

## Update 17: Monday 21 April 2014 - The Washup

The 4-day DW start on Friday was delayed by a couple of hours while a body was fished out of the canal just metres from the start line. Not the best thing for young schoolkids to witness. Fortunately it was discovered 10 minutes before official start time, and not after.

No such delays for us on Saturday.

After our final spreadsheet analysis we selected 2.30 as our start time, but delayed this for a few minutes to allow another boat to head off. The last thing we needed was to race from the start line. There would be enough racing further down the track.

We'd risen late, after a good sleep in so were feeling pretty good. But the excitement of getting going led to the inevitable heart rate increase. It wasn't to drop for many hours...

The pound was much cleaner than it had been two days prior, with very little weed and much less narrowboat traffic, and we managed a good pace for the first 20km making up a couple of minutes by Pewsey. Alanna and Joy were waiting for us by the bridge near our lodgings, and with a quick change of drink bottles we were away to meet the first of the locks.



Something must have clicked into place with our portage technique, as we were going at great rate and making up time on our plan, and I was managing to run every portage. But each portage increased our heart rate by up to 20, meaning we were pushing things on the energy recovery side. Except for Dun Mill lock, where once again, in front of the landcrew, the boat slipped from my grasp and the rudder snapped off. Well practiced, we had it changed promptly.

With handles on the front and back of the boat, our portage technique was to both get out together, and while Richard went to the front to grab the handle, I would hold the boat against the edge of the lock with my foot. He would then drag the boat forward till I could grab the rear handle, and off we'd go. It avoided me having the stand up and squat a second time, as my back couldn't cope with any more bending.

By now we had encountered a couple of other 'late' starters, crews who were aiming for 20 hrs or less. To our pleasure, we were actually overtaking some of them in the portages coming into Newbury.

We'd started off in wool thermal tops, with paddle shorts over wool longjohns, and expected to don jackets in the early evening. It wasn't till Newbury and the last vestiges of daylight that we needed the extra protection from the wind, which was only really an issue then in the exposed sections of the canal. 35 portages down, 42 to go!



This photo shows us in a very happy mood.

Heading out into the great unknown, we quickly regretted not having paddled this section previously. It was by far the trickiest navigation of the whole course, with the river often splitting into several channels as the canal and river constantly separated and rejoined. It was into one of these river channels that we inadvertently strayed, spending the next 20 minutes paddling up to a raging weir and farmhouse, totally lost. There was no alternative but to retrace our steps through what can only be described as 'banjo' country, the willows and vines hanging low over the water, no moonlight to assist us. Actually, the main reason we missed the turn was that I had forgotten my head torch at Newbury, and Richard couldn't get his to work, so we missed the all important sign directing us to a sharp left hand turn.

That completely cancelled the 20 minute buffer we had built up. No more time was to be made up on the canal as our pace was slowed by the unknown. On several occasions we had to carefully scrutinise some low swing-bridges, one of which had us flat on the deck with millimetres to spare. But it avoided another portage, and was a good thing! Coming into Reading and Dreadnaught Reach, we were still on our target time, and ready by then for a full change of clothes. On came the neoprene strides, new thermal tops and cags, full gloves, neck warmers and beanies. It was like we were starting fresh, just a bit over one Hawkesbury to go.

Part of the reason we were feeling so good was the meticulous preparation we put into our food. We were aware of exactly how much we needed to eat and drink, and balanced carb, protein and electrolyte intake at each stop. We were feeling good, if not a little disappointed at our earlier blunder. But no point mulling...we had to get onto the next challenge, the River Thames.

The promised cloud cover and light wind failed to eventuate, instead replaced by clear skies, cold temps and a stiff easterly wind, right in our faces. Our speed was also affected by the slow river flow. Immediately, we were getting behind schedule and our race plan looking shaky.

What kept us motivated was that of the crews behind us, none had passed us yet. And now we had good stretches between locks, with only 20 to go. Light was yet again an issue, as the promised moonlight failed to eventuate, and we ploughed headlong into a riverbank when anticipating a turn too early. No damage done so soldier on.

Unfortunately, the further into the Thames we got, the more congested the portages became. At some portages, there was only room for one boat at a time to enter the water. Unbelievably, some landcrews chose these points to feed their paddlers, much to the dismay of those waiting. A few words of suggestion got things moving again.

The four 'nasty' portages (where re-entering the river below the weirs was often tricky), were less trouble with the reduced flow, a welcome change.

Our landcrew were superb, guiding us through to our feed stops with everything ready; hot pumpkin soup with rice, ricecream and honey (though the honey was abandoned early on), diced fruit, fruit cake, choc brownies and nut-based protein balls, which were great.

All this to supplement our standard race food of Endura Optimiser (NOT the banana flavour!) and Torq carb powder, in lovely grapefruit flavour that cleaned the palate. Lastly, some Torq gels for emergency use (we both used around 3 during the race). We had pure water in bladders on our backs, which were replenished when necessary.

