

Narrow Boat Management - written December 2009

We have a three week share of a narrow boat. Called Sapphire, she's over 10 years old, 57 feet, 17 tons, one new engine, and going strong. She moves most winters: Llangollen, Trent and Mersey, Calden, Macclesfield, Birmingham Navigations, Grand Union, Shropshire Union, Coventry and now Oxford, with access to the Thames and those expensive houses and cruisers.

The boat is busy and takes a battering. Not just other boats, but also overhanging trees, bits of sticking-out bridge and bank you can't quite see. Boating is after all a contact sport. Late in the year, she looks like a tramp steamer. Recently, we waited outside Osney Lock with a large cruiser, not sure how they would take us. The husband dealt with the lock and we craned our necks to talk to his wife up on their deck. Very nice she was. Couldn't go any further because of a low bridge upstream. We made sure we didn't bump them as we proceeded.

Sapphire takes a lot of looking after. So us owners meet for five hours every year and decide the following year's programme. First we confirm secretary and chairman. These roles are held by the same people year in and out. If not there's always a volunteer. No vote needed. Next, where is the boat going? This is determined by the number of vacant moorings. As we are mailed these we can express our preferences in advance. A quick decision.

There are fixed costs. Many occur week to week and are dealt with at the boatyard, covered by a sinking fund. The annual decision is the extent of the paint job and are we going to deal with corrosive rusty bits this year? A bottom-blackening maybe? It will look great for a month, and then revert to tramp steamer.

To the discretionary part of the finance. We expect a bill around £1000, so what's the change from fixed costs? Have we enough to gradually improve the inside? New curtains, cushion covers, mattresses, maybe a TV. This year it was new carpet, replacing the towpath-coloured one.

Done in 5 hours. All it takes is a powerful common purpose. Who puts our decisions into practice? Three quotes? An owner lets the contractors aboard? No! We once bought a new mattress and couldn't get it down the gangway. We installed a TV and it didn't work. So, we are in a scheme. Quality? Everything seems okay. We are not engine, paint job or TV experts. Value for money? Not sure. The scheme has control, supplying its own fabrics and electronic gizmos.

Sadly, we've waited several years for the engine dashboard to be repaired. It took two seasons to replace an alternator. The calorifier leaked the whole of one summer, with pumps going off every five minutes and too much bilge.

We love cruising the waterways. Sharing boat ownership brings costs within reach. The scheme is convenient. But there is not much choice and you may have to wait a long time.