

Notes on Cruising from Chirk Marina

CRUISING WEST (See also **CRUISING EAST**)

*Within half a days cruising west from Chirk Marina, destination **LLANGOLLEN**
This trip, which is a little over 7 miles, will take you a minimum of 3 hours, but at busy times be prepared for this to be longer, if, for example, you have to wait at the aqueduct.*

Shortly after leaving Chirk Marina is Whitehouses tunnel (191 yards). This is a single bore tunnel with a towpath and throughout this stretch the canal hugs the hillside with the railway alongside. To the east were two collieries, Maesgwyn and Black Park, the latter, which was sunk by the Myddleton's of Chirk Castle, was one of the oldest pits in North Wales surviving into public ownership in 1947. These and other enterprises brought their coal and goods to the canal at a number of wharves along this stretch. At Irish Bridge, however, the canal leaves the railway and most of the old industrial sites behind as it takes a sharp turn to the west to head off into wilder country, of the brooding Welsh mountains.

Heading up the valley of the river Dee the scenery becomes truly awesome, with fine views at every turn. The village of Froncysyllte stands on the valley side, so benefits from these views and there are a number of shops here including a post office and several pubs. After this, the canal heads out on a massive embankment before crossing the world famous Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. This is an incredible structure which, like that at Chirk, was built by the famous engineer, Thomas Telford. Here is what Attractions North Wales, has to say

At over 1000 feet long, Pontcysyllte is the longest and highest cast-iron aqueduct in the world. Treasured by the Canal & River Trust, it is today a protected Grade I listed building, a Welsh National Monument and is one of the seven wonders of the British Inland Waterways System. It is of course still used for its original purpose, being crossed by more than a thousand canal boats a year.



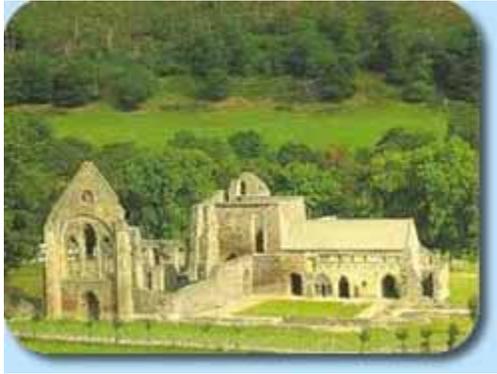
Navigation Note: This is an experience you will never forget, but treat the passage with respect and once you have determined nothing is already on the aqueduct and coming your way proceed calmly and steadily across taking due care and attention at all times. It's a drop of 126 feet into the Horseshoe Pass, so whoever is best with heights needs to be on the tiller and children should remain inside for safety. They still get a great view! At the end of the aqueduct, the canal turns sharply to port (left) and you need to approach this steadily *and with a warning* as there is a bridge on the bend, and so oncoming boats are unsighted. Directly ahead of you is the Trevor Arm, which originally was planned to descend to Chester

The canal follows the pretty Vale of Llangollen towards the town of the same name, some 3 miles distant. There are many places to stop and admire the scenery, or for the more adventurous, explore the various footpaths and bridleways. At Trevor Uchaf is the *Sun Trevor*, a pub from which some of the most memorable views can be enjoyed.

Navigation Note: the canal is at its shallowest between Trevor and Llangollen, plus the flow is most evident. Stay to the centre of the channel wherever possible, moving over to the left hand side to allow other boats to pass.

Approaching Llangollen itself, the canal perches high above the town. The moorings are on the town-side. The limit of Navigation is a winding hole beyond Siambr Wen Bridge and the Museum. You will need to turn here and find moorings to enable you to explore the town and its surroundings.

This may be as far as your boat can go but it needn't be the end of the trip. The waterway that feeds the Llangollen canal continues up the valley to the Horseshoe Falls, which Telford built across the River Dee to capture the water and persuade some of it to flow down his new cut. This is what feeds the canal along its length and why there is a constant and steady flow toward Hurlleston Junction where 12 million gallons enter the reservoir daily. This narrow channel is navigable by one craft only, a horse-drawn boat in which it is possible to take a leisurely journey to the head water at the falls. More energetic souls may wish to



walk this along the towpath, perhaps taking a detour to Vale Crucis Abbey, a former Cistercian Abbey, established in 1201, high above the town.