Coming into the latter stages of the Thames river section, we were accompanied by the usual washriders, who could gain another half mile/hr sitting on our tail. But by this time, we didn't care, as we were just focussed on finishing. They often stopped at landcrew meet-ups, and we'd push on.

The two fastest teams passed us at one checkpoint, looking in very good shape, and vanished into the night, accompanied by 'come on, you can go faster, go, go, go' from their landcrew. Glad we were not under that much pressure.

As dawn approached, fatigue set in, not the debilitating sort but enough to mean the paddle doesn't enter the water cleanly, you miss a stroke here and there, and there's nothing left for any 'efforts'. Everything else was going well, and we were still passing boats on the water. The two fast boats were the only ones to pass us before Teddington.



#### [Leaving Penton Hook as dawn breaks](#)

Our crew met us at Molesey, one lock before Teddington, and refuelled our drink systems. It was then off to Teddington, where they made it in time to be told...'not stopping'. Richard and I were keen to finish, not having any idea of our position in the race, and how close those behind us the next places were.

We hit the tideway, with another 40 minutes up our sleeve before the Richmond tide gate closed. Once it did, paddlers were faced with a very time-consuming, knee-deep portage through mud around the gates. Not something we wanted to encounter.

Now we were really struggling, just trying to stay upright as the relentless wind slowed our progress down the tideway, and our balance deteriorated. Added to this was the unbridled abuse from the rowers going up the Thames against the current. I haven't been so disgusted by athlete attitude as I was that morning. Knowing full well that all the paddlers on the river had just paddled 110 miles and had 7 to go, the hurled unbridled abuse at the struggling paddlers for seeking the shelter of the banks and 'getting in their way'. Thank goodness those in Australia are a little more considerate.



Anyway, our luck ran out halfway down the tideway, and we came to grief trying to get out of the worst of the chop. Over we went, belting down the tideway at around 6km/hr, and trying to swim the boat to the bank. Eventually Rich found the riverbed and could swing the back around with me desperately holding on. I lost grip and was swept downstream, but managed to get my feet down shortly after. Bedraggled, we pushed off again, in even poorer state for our swim.

There were some flatter sections further down, but they didn't last long. Approaching the final straight, you come around a bend with two bridges left, and the London Eye Ferris Wheel leading to the finish. We'd used every bit of energy getting to this point, and amid the roar of encouragement from Westminster Bridge, we relaxed, and promptly fell in again, fortunately just metres after the finish line!

This time, there were volunteers to empty the boat and carry it up the steps, while Rich and I finally realised our dream, of finishing the race. It wasn't till we were back home that we found out we'd come 5th. It made the sleep very, very sweet!

We can't thank our landcrew enough for their help during this race. We will send a separate report from their perspective, but suffice to say that it takes a great deal of thick skin and perseverance to be barked at every hour with a series of commands that have to be met within seconds, while at the same time reminding paddlers of things they may have forgotten. Lucky they know we can behave better most of the time.

## Update 16: Sunday 20 April 2014 - 3:30AM

The lads are traveling well...made up 15 minutes in the first part of the race then lost it again to a navigation error on the only part of the canal that they hadn't practiced. That said they have been feeling great until Marlow where we think Rich might be getting a bit cold and Tony has slowed on his food intake. All is going very well though. Wiggy our driver is heaven sent. He's napping beside me with Guy doing the same in the back seat and Joy and I should be sleeping but are still fiddling around. We should get 30 minutes kip here as our other trusty landcrew (Geoff and Jan) have taken the pressure off and are meeting the lads at Boulton with their kit. They will then join us again at Romney which is where we are waiting now.

All said it is going great. Landcrewing isn't quite as difficult as it would have been had we not had local support and thank goodness for GPS navigation! It's fairly dry underfoot now which was an initial concern. It's cold, but nothing like last year and nothing like it could have been so we're all pretty happy.

Ok so it's 3.30 am here, has just started raining :- ( and it's time for a nap. Revised Eta westminster 9.50am. Bring it on!!

Thanks for all the interest and support.

Alanna and Joy

## Update 15: Saturday 19 April 2014

Start time 14:34





## Update 13: Friday 18 April 2014 (from Joy)

It's getting tense here at Pewsey ..... only a matter of hours to go.



As you can see, the 4 day event has started.

The boys have spent hours working and reworking their times to meet the high tide at Teddington (taking into account what now appears to be below average flow) and then make Richmond lock within 2 hours of Teddington high tide or face an ugly portage through deep mud.



The boat cleaned up and ready for scrutineering

From a landcrew point of view we too have had our challenges. A sat nav taking us to Debenhams car park (like DJs) instead of our expected meeting point on the canal, or even worse taking us to the wrong lock altogether. Driving through London traffic has its challenges, especially when the update rate on the gps isn't exactly instantaneous, blink and you've taken a wrong turn...darn. Guy has been the patient (most of the time) back seat passenger through all this and has managed pretty well.

