in Builth, fuelling ourselves with bacon and coffee he showed us images on his camera. The Irfon was iced up in places all the way across, but the Wye which was much bigger should be OK. It was starting to rain, it looked like we would have the double whammy of low water and grotty weather to contend with. Garry asserted that we were all "As mad as a box of frogs", no one disagreed although we did try to come up with even wackier analogies of how crazy we were. We felt Baldrick (of Blackadder fame) summed it up the best.

It seemed like a good idea to have a look at the "S bends" on the Wye, a grade 3 section, close to the finish. Andrew discovered that his skater shoes, which may be the coolest item on Fleet high street, were decidedly chilly when traversing snow covered rocks. There was some ice in the eddies and it covered the river in the pool below the bottom drop, a portage was possible so we decided to head up to Newbridge.

Anne presented Brian with a birthday card signed by all of us and we had some cake. Whilst waiting for the drivers to come back Nick thought a spot of snowyskating was called for. He slid down the access point with Andrew allegedly controlling his descent by means of a sling on the stern. Nick came to rest in a tree close to the water's edge. Anne, fresh from her 1st Aid course was keen to tell us that in outdoor adventurous pursuits the three most common ways to D.I.E. are Drowning, Impact and Exposure. With this little jaunt Nick attempted to achieve all 3 at once. (He didn't do it again!). The drivers returned and after a brief foray to the hedge to test the relief zips of their drysuits we prepared to launch.

“Oh No! Where’s my key?” cried the trip (dis)organiser. “I’m sure I put it on the back of my boat just now”. Some walked up to check the hedge (Don’t touch the yellow snow) whilst the others checked around the boat, where the key was found on the front deck.

Exposed rocks in the river were covered with great flat slabs of ice. We paddled slowly downstream picking our way between the many rocks just below the surface ready to stop the unwary. We rafted up 1star style for a team photo. Ice encroached on the river in various amounts but we could still pass. Then, below the first bridge we were met with a sheet of ice across the river. Various attempts were made to break through, sending in the icebreaking canoe followed by heavily loaded kayaks. (I hope you understand what I mean, they were full of “solid muscle” and not “pies”.) This approach didn’t work and Jason leapt onto the bank and threw a line so we could haul ourselves along the ice. Once on the ice Paul tried to convince us that his vigorous shuffle was an effective means of propulsion, but like a crippled seal it didn’t get far. A river came in from the left just below the ice, we blamed it for backing up the water so it froze then decided the extra flow would mean no more ice downstream.

We were WRONG!

As the river flowed gently round a long left hand bend we were once again faced with a river wide sheet of ice. Jason, Richard, Nick and myself opted for a climb up the bank and a portage while the others chose to use the throw ropes again to haul each other, with Brian taking the lead from his canoe. We dragged our kayaks along in the snow like a group of recalcitrant puppies. They would bound ahead joyfully on downhill stretches and stop stubbornly to investigate molehills and tree roots. The river below was free of ice and we started to look for an easy launch spot. The paddlers below said “Don’t bother” more ice ahead and they joined us on the river bank. Time was creeping on, we were maybe only halfway down the river and there was only an hour before sunset. We spotted a dog walker on the far bank. The river was some 40m wide at this point and Paul had a shouted conversation with him as to where the nearest road was. Cross the river, tow your boats for ¼ mile downstream along the Wye valley footpath, and then up the hill. We knotted 3 towlines together. Brian pushed the canoe over the ice, one foot on the ice, one in the boat with Anne ready to brace if there was an ominous cracking sound. One by one we pulled ourselves across the river of ice. Garry was belaying us firmly on the far side. Just as you thought you were almost there he would pay the rope out in your direction and you went nowhere for a while!

After more walks with our kayaks and canoe we came to the bottom of a large hill with a house and road at the top. Nick was keen to do more snowkicking but it was hard work pulling the kayaks up and one trip up was enough. We went back to help Brian and Anne who had an even harder job pulling their canoe up the hill. The friendly dog walker appeared with his Landrover to take the drivers back to Builth. (Top Man!). As night fell we watched the Wye valley fill up with mist. It was getting cold so we sat in Anne’s group shelter until the drivers returned. The drive up to Newbridge was on some untreated roads and I was glad I didn’t have to pilot a van and trailer along them.

Jason, Garry, Andrew, Brian and Anne returned home to leave me, Nick, Richard and Paul pondering what to do the following day as paddling wasn’t a realistic option. We found the B&B first and then the Off Licence to buy a bottle of whisky for the man who gave the drivers a lift. We were the only patrons in the pub that night. The landlady was keen to tell us how cold it had been the previous week, minus 18 C. They were full and showmen at the Winter Fair in the showground sleeping in their wagons overnight had hot water bottles freeze.

On Sunday morning after a full Welsh breakfast we decided to complete the river on foot, along the Wye Valley path and this time armed with a map procured from the local newsagent. The mist had lifted leaving a beautiful blue sky and everything rimmed with hoar frost. The hill we had struggled up the previous night was 170m above the river, no wonder it was hard work! A natural weir had been formed by a rock ledge and that is what had caused the river to freeze up. We had a long clear stretch which made us wonder if we were right to give up yesterday, but more iced over stretches vindicated our decision. The largest patch of ice was about 400m long, situated above the railway bridge. Past the “S bends” and it wasn’t far to the confluence with the Irfon, this too was frozen solid, hard enough to bear weight judging by the messages on it. It was then a short walk through the park to the car and for Paul to shuttle us back to the top. Normally trip reports end here, but there is a final twist in the tale. Driving back to Builth

there was a meeting of metal. Richard's Landrover with the bullbars on the front of a local's Toyota, a blind bend, and black ice on the bridge over the railway are not a good combination. No one was injured, but the red fluid from the Toyota radiator mingled with the yellow from the Landrover to make a multi-coloured puddle on the road. Paul very kindly backtracked to take me and Nick and our kit home while Richard waited for the AA to transport him and the Landy back home. It was a sad end to a memorable weekend.

Liz