From the President:

savouring the ergonomics

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From the President

Savouring the ergonomics

Some years ago we undertook risk assessments for British Waterways, examining the manual handling of locks and swing bridges. This came to mind recently whilst holidaying on the 57 foot 'boutique' narrowboat JessicaBoo.

Named after one of the owners' Newfoundland dogs, JessicaBoo features all mod cons, including a light-sound system operable with a smartphone from the towpath, ideal when returning from the pub in the evening!

The primary controls on a narrowboat are a combined throttle-gear selector and the tiller. The control-response with steering takes some getting used to, moving the tiller left to steer right and vice versa, with a vessel that pivots near the middle and where it’s not possible to see the front.

During skill acquisition stages, steering can break down in more challenging (panic) situations, for example when negotiating boats coming the other way, when going too fast. Slowing down requires anticipation as the only braking available is through putting the gear into reverse. It takes quite some distance to stop an 18 ton boat even if it is only travelling at 4 miles an hour.

When it comes to the displays, among the most useful are level indicators for fuel, water and waste. It is necessary to fill up with water every couple of days at one of the water points along the canal network. The waste tank receives the toilet flush and needs to be 'pumped out' when full otherwise the toilet won't flush. This needs to be judged carefully as it costs approximately £15 per pump out and there might be a day or more travel needed to reach somewhere offering this service. Due to the shape of the waste tank, the waste display on JessicaBoo is non-linear: the rate of change of the gauge for a given volume of waste varies depending on how full the tank is. This can make life interesting!

Our cruise took us from Leeds, heading up into the Yorkshire Dales. Covering 55 miles in 10 days, we passed through 55 locks and 43 swing bridges. The swing bridges and locks vary considerably in their mechanism, efficiency and standards of maintenance, and represent a good deal of manual handling, as well as the cognitive challenge involved in trying to work out how to operate some of the motorised road bridges.

Our journey concluded with the mile long Foulridge Tunnel, built in the 1790s. Narrow, unlit, and with water showering on us from the roof, the 20 minutes it takes to pass through the tunnel is a memorable sensory experience.

All in all we had a great break. As summer progresses, I hope you enjoy your holidays too and are able to savour the ergonomics along the way.

Best wishes

Roger