Fortunately Alanna has conscientiously programmed all our waypoints now, so things should go smoothly on the night. We will also have half of our local support team, Wiggy, driving us around on the night, which will let us jump out of the vehicle and run to the locks, rather than having to park. If you are contemplating this race yourself, let me tell you the land crew side is significant.....parking restrictions, parking wardens employed especially on the



night to fine offenders at certain locks, restricted access at many locks and of course the darkness and cold. At least the forecast doesn't indicate rain until Sunday morning when most of the race will be behind us.

We've spent a lot of time determining how we can heat some food to feed the paddlers along the way, as they are concerned about the cold given it appears they are going to have some breeze throughout the night, finally settling on some heated travel mugs to warm the rice cream and choc drinks. Thermos soup will help fill any remaining holes.

Geoff and Jan, the remainder of our local contingent will give support the whole way and give us a short break at some stage during the night. Jan's chocolate brownie will prove popular I'm sure, as will Geoff's robust encouragement of the boys through the locks.....he's been fantastic with calls like "lookout fast boat coming through". Rich said the first time he heard that, he assumed Geoff was talking about someone else and moved aside, only to realise he was talking about them!

We have had some time for the touristy stuff, but it has been a busy schedule. I had hoped to get out and do some paddling myself, but have only managed the one paddle, a 10 km - 8 portage paddle along the canal and through the infamous Bruce Tunnel, 400m of darkness, eerie and total concentration as to fall in here means a swim to a chain on the side and pull your way out. Thankfully Rich kept us upright and it was great fun. Pleased to say we had two uneventful passages!

Fingers crossed now for fine weather, light winds and no traffic. Make sure to keep an eye on things via the [tracker](#) throughout the event.



Scrutineering

## Update 13: Friday 18 April 2014

We had a swim today. And not deliberately either. Arriving at Devizes to have one last paddle before the big day, we dropped the boat in off the wharf, and in front of everyone setting up promptly tipped in without taking a paddle stroke!

The canal was filthy, but fortunately only waist deep, so we quickly regained our composure, red faced. It is so easy to fall in from a high wharf when there is nothing but slippery brick to try and hold on to. It is the most difficult part of the whole event, and further down the river will provide us with some real challenges in the early hours of the morning.

We did the distance in a very lazy 1.52 compared with our time in Waterside D of 1.35, which we assumed would be our race pace. We had a few pauses while waiting for narrowboats to squeeze past each other, others to hold our noses while passing other narrowboats secretly discharging the unmentionable, straight into the canal, and for the inevitable attack from our good friend Sir Swan at Wilcot Bridge. But we'll have to lift that a bit if we are to do a decent time.

The best thing about the day (besides the shower afterwards), was that we could test whether we needed to change if we went for a swim. It took less than 10 minutes to get back to normal, so that was a decent, if embarrassing test.

## Update 12: Thursday 17 April 2014

The junk mail header 'you have been selected....' is usually moved straight to the Junk Mail box. but this time I read on 'to carry a tracking device'

Sweet!

You follow our progress during the race at [OpenTracking](#), along with a number of other crews.

As we expect to start somewhere between 2.30pm and 3.00pm local time, this will equate to 11.30pm - midnight Sydney Time on Saturday Night. We hope to finish somewhere between 18 and 19 hrs later, roughly around 7pm SydneyTime.

One last paddle today to gauge our DW race speed on the first section from Devizes back home to Pewsey, keeping a lid on heart rates through that section. It is so easy to go out too hard, especially if there are others starting with us. Mustn't race, mustn't race.....

(tell that to someone who's listening!)

## Update 11: Wednesday 16 April 2014

Alanna, Joy, Guy, Richard and Tony would like to wish everyone venturing south to fly the NSW flag high, all the best in the National Canoe Marathon Championships. We're eagerly awaiting the race reports.

## Update 10: Tuesday 15 April 2014

Our evening paddle to test our cold weather clothing was abandoned when the temperature failed to dip into single figures, even at 10pm. So the decision was made to rise at 4.30am, when we were presented with a thick layer of frost on the boat, and do a couple of hours as dawn broke.

We'd invested in some quite substantial cold-wether kit; spraydecks, neoprene trousers, neoprene wetboots and sealskinz socks, the usual double wool thermal tops, a cag (sealed at wrists and neck), neck warmer and beanie, and neoprene gloves (don't laugh, I actually found some that fit me!)

In 3 degree temp, we found the additional insulation provided by our lifejackets warmed our torsos nicely, while other areas were bearable. Richard found just his fingertips getting chilly by the end. The moon was out as happens around Easter, so we navigated the canal with ease, dodging the logs, swans and moored narrowboats.