Alternatively walkers can climb the 1100ft to Castel Dinas Bran, which was the home of Elisig, Prince of Powys. For those who like their history to be more recent than this there is a motor museum and canal exhibition near to Bridge 48

The musical Eisteddfod takes place each July and for lovers of literature Plas Newydd is a memorial to the visits of Browning, Scott Tennyson and Wordsworth among others.

No visit to Llangollen would however be complete without a journey on the Llangollen Steam Railway. This takes tourists up the Dee Valley from the historic station in the town to Carrog.

This eight mile trip through the picturesque welsh countryside truly takes you back in time. As it follows the river, the line which was reopened in stages from 1975 passes through some memorable scenery stopping at lovingly restored stations from which passengers can explore the surrounding area, There are dining cars, Thomas specials and a vintage bus, so truly something for everyone



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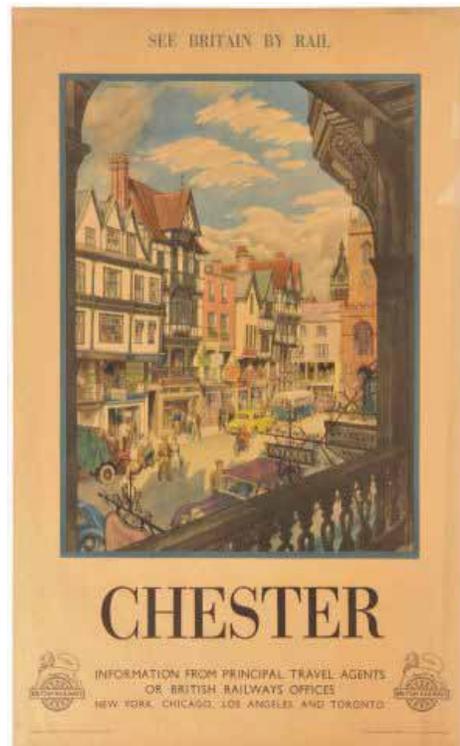
CRUISING EAST (See also **CRUISING WEST**)

*Within half a day cruising west from Chirk Marina, destinations **HINDFORD BRIDGE** or **ELLESMERE***

These two trips, which are a little less than 7 miles or a little over 12 miles respectively give you the option of reaching a point where cruising the Montgomery Canal the next day is feasible, or instead cruising down the Llangollen Canal without diversion. Both follow the same route to Hindford Bridge, a stretch which will take three hours and take in two locks, so a gentle introduction with a convivial pub at the end if time is short. Those with more time or not wanting to explore the Montgomery may wish to continue to the charming market town of Ellesmere with its many attractions. The additional cruising will take a further 2 ¼ hours making a journey time of 5 ¼ hours if that delightful town is your objective. At busy periods be prepared for these times to be longer, if for example, you have to wait at the aqueduct.

Your cruise east from Chirk Marina, which lies between two tunnels, takes you first along side the railway and thence into a deeply wooded cutting before entering the northern portal of Chirk Tunnel. There are good moorings here for those who, on the way back might be tempted to explore Chirk Castle to the west of the canal, built to subjugate the Welsh in the reign of Edward the First. The last native Prince, Llewellyn was murdered by the efforts of the original inhabitants of the castle, the Mortimers. The castle is open to visitors and throughout the season though only on Saturdays and Sundays in October.

Alternatively, on the return leg, a very pleasant final day may await those who elect to take the train in to Chester and explore its ancient walls and old world shops. There is a convenient service from Chirk Station, just below the tunnel and the journey takes a mere 29 minutes.



Most holidaymakers will however want to enjoy their boat first, and the 459 yard Chirk tunnel is the ideal fanfare for the fun to follow. The bore isn't wide enough for two boats to pass. Make sure therefore there

is no headlight in the distant darkness before you enter the tunnel and check to see that yours is on! Unusually, the tunnel has a towpath.

