

Sprague UK trip – 2008

Lori has spent about a year trying to figure out how to get us all on some sort of a grand summer vacation. After endless debates about California, Iceland, Sweden, Hawaii and Germany (I suggested Iowa, but was overruled... again), we found ourselves booked for 2 weeks in the UK. Ever since our Pastor in Akron told us of the great time he had on his canal boat in England 20 years ago, Lori has been wanting to try it herself, and what with the British Pound at a record unfavorable exchange of \$2.00, airline tickets at record highs, and the Michigan economy at a 50 year low... now seemed to be the time to do it. With that, we dug out our passports and took our two middle-aged selves (JKS & LMS), a 15 year old Kent (KKS) and a 10 year old Clark (CDS) to the UK.

Day 0: Wednesday, 7/9/08: 9pm EST: JKS

Sense of foreboding at level Orange... not too bad for the start of a Sprague family vacation. Started off day well, but then got dragged to Lori's water aerobics class (it hurt). Completed packing 4 checked bags, 4 carry-ons for 4 people... a bit on the heavy side, but I've seen (and done) worse. Boys were both hacked off at me because I removed their hardcover books (~ 9 lbs each) and insisted they bring only paperbacks. Bought last minute items including an overpriced Apple I-pod charger unit... our only email link over there is likely to be the Wi-Fi access thru Lori's I-pod Touch.

Bought and delivered a get-well card for Mary Ann's sick dog, then Larissa Jaskiewicz shuttled us to the airport. Lori and I recalled while eastbound on I-94 that the last time we had ridden with Larissa was several years ago when she was 16. On that trip, she managed to take our minivan slightly airborne over the RR tracks coming back from church. This ride was more sedate.

We checked in with no trouble. I wanted to try my luck with Brother-in-Law Ken's technique of sneaking extra liquids/gels past TSA by slipping it in his pocket (and hoping not to get shunted into secondary) like he had to do with his Mother's magic cow cream on his trip to Rome, but I didn't really have anything worth sneaking. We had a quick last bite at the airport Japanese restaurant and hopped on the plane. Kent and Lori sat on the starboard; Clark and I were on the port seats, same aisle. Clark and I practiced a few rope tricks for the obligatory magic show at our upcoming "Cousin Camp," and then read and napped. Clark drew a nice maze in his notebook.

Day 0: Wednesday, 7/9/08: 9:30pm EST: LMS

Dazed. Replaced Clark's windbreaker at Salvation Army (\$2.64 + tax) to replace the one he lost at Summer Camp. Boiled eggs, packed snacks, made keys so our neighbors can get in if needed. Was Mary Ann's last customer for the day for a quick hair trim. She did a nice job but was pretty bummed about her dog.

Since the narrative that follows is a group effort and somewhat rambling, this is probably a good place to say something about our itinerary since I'm the only one who knows where we went. Days 1 & 2 were spent in London trying to gather our wits. Days 3-10 we were cruising the Llangollen Canal in mid-Wales and Shropshire. We started at Chirk on Saturday and went downstream (east into Shropshire) past Ellesmere and finally turning around at Whitchurch on Tuesday. Wednesday evening found us passing our starting point at Chirk and we reached Llangollen mid-morning Thursday for a 24-hour stay before returning the boat to the Chirk Marina on Saturday morning. Days 10-12 were spent in Conwy in north Wales before returning to London for our final two days. You may need to refer back to this as you read the tangled tale which follows.

Day 0: Wednesday, 7/9/08: 9:45pm EST: KKS

I guess some people just don't support literacy and reading! (JKS note: Kent is starting out the trip being a pill and not contributing to our diary, even when asked nicely).



Day 1: Thursday, 7/10/08: 9am GMT: CDS

At this moment, I'm going over a giant lake in England! It's strange and not natural.

Day 1: Thursday, 7/10/08: 9:10am GMT: JKS

It's somewhere around 4am EST. I think we all got a couple hours of shuteye, but Lori has been glaring at me from across the aisle because she thinks it was my job to put her sleeping pills in the carryon. England isn't quite 100% socked in with cloud cover; Clark has spied a couple lakes and fields peeking through. We'll be landing in about 10 minutes. I wonder what's waiting for us down there.