Happy with the result, we collected Guy and the Girls and headed out for a squiz at Stonehenge. All the historical brochures show stones carefully arranged in a paddock. What the didn't show was the huge circle of tourists doing laps around a new perimeter fence, the safari trailer trains getting them there from the visitor centre, and huge queue waiting to pay the twenty quid entry fee.



We had other things on the agenda, so after an opportune photo shoot, we headed off to check out the remaining section of the canal we hadn't seen yet. From Newbury (where the Waterside D finished) to Reading, there are another 20 locks, interspersed with the coming and going of the Kennett River adding some very welcome flow to the canal.

Checking on the weather for the weekend, it seems our cold-kit purchases may have been in vain. Forecast temps for Saturday range from 10 - 16, so it could be a warm one. Just a bit of drizzle on Sunday a possibility. Oh well, best to be prepared.

## Update 9: Monday 14 April 2014

England is in the middle of a drought. It hasn't rained here for at least a week, and the towpaths have dried out, the river is dropping and we're concerned. Waterside 'D' river flow rate was around 72 cusecs at Maidenhead, halfway down the Thames. Yesterday it was 57, and still slowing. It is quite possible that it will fall to 50 or below



by race time, meaning all our start time calculations have been thrown out the window. We'll have to move our start forward as the river drops if we are to make Teddington by 7.30am Sunday, our preferred schedule.

We have a couple more days to make start time changes, and our race calculator has been running hot with changes as we allow for the potentially slower journey.

The logistics for landcrewing this event are complicated. Due to the number of portages, a normal Australian Ultramarathon support schedule just can't work here. We have to carry the boat 77 times, and often upside down, so carrying anything loose in the boat is out of the question. Our compulsory safety gear has to be strapped into the boat in a waterproof bag, and consists of :

- 2 x survival bags, (akin to plastic sleeping bags, which are heavy)
- 2 x sets of thermal top and bottom full-length clothing
- 2 x 300ml bottles of water
- 2 x 200mm high-energy food bars (yes, Kendal Mint Cakes)
- 2 x spray decks (that must be worn on the Thames tideway)

So the whole kit weighs around 2kg And the remainder of our food and drink has to be carried on our person (ie lifejacket) We'll be using the bladders on our backs for water (Tony) and electrolyte (Richard) and we have quick-change sports bottles that fit in holders on our chests, for our main liquid food supplies (Optimiser and Torq carb drink) This means that we will have to be met by our landcrew every hour to hour twenty. (Locals are met much more frequently, but we don't like stopping that much) Navigation to get to the checkpoints can be a nightmare, especially in traffic. Hence the need for two separate crews, who can 'leapfrog' the checkpoints and phone each other for information and instructions.

We found some cheap, nifty 12v heating mugs that will heat our soup and ricecream in the cars between stops, and will have fruitcake and Kendal cake as alternative options for solid food. Our crew will also have a spare rudder, (of all things!) plus a full change of clothes at Dreadnaught Reach when we enter the Thames.

Now if you think this is all a hoot, and want to give it a go yourselves, we'd love to hear from you. Our intention is to leave the boat here together with much of the compulsory and optional gear that will make your event much easier (like roof racks!). Don't be put off by our reports. This event and our whole experience here have been fantastic, and the paddling fraternity has been equal to, if not friendlier than ours back home. So, rather than sell the boat, please let us know if you are interested, otherwise we'll have to sell this fantastic boat and bring all our well-sorted gear back home. Email [tony.hystek@gmail.com](mailto:tony.hystek@gmail.com) or [ricrobbo@hotmail.com](mailto:ricrobbo@hotmail.com) and let us know, sooner rather than later if you could.

## Update 8: Sunday 13 April 2014

So the story goes that Roger Daltrey liked a spot of trout fishing. He had this bit of land up near Pewsey on the very upper reaches of the Avon River. After amassing quantities of explosives, he blew several large craters along the watercourse to use as trout hatcheries. This is a while back now, and the water has settled. Apparently trout are off the menu, and the place is now Willowbank Cottages. One can launch a kayak in the crater ponds with a little imagination and permission from the local swan, who is quite particular who gets to share his patch.



Today we spent the day with Geoff and Jan Dixon, our second support team for the race. It is quite a drive to Tonbridge, over 2 hours and 110 miles from Pewsey on crazy UK motorways, but worth every minute. They are a lovely enthusiastic pair, who couldn't do enough for us.



Geoff just collected a new V10 ski this week, the first ocean ski in his district. It will be interesting to see how quickly skis catch on, as he has no-one to paddle with offshore at the moment. We got him all fired up looking at the Surfski Australia website amongst others and researching the big world events. Then took a stroll into town to get some Kendal Mint Cake and topo maps.



Geoff and Richard. Tonbridge Canoe Club is just to the left of picture!



