

BCCC Trip to River Barle, Exmoor, 30 October 2010



Keen to build my kayaking experience after completing my 2 Star qualification with BCCC in the early summer, I was advised to check the website for details of forthcoming trips. First I spotted Brian Biffin's mosey down the Mole, which was a delightful paddle, albeit in rather a limited depth of water. Next up was Paul Jeffs' battle of the Barle, a river recognised by those more experienced than myself as a relatively benign, Grade 2. In preparation for both, I made a trip with another club to the Grade 1 Wye, with its chuckling Symonds Yat, to learn some basic moving water skills.

One of the principal reasons I started kayaking is the opportunity to enjoy the natural environment and the Barle trip certainly came up trumps. Firstly there were the spectacular autumn colours, highlighted harlequin fashion by the dazzling sunlight. There were glittering emerald pastures, carpeted in thin layers of brilliant white early morning mist. There was the sparkling night sky, lit by beautiful stars. Not in the evening, as it was raining by then, but between 5 am, when I jumped out of bed to gather my gear, and the dawn at 7.30 am when we were well into the journey. I mused that I also started kayaking as an antidote to the stresses and strains of the workplace and a two hour daily commute and yet, here I was on a Saturday, getting up even earlier to set out on a three hour journey to Exmoor. However, personally I was not driving, but had the good fortune to be sitting in both comfort and style with two other passengers in Richards impressive new Land Rover Disco4.

One of the most notable aspects of the trip was the manner in which BCCC's members made such an effort to help me really get the max from my day. On Friday, Paul Jeffs turned out in the early evening in the pouring rain, accompanied by his son Andrew, to help me choose the most appropriate club kayak and to find a suitable paddle, spraydeck, cag and helmet. To

assist with the logistics, Paul then generously delivered this kit to Richard, who in turn reloaded it onto his vehicle for a 6.30 am departure the following morning. When the time came to load up again in the evening, Paul Mant and Richard loaded four kayaks onto the roof rack, while during the day everyone chipped in cheerfully to help with lifting, carrying and portaging. What a brilliant bunch. As a new club member I was made to feel really welcome and supported. What a delight.

The morning meeting place was Dulverton at 9.30 am and, after due discussion and a check of the water level, we relocated to Tarr Steps, an iconic footbridge with low piers constructed of loose flat stones with rounded ends, topped with huge flagstones. I stood on this for some considerable time as the drivers relocated most of the cars to Dulverton and Exebridge, dozens of earnest looking walkers passed by and hordes of tiny midges nibbled my face and wrists. My main concern was how I was going to steer my kayak through this stretch of rock-strewn tumbling water. I quizzed Paul Mant on the techniques I would need and, despite most helpfully reviewing the basics, he advised that I should consider each manoeuvre on its merits, rather than trying to be too prescriptive. Right, that's clear then.

Paul Jeffs returned just before midday with the other drivers, then divided the assembled company into three groups, his own comprising myself, Garry, Steve and Andrew. Paul, an experienced coach, knew just how apprehensive Garry and I were feeling. He commented on our concerned facial expressions and urged us to smile. A difficult task as we stepped gingerly into our kayaks and tried hard to remember 'the basics'. Within seconds we were pinned against rocks, lifted, dropped, turned, pitched and yawed. But we hung on in there, hearts pounding. Far too soon for smiles, but perhaps we managed the odd grimace?

The environment was simply delightful and the river beautiful and, despite my determined concentration on the task in hand, there was really ample time to enjoy the passing scenery of russet coloured woodlands and verdant pastures. Gradually I started to relax a little and after successfully negotiating the first few 'features' began to gain a little confidence. Prior to each feature Paul explained thoroughly exactly what to expect and how best to approach, undertake and complete each manoeuvre. Initially I found the instruction to keep two boat lengths' distance from the person in front a little hard to deliver, but before long my toolbox of strokes morphed from a jumble of jigsaw pieces into an irregular patchwork and then into something a little more seamless. Occasionally and, increasingly, I felt a bit more in control and this was the time the smiling started.



Paul's briefings continued: "The next feature is a low weir; the next a drop; then there's the 'magnetic' tree" and so on. It was Brian Biffin who told us about the tree in line with a sloping weir and warned us to turn sharp left – or sharp right- at the bottom of the chute. Some went left. Some, like me, went right. Some went straight on: wham! Discretion prevents me from naming names. However, no one 'swam' here, although it was reported that one or two took the odd dip during the day. After rather a late lunch stop at Dulverton, the party shrank somewhat as some had to get back home. Pretty much the first feature of the second leg was the 'Salmon Steps'. Paul introduced these with his characteristic, disarming smile and an added: "Trust me". Well of course I trust him. I just don't trust myself. The two canoes, paddled by Brian and Anne Biffin and Rosie are too long to negotiate this alarming looking three-tiered construction of consecutive weirs and concrete tanks, so they took the portage route. I opted to follow them. All others launched cheerfully into what seemed to me to be a series of significant waterfalls affording negligible time to recover composure before the next one appeared. All arrived safely at the bottom and, when I subsequently Googled this feature, the YouTube videos actually looked rather good fun.





As the Barle merged into the Exe, the river widened and took on a darker hue as the clouds gathered, the odd shower fell and dusk drew ever closer. Andrew called our attention to the millions of autumn leaves suspended and motionless in all but the very top layer of water, as though encased in Perspex. There was enough light penetrating the darkening water to illuminate their startling shades of yellow, red and brown, like some submerged jacquard carpet from a bygone age.



All too soon it was time to pull the boats out of the water at Exebridge, load up the cars and locate our dry clothes from the vast and varied selection of bags that had accumulated in the shrinking number of vehicles. The drivers were keen to set out to collect the distant cars while the rest of us piled into the adjacent, inviting local hostelry for cups of tea, drinking chocolate topped with marshmallow or samples of the local brew, plus the opportunity to sit in front of the open fire. As the company reassembled, we all agreed it would have been lovely to spend the evening there, but time was pressing and a three hour journey loomed. The stalwart drivers undertook their task cheerfully while the rest of us chatted, dozed or watched spectacular firework displays drift by. A truly wonderful day and one I shall always treasure as I continue my journey to gain confidence and competence.

Thank you to all those who made this trip to the Barle, my first Grade 2, so memorable and so special.

Cynthia Robinson