Directly after the tunnel is the aqueduct at Chirk, built in 1801, from stout masonry with a cast iron trough in which the water is carried. Alongside this runs the mainline railway on its own viaduct, the two crossing the river Ceiriog 70 feet below. The midpoint of this aqueduct marks the border between Wales and England, so once across you are in the English Marches, formerly wild borderlands and now a tranquil haven

At Chirk Bank, you can stop and enjoy a pint in the warm and friendly Bridge Inn, which has a real fire in the autumn months and fine views of the Chirk Aqueduct, all year. Known as the last pub in England, it offers meals all day, every day. A little further on at Rhosweil there is a small store and the canal passes through a cutting. Just before St Martins was Ifton Colliery, which had a famous silver band and brought coal down to the canal along the railway to a small bridge just after Rhosweil

At the small border village of St Martins Moor, which has a Methodist chapel and a Wharf. From this wharf a pleasant circular walk is possible taking in part of Wat's Dyke – a new heritage trail which mostly follows this ancient earthwork into Flintshire over some 61 miles of border countryside. Although it not possible to visit Henlle Hall, the former home of the Lovett family and the subject of a terrible fire in 2009, the Hall itself is visible in the grounds of Henlle Park, around which the canal will skirt. Return to the wharf over Preeshenlle Bridge along Wat's Dyke, over a disused railway and then back to St Martins Moor. It's hard to imagine that this pleasant rural idyll was once a hive of industry.

This is pleasant countryside, gradually getting less hilly, a fact soon demonstrated by the two New Marton Locks, the last you will encounter on your journey to Ellesmere. A little further distant is the tiny hamlet of Hindford, still with its own pub, the *Jack Mytton Inn*. The story of Mad Jack Mytton is worth researching over a pint or a meal at this attractive hostelry and for those planning to explore the Montgomery Canal the next day, this is a good place to stop as there are good moorings below the pub

Those who elect to cruise on beyond Hindford Bridge toward Ellesmere will shortly find the canal crosses the now disused and dismantled Ellesmere to Oswestry railway line. Further on still is Maestermyn Marine, with a boatyard, moorings and a chandlery selling provisions and gifts.

After Maestermyn is Frankton Junction, at the northern extremity of the Montgomery Canal. This will be of passing interest to those continuing onto Ellesmere, but those interested in exploring it on the return leg should follow the notes which appear further below.

Leaving Frankton the canal passes through rolling farmland toward Ellesmere Yard. Expect this stretch to take you about an hour. Beyond Frankton, lies the scattered village of Welsh Frankton on rising ground to the north, with a church, chapel and both a Grange and a Hall, until Ellesmere is reached, via a short arm which deviates from the main line to the town wharf. This town is real gem with its own basin surrounded by the old industrial buildings typical of a once busy canal wharf and a handy new superstore. The boat can be winded (turned) here, and there are moorings along the arm leading back to the main line. From the basin it's a short walk into the town where provisions can be bought or a meal enjoyed at one of the many pubs and restaurants. The town is well worth a visit with its narrow streets of half timbered houses, a medieval church and old castle earthworks.

Within a day's cruising east from Chirk Marina, Destination The Montgomery Canal and MAESBURY MARSH

If you have stayed the first night at Chirk, or cruised on to the Jack Mytton at Hindford Bridge, Maesbury Marsh, the furthest extent to which you can explore on the Montgomery, is, lock opening times permitting, within an easy day's cruise.

Following the cruising notes to Frankton Junction, you will need to time you arrival to coincide with the lock keeper on duty. The staff at Chirk Marina will be happy to confirm these times, but during 2012 they were open from Tuesday 27th March 2012 until Wednesday 31st October 2012, but bookings were required for passage through the locks. The Lock opening times 12 noon until 2pm, 7 days per week including Bank holidays. You can book any time before 10am on the day of passage and that can be done by phoning the C&RT Northwich Office on 01606 723800. Anyone wishing to cruise this stretch should note there are no passages available without a booking or outside these hours.

The Montgomery Canal is a hidden treasure which remains the subject of restoration work to return the full navigation to public use, an initiative Hire a Canalboat both applauds and supports. That objective is still some way off but the navigable section is interesting, pretty and well worth the diversion.