Secret Paddle Food...a DW favourite.

The sun came out in force, and we chewed the fat late into the afternoon. As we were leaving, Geoff mentioned in passing 'so we'll see you on Friday somewhere along the canal'

'Friday? are you going there to see the four day event start?'

'No, I'll see you guys too'



'One little problem Geoff, the race starts on Saturday'  
'Oh goodness, when I did it we always started on the Friday'  
'So we'll see you on Saturday then?'  
'Yes, but Sunday might be difficult, as we have invited guests over for lunch'

So, we'll have to sort out the latter stages of the race (early Sunday Morning) with them when they have had a chance to sort their logistics.

## Update 7: Saturday 12 April 2014

The communications pathway for the DW is now up and running. For a while there, we hadn't heard a thing and were getting a little concerned that even our entry hadn't been processed. But after meeting Martin the other day, everything seems to be gathering pace. Strangely, there are still bits of paper floating round in amongst the computer terminals. A quaint mix of new and old technology meant that at waterside D, our entry was scribbled on a piece of blank paper, and our support crew's details on another. But at the finish the results were scrolling down a screen just like they were for Kayak4Kids.

Our boat number is 481, right down near the bottom of [the list of entries](#). Unfortunately, there appear to be only 2 international entries this year among the nearly 200 crews entered in the Senior Doubles.

We hope to have a spot tracker on us for the event, one of 40 being trialled this year. The log-in details will be published shortly, and we'll post them as soon as they are available.

We've a couple of test paddles coming up over the next couple of days, one to test new clothing at our projected (and still secret) start time for the event, and one at 10pm when we will be entering the coldest hours of the race. We spent Friday in London shopping, leaving at 6am to beat the traffic, and arrived home at 9pm. A big day for guy, who must have covered 10km on foot and dad's shoulders. Visited the usual suspects, saw the Changing of the Guard and Cutty Sark, and caught the river cat back on dead low tide. 6 metres down in the gully of the Thames, the river doesn't look so inviting. Didn't stop people climbing down to sunbake on the river bed though!

Will try to find a photo, but racing out the door on Sunday morning now for the big pow-wow with Geoff and Jan, our other landcrew (introduced to us by Matty B). They have threatened us with a roast lunch. Yes!

## Update 6: Thursday 10 April 2014

Wednesday saw LCRK Team DW take a well deserved break from paddling and planning as we took time out to visit the historic town of Bath around an hour or so away. For those who have been there before we managed to tick all the tourist boxes by visiting the major attractions - The Circus, Crescent, Roman Baths and the infamous Tony & Guy Store.



The Crescent





The Roman Baths



The Tony & Guy Store

Thursday dawned foggy after a cool and clear night (overnight temps around 3 degrees) and following a leisurely start to the day watching our resident squirrel finding breakfast we embarked upon our second and final familiarisation of the Thames section of the course.

Our commute ended up taking an hour and twenty minutes, after which I for one had developed a new fondness for Sydney Traffic. The drive home was to prove even worse. What was a 3.5 hour paddle turned into a 12 hour epic (admittedly this included a fantastic dinner at the Wotton Rivers Pub) so we were glad we wouldn't be repeating the day's journey until race night.



On the positive side, it was a lovely sunny day, both of us donning some light single layer wools and waterproof jackets(no beanies for a change woo hoo !!) and it seemed quite a few of the residents had the same idea, as pleasure boats were out in force. I'd hate to see the river at its peak in summer, it must be like Pitt Street at the locks.



Warm weather!



Portage at Boulter's - Interesting in the dark



Some of the 'rough' boathouses

Picking up where we had left off two days earlier, we launched out into the strong stream flowing past the island at Boulter's Lock quickly reaching 15.5 kmh just in time to pass two of the above mentioned boats pumping out some great wash. The concrete walls and shallow bottom in the narrow channel nicely amplified the waves .... not quite what we had been expecting in the first 5 minutes. It was a bit tense at times, did we mention the water is cold?

Thankfully conditions improved and with the exception of two locks (Bray and Old Windsor) which featured some very strong weir streams entering the main channel, and an angry swan (it sounded like a low flying helicopter at first as it slapped its feet on the water) who seemed intent on removing Tony's right ear, it was a good day out. Our support crew even reported better conditions on the road (they've been facing their own challenges!)



An easy portage via the rollers at Shiplake



Smooth Conditions.....for a while

We've now covered around 140 kms of the course and have started to really appreciate what a different and challenging race this is. There is a significant variance in paddling conditions all the way and you never have the opportunity to relax and tap away. We've lost count of the number of times we've praised the Zedtech's stability, and swimming at the wrong place could cost you dearly - come out above the Oracle Centre in Reading (easy to do) and you aren't going to get out for around 5 minutes thanks to the sheer concrete walls - probably not until the canal spits you out into the Thames - we averaged around 16-17 kmh through there. At other locations it would be easy to disappear under a line of moored boats. It's been tricky during the day, let alone at night.