Day 1: Thursday, 7/10/08: 9:20am GMT: KKS

I got exactly 30 minutes of sleep. Me and Mom nearly bust a gut watching the Blue Man Group on the in flight movie which involved catching things in their mouths, painting with drums, acting like rock stars and shoving a drain camera down someone's throat. After everyone went to sleep, I watched "27 Dresses" which was actually a pretty good movie, though I don't often watch movies of that genre. I think I will regret the meager amount of sleep later.

Day 1: Thursday, 7/10/08: 9:22am GMT: LMS

Kent was really nice and let me have the window seat. Didn't sleep much anyhow.

Day 1: Thursday, 7/10/08: 9:20pm GMT: KKS

Our flight landed at about 10am GMT and some of us weren't doing so good on sleep. We stumbled through customs with no problem. "Just going on 'Oliday are you? Have a jolly time!" (He really said "jolly"). I think we only registered a 1 or 2 on the Humilometer for being so obviously American.

We caught the Gatwick Express train (that my Dad's friend Dr. Digby said we should take) to Victoria station and eventually emerged from the hustle and bustle dazed, confused, and lacking a respectable map. We immediately went back into the station to procure one. The info booth didn't have the right map, and Dad said that he was under no circumstances going to go into that den of "frothing tourists" that was the London Transport Customer Services until the queue calmed down. So we emerged again, this time with a sense of doom and foreboding as we all remembered our infamous 2003 South Dakota trip, Poison Ivy, failed radiator and all. We struck out in the direction that Momma guessed and look for the Central House Hotel. We make it to our Hotel with little hassle besides heavy luggage. Leaving our luggage in the subterranean luggage dungeon, we strike out to see one of the great cities of the world.

I would like to point out that London is one of the worst planned cities in the world. None of the streets run parallel; traffic circles and 7-way intersections are countless. This makes navigating the city a bear. We found our way to Buckingham Palace using Dr. Digby's emailed directions and marvel at how still the guards can stand while balancing beavers on their heads. We walked through the parks and through

Covent Garden before trudging back to our hotel, but it was a lot easier without all of that **HEAVY** luggage. We shopped for dinner for **45 minutes**, not having had lunch. I was starving. Hunger apparently doesn't affect my parents as they were arguing about whether Indian food would be too spicy for Clark, who was lying on the ground with hunger pains. After settling on fried fish carryout, we oozed back to our hotel to absorb the warm glow of the BBC evening news.

Day 1: Thursday, 7/10/08: 9:40pm GMT: JKS

I liked the warning signs in London. They were everywhere. "Caution: Danger of Death" appeared many places, especially near anything carrying more than 3 volts. My favorite was the warning sign to thieves reading "Thieves Beware, Plain Clothes Police Officers are Operating in this Area." The sign was securely chained to a lamp post to keep thieves from walking off with it. Kent and Lori labored in vain to get his cell phone the appropriate SIM card so it would work in the UK. Disgusted, Kent put his phone into a body bag, not to be touched till we return home. How will he live without his gadget?

Day 2: Friday, 7/11/08: 10pm GMT: LMS

Our full day of sightseeing in London got off to a slow start. Reluctant to wake the three slimy slugs oozing in their beds, I misread my watch and let them oversleep breakfast. Jim raced down to the breakfast room and snagged some croissants before the breakfast girl put them all away. All that was left of the coffee was the dregs but I drank it anyhow.

Somehow we figured out how to find our way back to Victoria Station and buy day passes for the bus. We also managed to pick up a copy of the London Transportation System map... the only map you need for getting around the city. Following Gareth's excellent instructions, we found our way to Covent Garden and the London transport Museum. The museum presented the history of the transportation systems of London from 1800 the present. It was nicely done and so kid-friendly that Clark kept disappearing and we spent half our time looking for him. We attempted to find Stamford's, a bookshop where we intended to buy Ordnance Survey maps of the Llangollen canal area. However, since I failed to follow the link in Gareth's guide before we left, we weren't sure of the address and so, tempers short and breakfast having worn off, we opted for Italian food with the pigeons in the apple market.