There is the former Weston Branch just beyond the last Frankton Lock, and at Rednal a one-time canal basin, now disused, with old canalside warehouses at adjacent Heath Houses. The limit of navigation presently is Gronwyn Wharf, just beyond the interesting and delightful village of **Maesbury Marsh**. Wind here and return to the village where there is a friendly canal-side pub, the aptly named Navigation which incorporates an eighteenth century canal warehouse. A variety of fare local and more cosmopolitan is served and there is a Jazz night too. If you are here on a Sunday why not visit the curious corrugated iron church, a rare survivor of a style once common in previously isolated communities of this kind.

From Maesbury Marsh, hardy souls will find it's possible to walk along the towpath to the adjacent towns of **Pant** and **Llanmynech**, the latter having once been important for the quarrying and processing of limestone. The former quarries are now part of a beautiful nature reserve and both it and the surrounding Llanmynech heritage area are well worth exploring.

Within a day's cruising east from Chirk marina Destination Platt Lane, Whixall Moss or Whitchurch

If you stayed at Chirk the first night and want a full days cruising to take you deep into the remote heart of Shropshire then the 8 ½ hours it will take to cover the 20 miles into Whixall Moss will transport you to one of the most ancient landscapes in central England.

Follow the cruising notes to Ellesmere from whence the early birds who began the previous afternoon will begin today. On leaving the Town Arm, you will pass the historic Canal Yard which still provides boat maintenance facilities and a little later Blackwater Meadow Marina, beyond which glimpses of the first and largest of the meres is possible. This and those which follow are well worth exploring and there is a visitor centre by the main Mere which explains the formation of the meres and their fragile ecosystem. There are four meres in total deep ice age pools which stretch to the edge of the Moss

Almost immediately on leaving Ellesmere you will enter the short but exciting tunnel of 87 yards after which the remaining Meres can be seen over the next few miles either side of the navigation.

Once the meres have been left behind you will cross the wild Whixall Moss, an untamed raised bogland with a rich and diverse flora and fauna. This is a delicate and rare habitat created at the end of the last ice age and it can be enjoyed from the boat or by following the mosses trail, which can be walked or cycled.

This part of the route takes you through wet and marginal farm land at the edge of the Moss, an upland bog left over from the ice age (***see cruising west***). It has a bleak beauty all of its own, and for solitude, few canal locations can match its unique charm. But if you like more civilisation than Whixall Moss can offer, head onto Platt Lane where a short walk to the right will bring you to *The Waggoner Inn*, a basic country local. Hereabouts, the villages have a frontier feel, such as at Welsh End, to which you can walk from Platt Lane and which has a Methodist chapel although no store and no pub.



This is as far as is probably feasible for those setting out from Chirk that same day, but if you have re-started your journey from Ellesmere then if you have time, press on through the lift bridge at Tilstock Park, and then beneath the Cambrian Railway Bridge which once took the railway line from Whitchurch to Oswestry, through Ellesmere over the canal. At Sparks Bridge a little further on, The Shropshire Way crosses the canal and to the east of this bridge is the Motte & Bailey of Pan Castle. From here, on elevated ground, fine views of Whitchurch can be had, over formerly marshy terrain.

Two more lift bridges need to be dealt with on the approach to Whitchurch and there are moorings on the town arm, from which a half mile walk will get you into the town centre where there are many fine pubs and interesting town trails. Whitchurch, not Shrewsbury as is often supposed, is the County town of Shropshire. This journey, from Ellesmere to Whitchurch will take approximately 5 ¾ hours, all things being equal.

Within two days cruising east of Chirk Destination Marbury or Wrenbury

These two destinations offer two distinct and very different locations, a day out of Ellesmere, Whixall Moss or Whitchurch. The first, Marbury, is reached after 9 ½ hours of pleasant cruising from Ellesmere, or 6 from Platt Lane. If you reached Whitchurch the night before then Marbury is just a short step, of 4 hours, but Wrenbury the second destination is 5 hours distant, allowing for a late start from Whitchurch, perhaps to explore the town and market.

The stretch to Whitchurch has been described in the half day cruising section. And from Whitchurch, the first obstacle is the lift bridge at New Mills. Just beyond the town arm. Shortly after, there is more exercise with the six Grindley Brook locks, three in a staircase and three separated and all descending. At the bottom lock there is a pub, the *Horse & Jockey*, which like many in the area is said to have a resident ghost. Meals are available lunch times and evenings. There is also a lock-side store selling farm bacon, cheese pasties and other produce.