Canal at Reading and those concrete walls

Having covered the non-tidal Thames at an easy pace that we feel we can sustain on race night, it seems we'll be able to average a bit over the 12 kmh mark (including portages) providing conditions don't change significantly in the week ahead. This is still roughly consistent with our original projections, so we are starting to form a good idea of our progress on the night. It should be an interesting night out.



Teddington - last of the portages and where the 17 mile tideway begins

## Update 5: Tuesday 8 April 2014

Toby Hogbin suggested we try 'pork scratchings' as pre-race tucker, so off we set in typical Wiltshire weather, overcast, drizzle etc, to find them. They were in Pewsey, involving a walk down muddy lanes and along the towpath, to the pub.



Off to the pub



Found'em

Along the way, we met a local who explained we were in one of the richest, yet unpublicized areas for Bronze Age and Roman archaeology. A hill not a mile from our lodgings, begs exploring, so we'll attack that one next week, when we are taking it a bit easier. By the way, 'pork scratchings' don't get a heart foundation tick of approval.

Tuesday was our first venture down the Thames River, the second half of the race. Due to the complicated navigation and sometimes tricky currents, we paddled it in daylight to map it on our GPS for the race.

Starting with the intent to replicate actual race conditions, we donned a couple of wool thermals, Goretex jackets and spray decks, and started upstream on the canal so we could do the last 3 locks before the river. We were hitting 16-17km/hr through Reading with the additional flow of the Kennet which joins the canal at Newbury. It was pretty hectic, with the narrow walls and swirling current, and once again, we praised the Zed for its stability.

There is a compulsory portage at Dreadnaught Reach, just after the canal enters the Thames, where we met our crew and discarded some clothing. With all the work staying in the current, we were getting quite warm, even though the temp was in single figures.





#### Dreadnaught Reach. Going to be very exposed at 1am in the morning in a bitter wind

This part of England shows just how well the countryside has been adapted to human need. Beautiful, tree-lined banks, architecture from many periods, including that house on 'Grand Designs'. (It didn't seem quite so grand a couple of years down the track). Accompanied by equally stunning watercraft.



#### The driver's comment..."It's not mine!"

The wind came up bitterly cold on some of the exposed stretches of water, especially around Henley, where standing waves crashed over the bow. This was a real wake-up call for us, as it showed how much energy we'd lose just keeping warm. Solid food was the go, with ricecream and fruitcake scoffed every time we met our crew. We'd learned from Waterside 'D' that we'd need to consume much more water, and fortunately the leg cramps we'd both experienced in 'D' didn't reappear.



#### The end of a long portage at Marsh Lock. Note the canoe wrapped around the pylon.

The portages were not simple, and navigation at night would have proven a nightmare had we not seen the course in daylight. High portages, bridges, etc all added to the mix.





Lane Cove pontoon didn't prepare us for this!

### [Hambleton Portage](#)

Worse was to come, as we'd messed up our pickup point arrangements with the crew. In quickly dropping temperatures, Rich and I stood soaking wet, forlornly on the side of the road waiting. Rich was shivering badly, (not much insulation on that boy!), and I'd even started jogging to stay warm, something I have an aversion to.

Finally 30 mins later they appeared.

We are gradually getting an idea of our possible race time, and more importantly our time to get to Teddington and the tidal Thames. Our speed on the Thames river section worked out at around the 12.1km/hr including portages, so this will equate to 7 hrs 15 minutes for the 85km, while our canal time should be around 8 hrs 40 minutes for the same distance. Once on the tidal Thames, we should cover the 30km in around 2hrs 10. This gives us a projected time of 18hrs 15 minutes. This would certainly put us at the pointy end, but as we know, anything can happen. If you are thinking this is just two Hawkesbury's back to back, think again.



Being on the water just puts a smile on your dial!

## Update 4: Monday 7 April 2014

So, what do you do on your day off? Watch movies, of course.

- [Before Devizes to Westminster](#)
- [After Devizes to Westminster](#)

And

- [some footage of us racing in the Waterside 'D' race](#), taken by our washriding K1...from about the 1.20 minute mark. The tunnel is around the 4.23 mark.

## Update 3: Sunday 6 April 2014

The comment from Richard after the Waterside 'D' race was 'glad that's over...its not something I'd do again in a hurry'. Well mate, give it two weeks and we will have to do it all again!

Waterside D was the shakedown race for us, covering the first 34 miles, or roughly 57km, of the actual DW course. It has 35 portages, all in the second half of the race, plus the Bruce tunnel.

We arrived in Devizes at 6am for a wet and windy start. We also met with Dave, a long time friend, who is our landcrew driver for the race.