Having fortified ourselves, we were able to find the bus to the City of London. (St. Paul's will have to wait for yet another trip on account of our late start.) We had 2 hours to do the Tower, twice as much as our previous trip. So we got to see the armory in the White tower and lots of other bits we missed before, but we couldn't find the torture exhibit because we didn't grab a map of the tower before we ran out of time. (The free map rack was obscured by a pack of Oliver Twist sound-alikes trying to sell us guidebooks for £5.) We repeated our very nice trick of seeing the crown jewels at the very end of the day. They must get some real crowds in there because they had a queuing space that would do Disney proud but there were no lines when we got there and Clark was able to ride the conveyor past the jewels 2 or 3 times before we dragged him out of there. Kent read up on the legend of the Ravens of the Tower (the Tower will not fall so long as the Ravens remain on the grounds), and noted that the English take no chances... the Ravens had their wings clipped.

From there, a nice walk across the Tower Bridge took us to the South Bank. Newly redeveloped and rather trendy. Kent wasn't sure he liked the London City Hall – an ultra modern slanted egg-shaped thing that looked like it was going to topple over backwards. Ducked into a bike shop to check out the selection of folding models and escape the sudden downpour. Successfully used the London bus map to find our way back to Victoria with only one transfer and even got to ride one of the classic old doubledecker

Routemaster busses – they’ve still got a few of those on the routes. Dinner was pasties from the stand at the station, eaten in our hotel room. I’d definitely have the steak and stout pasty again.

Let the kids watch some murder show while I booked the hotel for our return. Determined that we could take the tube to our early morning train. Conclusion: A mostly successful day of sightseeing.

Day 3: Saturday, 7/12/08: 9:30pm GMT: CDS

Today was our first day on the boat. It was extremely hard to get to it.

Day 3: Saturday, 7/12/08: 10:30pm GMT: JKS

Up at 6am, ~ zero sleep for LMS, probably even less for me. We were both nearly asleep at 10pm last night when Kent’s watch hourly chime (that LMS asked him to silence a day ago) “BIPPED.” I snatched it from his wrist and was gonna chuck it out in the hall, but Lori deactivated the chime. For the next 7 hours, Kent made smacking and clicking sounds occasionally interspersed with him chuckling to himself. We found out later he was listening to the BBC on his I-pod radio. I started making plans to make his I-pod have an accident.

Multiple alarms woke us at 6am, we were checked out and trudging towards Victoria Station by 6:30. After an unproductive exchange with an uncooperative automated underground ticket machine, Kent steered Lori towards the manned ticket counter. 10 pounds got us to Marleybone station early enough for breakfast milkshakes. The tube ride was complicated by trackwork, but 1 train change was all that was needed to circumvent. Marleybone was also the first luggage malfunction – Kent blew out a wheel on the biggest roll-on (42 lbs on the NorthWest luggage scale).

We caught the British Rail train for Shrewsbury that left precisely on time causing Kent and Lori to contrast the service with AMTRAK. Kent fell immediately asleep. Clark and I played poker till he got disgusted (I had an impressive run of good hands), and Lori did Sudoku. British rail, like AMTRAK, apparently, also does track maintenance. We were sidetracked three times and then finally were stopped just outside the station just long enough for the drizzle to turn into an impressive rain so that when they kicked us off the train (end of the line for that day due to more track maintenance), we got good and soaked sprinting for the replacement bus that we had to take to Gobowen(SP) for continued train service. @ Gobowen we rejoined our train (that fortunately did wait for the late bus that had waited for our first late train) for another 5 miles till we “alighted” at Chirk.

We were the only ones off at the tiny station (except for one other guy that quickly sprinted to the road and took the only cab) and we hauled our limping luggage up the stairs to the roadway and looked around.



We saw a large carved wooden sign. I looked it over and decided that it was written in Hobbish. Chirk is in Wales and they apparently have their own language over here. Lori claims that in Welshish, “W” is a vowel, but all I know is that they can string together an impressive string of “F’s,” “L’s,” and “W’s” into something that I would have guessed only one of Tolkien’s creations could have pronounced accurately. Anyhow, I stared harder at the sign and decided that I could sort of make it out... the pictograms really helped.