A number of maintained walkways converge here below the locks; the Bishop Bennett Way, the Maelor Way, the South Cheshire Way and the Marches Way, and beyond these, the railway bridge which once took the Whitchurch to Chester line north to that great Roman city.

Navigational Note: The first three locks at Grindley Brook are staircase locks, which require particular care. Their operation will be explained by your trainers. During the boating season, there are often, though not always, volunteer lock-keepers on duty to aid your passage. Remember never to tie up in descending locks or you could find yourself suspended. Hold the boat using a rope around but not tied to a bollard

Heading north, the canal passes through pleasant farm land, rolling hills and small copses, nestled among which to the west are the Hall, Manor and Farm of the scattered community of Hinton. Beyond this is Povey's Lock, to the west of which is a waterfowl sanctuary and a little further still is the remote Willey Moor lock at which there is, implausibly a pub and restaurant, once the lock keepers cottage. If you are heading out from Whitchurch, rather than Whixall that day, the Willey Moor would make a great place to stop for lunch, it being only 2 and a half hours out from the county town. Alternatively if you have come from Whixall, you will get here after six hours, which might be enough, with the lift bridges and the Grindley Brook locks. Either way, it's a pleasant and unexpected location on the edge of the ice age landscape that is Willey Moor.



The two meres at Quoisley nestle between small hills, just as the Ellesmere ones do there, but here the countryside is far more open and very sparsely populated. Once through Quoisley lock, the next at Marbury, is our suggested stop for the short day. This is because Marbury village, a short walk from the canal down School lane, is a true delight, centred around a farm with mostly old buildings, many of them half timbered. The friendly and cosy pub, *The Swan*, looks out onto the green where the Marbury Merry Days were once held, involving Dancing Bears and general shenanigans with pigs and puddings.

Most folk miss Marbury altogether, gravitating to the more accessible honey pots, so it's a village well worth

exploring.

If you are determined to press on, then Wrenbury awaits. There are no more locks and just the one lift bridge on this section, so its easy comfortable cruising along mainly straight canal, so you can really enjoy the countryside in the late afternoon sun. Again, there are few farms and no villages as such – it's sparsely populated and allows you to truly unwind.

Wrenbury Wharf was once a transshipment point and at that time had a warehouse and a mill, now a really enjoyable pub and boatyard respectively. There is another pub also all nestled together around the canal and a short walk from the village itself which has a post office, railway station and church. It's a stretch to get here from Whixall in a day, but from Whitchurch, if you have done a half day cruise to there on the day you took on the boat, it's only a little over five hours which will give you time to relax even more.

If you have had a short day, cruising from Whitchurch, and next day you are thinking of heading for **Middlewich**, you might want to press on a bit further, to reduce your cruising time the following day. If so, think about stopping at Greenfield Bridge or Halls End Bridge, both of which enable the nearby village

of **Ravensmoor** to be reached in 10 minutes walking. There is a pub, *The Farmer's Arms*, a good general store and a Methodist chapel. Doing this will save an hour next day. If you decide to also get the two Swanley locks under your belt, and moor opposite Swanley Hall, it will save you two hours, bringing the next day's journey down to an easier 7 and a half hours cruising.

Take a peak at tomorrow's notes to see what this will entail

*Within **three days cruising** of Chirk – Destination **Audlem or Middlewich***

Leaving Marbury, the two hours to Wrenbury has been covered in the notes for yesterday. If you have stayed at Marbury overnight, then **Audlem** is your obvious choice of destination for today, because this is by far the shorter of the two cruises. If you have stayed at Wrenbury, Ravensmoor or Swanley then you might consider the longer journey to **Middlewich**.

This part of the cruise takes the canal through the fertile Cheshire plain and the countryside is soft and pretty. There are a number of lift bridges, and these are often left open allowing the uninterrupted passage of boats. At Wrenbury Heath, the canal turns sharply northwards. It passes a number of farms on either side before reaching the three Baddiley Locks, beyond which are the Greenfield and Halls Lane Bridges, from which **Ravensmoor** can be accessed. Further still, are the two Swanley locks, the bottom one of which sits opposite Swanley Hall, and will have been the mooring point last night for those who, from Whitchurch, wanted to make the most distance.