The start window is 7.00am to 8.30am, and the finish window is 12.30pm to 2.30pm. Once again, you judge your expected arrival time at the finish and leave when you wish (or join the queue).



#### [Rich looking pensive prior to the start....with good reason!](#)

Most of the slower crews leave at 7.00am or thereabouts, while Richard and I left at 8.15. Though it was quite cold earlier, we had several quizzical glances from local paddlers all dressed up in cags or gortex jackets, as we donned just the two woolen tops and a beanie. Maybe they don't sweat in the UK. We certainly did, as we 'put in' over the first unobstructed 25km of the course.

It is quite difficult to fit three boats abreast through some of the bridge culverts, but a bit of jostling got us through unscathed. The beanies were soon discarded as the first of the portages loomed. Before leaving for the UK, I had been having some lower back problems and this race would show up any weaknesses. The first of the portages brought a sigh of relief as everything worked well. However, our lack of experience at portaging showed as we were overtaken by slower crews on land, only to retake them on water. It was good to see our water speed pretty close to the fastest crews.

Our second local landcrew, Geoff Dixon, who had been introduced to us by Matty B, arrived on the scene at the Crofton flight, and showed he will be invaluable with his experience and enthusiasm. We could hear his encouragement hundreds of metres away.

After the 20th or so portage, we both started cramping and my back was becoming tender. We'd start the portage with a walk, and break into a slow trot as my legs warmed up. The portages were frenetic, parents and landcrew along with competitors jostling for position on the narrow towpath. Eventually, we left most of the slower crews behind and had some clear water. It was difficult to consume enough water as our attention was focused on not falling over and breaking the rudder. But eventually I did fall, tripping on a narrowboat bollard.

The rudder was bent beyond repair. The word 'crap' was uttered several times as this was our second broken rudder. The shaft couldn't be bent back straight without breaking. We'd purchased the last available rudder to fit our boat that morning, and fortunately we'd come to grief on the very portage where our landcrew was to meet us. With Formula 1 precision, we had it changed and were back on the water in no time. The end couldn't have come too soon, as we were both tested by the portages and close racing on the narrow waterway. A great day racing, a lot learned. But best of all, it showed that, with half the portages done, my back looks like it can do the distance. Yee hah!





[Just after we finished at Newbury.](#)

On finishing, we visited the DW registration desk to pay for our entry, and were met with “Hi Tony, you might not remember me.” And indeed I didn’t, till he introduced himself as Martin Deaves, former member of LCRK, and who moved to the UK 4 years ago. He knew exactly what LCRK meant on our entry form.

Results can be found at <http://www.watersideseries.org.uk/> Look for Waterside D results. Junior is U19, Senior equates to our Open, Veteran is our V35, and Veteran Masters is our V50. Mainly young’uns in these races, it seems. An interesting combination is the Vet/Junior doubles, for family pairings: quite a popular class.

So in every way, we have been in safe and expert hands this entire trip, Joy, Guy and Alanna have been a huge support, managing to get to all the checkpoints on time and even carrying essentials like a spare rudder. We have yet to be disappointed by anything except the quality of these UK rudders. And did I mention the beer? It is an acquired taste we’re working on acquiring!

Day off tomorrow.

## Update 2: Friday 4 April 2014

Richard, Joy and Guy flew in today after a mammoth 36hr flight. A quick stop for an English ‘Bacon and Egg Bap’ breakfast then on to John’s place to collect the K2. On the way to Pewsey we visited a couple of the locks on the Thames, the second half of the course. It is all starting to look do-able now, as we see first hand the different lock layouts. One of the Marlow lock-keepers filled us in on expected conditions, a most helpful chap. Marlow, as seen below, could be interesting at 2.00am in the morning, our expected time here. Keep well clear of the weir!



[Weir at Marlow Lock looking upstream. Paddle between weir and barrage fence.](#)