We are on the last mile or so of the Llangollen canal, and soon Bridge No1 is reached, the Hurleston Bridge, just before the busy A51. Beyond this is the lock cottage and during the main season, there is often a 'lockie' to advise and help boaters through the Hurleston flight of five locks which drops the canal 34 feet down to the Shropshire Union. Getting to and through this bottom lock will take an hour and a half from Swanley, two and half hours from Greenfield Bridge (Ravensmoor), three and a half hours from Wrenbury and five and a half hours from Marbury.



At Hurleston Junction, you have reached the end (or is it the beginning?) of the Llangollen Canal, and here you need to make your choice. Choose either north to Middlewich or south to either Nantwich or Audlem. Each has its charm and maybe time will be the decider

For those heading north toward **Middlewich**, the canal skirts the banks of the massive Hurleston Reservoir and then Stoke Manor appears on the port side. Bremilow's Bridge is Grade 1 listed, and there is a small Methodist chapel, still active by that, Barbridge itself has two pubs, one right on the junction, *The Jolly Tar*.

At Barbridge Junction, you will need to turn right beneath the bridge and head up the Middlewich branch of the Shropshire Union. There is a chandlery at Barbridge Junction and one a little further on at Venetian Marina. After a while, the canal passes beneath the main line to Crewe after which the countryside returns to quiet and remote peace.

There are few settlements but one that is close to the canal side is **Church Minshull**, 'an old and mellow' village as eulogised by the Nicholson Guide, to which we are indebted for the perfect description. If you have been travelling from **Marbury**, this is as far as you are realistically going to get in a day, being 2.75 hours from **Hurleston** and about 8.5 hours from **Marbury**. There are certainly worse places to stop than this and if you do stop here you will be sharing a part of canal history, for the famous LTC Rolt, the godfather of the waterways rested here and enjoyed a pleasant sojourn in the *Badger Inn*. Rolt's trip on the ex-working boat **Cressy** and the subsequent description in his book **Narrowboat** inarguably began the interest in the restoration of the canals the benefits of which we all enjoy today. Real Ale can still be enjoyed in the Badger too!

If you have set out from Wrenbury this morning, reaching Middlewich will take over 10 hours. That's a long day, so you may well want to tarry at Church Minshull too, a trip that will take you six and a half hours. For those who began the day at Swanley, the trip to Middlewich is eight and a half hours, which is quite achievable.

For these eager souls, they can expect, if setting off at eight thirty, to be in Church Minshull by lunchtime, so still an opportunity to explore this historic spot. After lunch the canal heads north following the wooded valley of the river Weaver and its tributaries. On the eastern side, the main line to Liverpool accompanies

the canal for a number of miles until crossing the navigation just north of Lea Hall. This is a countryside of farms and pleasant fields, a perfect approach to the town of Middlewich, a canal centre of some distinction where there is so much to see

Swanley crews can expect to get to Middlewich from Church Minshull in a little over three hours, so don't tarry too long in the Badger! Those staying overnight at Church Minshull can reach Middlewich by late morning the next day and it's as well to wind above Kings Lock and then find a mooring before going off to explore this unique Cheshire town.

Opposite Kings Lock is a great pub, of the same name, which is annually at the centre of the town's Boat and Folk festival. This normally happens in the middle of June. This is an incredible week of music dance and boat craft which appears to tumble out of every corner. It is well worth planning to visit if you can.

Middlewich is from Roman times and remains still, the largest source of mined salt in Great Britain. The modern workings are outside of the town, alongside the Trent and Mersey canal to the south

The canals are narrow and pretty and there are plenty of opportunities to sit and watch the world go by. Also there is a good chandlery at Kings Lock and a Boatyard too.

Allow three days to get back to Chirk, cruising eight and half hours per day, but remember to give yourself an additional hour each day for unexpected delays. Locks won't always be in your favour!

End of ***CRUISING WEST*** (See also ***CRUISING EAST***)