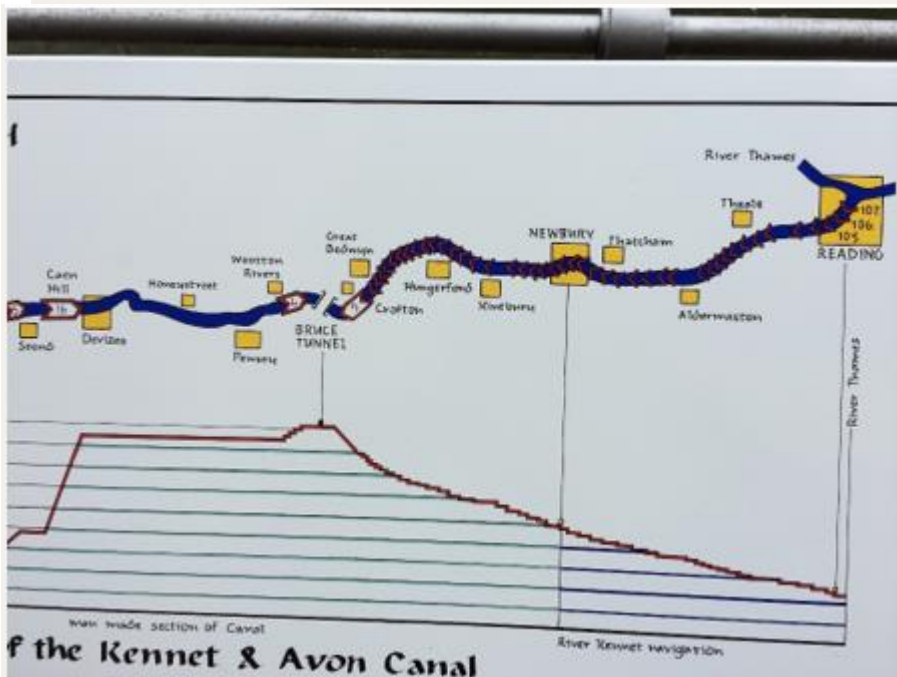
Our accom at Willowbank, Pewsey, is excellent, with plenty of space to work on the boat, and only 200m from the canal. Richard and I, keen to try the boat for the first time, set off toward the Bruce Tunnel and Crofton flight of locks (9). We almost made it in one piece, were it not for yours truly dropping the boat when it slipped from my hand. The rudder bent badly, but with the help of some brickwork, we managed to straighten it. The tunnel itself was much overrated in difficulty, as we were able to get most of the way through without the aid of torchlight. Still fun, though.



### Willowbank, the Zed, the only thing worth reading and the V bars on the car

The Zedtech AA is fantastic. It is stable, but fast, with a good amount of rocker that we were to appreciate later. Consequently, it didn't collect one bit of weed on nose or rudder, a great benefit on this section with floating debris still a problem. This is one of the best 'masters' K2's I have seen. The rear cockpit has a wider coaming for larger paddlers, while the cockpits are a little further apart than usual. I'd love to get some boats to bring back home. That would turn the Marathon series on its head!

Crofton is the highest point of the canal. The Crofton Steam Engine worked a pump that filled the canal, and moved a substantial amount of water in its heyday. These days, just two 30cm pipes trickle water into the canal near the Bruce Tunnel as there is much less boat traffic through the locks, and the engine house is now a museum.



Lock heights show we are going downhill most of the way from Devizes to Reading and the Thames.

Just after the Bruce Tunnel, more drama when I tripped on an exposed brick on the towpath and dropped the boat again. This time, the rudder broke when we tried to bend it back, leaving us no option but to paddle home to Pewsey rudderless. The excellent rocker on the boat made this relatively painless as we counter steered the boat (leaning left to turn right). The boat tracked remarkably well and we even managed to paddle the whole way back through the tunnel (800m long) without a correction stroke.

We felt really great having finished this first paddle, portaged some locks (one of which was above head height in the boat), and confirmed the boat was an excellent choice for us. Happy as!

## Update 1: Thursday 3 April 2014

Richard might be out of a job soon if our flight was any indication. A learner pilot provided a very 'entertaining', bouncing landing into Dubai. Heathrow on the other hand, suffered thick fog rolling in just on our approach, and the autopilot took over. Landed us in pea soup with barely a bump. Good old technology. 5000 jobs will be easy to lose! GPS Technology got Alanna and I unscathed to Reading too, where we met Paul Ralph from Marsport, and got the lowdown on current conditions. The Thames was still belting along after the recent floods, and all signs are that it will remain close to this level for the race. Excellent!



[Dreadnought Reach. Our hired car, Marsport shop and Thames in background](#)

We then met our 'Saint' John (who sold us the boat), and the boat itself. It needed some serious work, due to my thoughtlessness at growing too big. John kindly assisted me at his workshop, and we have spent the last 3 evenings fitting a seat, ripping out various unnecessary fittings and making a new footplate. All this by torchlight as darkness fell.



[Evening sky above the workshop, boat minus footplate \(under construction\)](#)

Yesterday was filled in looking for roof racks for the hire car, which we eventually found an hour's drive away much to my relief. Borrowed some V bars from John, and we're in business (they only use kayak cradles over here for 'fat boats'). Today we walked the river, having a close-up of a lock. It was much smaller than I imagined, but the water flowing over the weir beside it looked mighty unsettling. The flow was easily 4km/hr, with a rolling stopper at the bottom and a substantial eddy right at the put-in. We'll meet this one 8 hrs into the race, so will have to be on full alert.





#### County Lock in Reading, second last before the canal meets the Thames

Reading has been a nice town to spend time in, but tomorrow we're off to Pewsey, our base for the next 2 weeks. Hopefully Rich and I will get a short paddle in tomorrow morning to try the boat after he flies in, and we'll start preparing for Waterside D on Sunday, where we meet our support drivers for the first time.