The town center was shown to be 600 meters east of our

location (past the Cadbury plant), the lumber mill was shown as 700 meters north on the east side of the canal, and by scaling these distances, I concluded that the marina (where our “Narrowboat” was to be met) was about 800 meters north of us on the west side of the canal. I figured that if I could find the right path, we could roll our luggage 800 meters (about a half mile) no problem. I scouted around and soon found the canal nearby which went only North (the South-bound portion was beneath my feet as I was standing on the 537 meter long Chirk canal tunnel, though I didn’t know that then). I looked about some more and found 2 nice looking footpaths, the towpath on the east of the canal, and a nice, wide and well-marked footpath on the west side. Not knowing if there would be a cross-over bridge near the marina (the hobbits showed no such structure there, and they usually are rather fussy and precise about such structures), I decided on the footpath and called back the boys, who had already wandered a good ways towards the lumber mill (actually a plant that made OSB out of locally logged trees – the marina owner described it as “making bad wood out of good wood”).

After squeezing through the stile, we trotted off, each of us wearing a backpack and toting wheeled luggage – that is except for me, since I was lugging our giant 42 pound wounded roll-on (technically now a drag-on) on my shoulder. After the 1st 200 meters, the 5 yard wide trail had narrowed to 2 yards and Clark’s roll-on had also degenerated to a drag-on due to mud jams in both wheels. The 2nd 200 meters consisted of me carrying the 42# drag-on in my right hand with Clark’s 35# drag-on in my left hand. I found myself listing to starboard a tad. The 600 meter mark saw the friendly footpath degenerate into a winding cow path with frequent quagmires from the earlier rain. Kent carried the 35# drag-on, I carried the 42# drag-on, Lori pulled her formerly spiffy red roll-on (now nicely mud-splattered) and Clark hauled the giant wheeled duffle that had nice big wheels, but kept capsizing on him. The 800 meter mark was where we encountered our first fallen trees across the goat path and we found ourselves gaining altitude and surrounded by scary looking forest. I’m pretty sure I spotted an Orc off to our right, matching our speed and looking for an opportunity to pick us off 1 by 1. Here Lori remembered she had a map that showed a bridge and implied that the tow-path was the way to go... but according to the Hobbit map, we were already there. At approximately the 1.5 mile mark, I had just rescued Lori and her formerly spiffy red slog-on from a quicksand pit and heaved a rock at something that looked like Gollum when Clark up ahead cried out NOT the longed for assurance of “Marina!” but the much more expected confirmation of “End of the Road!” Sure enough, ahead of Clark was a stream gushing across, which if forded would yield the ford a beautiful expanse of gorse, nettles, barbed wire, brambles and presumably, angry black dwarves.



I scouted West and found a golf course past some gnarly barbed wire and hoofed it over to what turned out to be the 2nd green. I waited till the golfers there had teed off, and they amicably assured me that the Marina was just past the clubhouse, so I slogged back where I found that Lori had already hailed a northbound canal boat and begged passage for her lost tribe. We went with the boat passage, which took only a few minutes, and dumped us at the end of a grassy peninsula that only took us another 10 minutes to traverse back to the marina.



Our boat was “Debbie.” Debbie was all steel construction, built in 1995, was 58’ in length, and had a 6’-10” beam so as to squeeze into the locks that were built at 7’ width back in 1810. I would guess she displaced about 8 tons and was driven by a 6 cylinder Isuzu diesel. Her 120 gallon fuel tank was good for 2 weeks of canal cruising. Steering was by tiller which drove a rudder aft of the prop (no bow thrusters on this boat). Debbie handled as nimbly as the barge that she was, meaning that you needed to be a good guesser as to which way you wanted her to be pointed at some point in the distant future. Since the canals varied from 7’ to 25’ in width (16’ was common) and got shallow near the edges, you

couldn’t drift much or you’d run aground and get stuck in the mud while oncoming and following canal traffic would bear down on you. She had a 170 gallon potable water tank, hot and cold running water, flush toilet, shower, hot water radiators, headlight, well equipped galley (with propane fridge and stove), beds for 4, living room, TV and a horn. The headlight and horn were for the tunnels. The marina crew also gave us mooring lines, 3 steel spikes, a sledge to drive them with, a mop, a gangplank, and a 12’ pole. Lastly, we received a pair of windlasses – basically cranks which fit the square drive shafts in order to allow us to operate the gates for the locks and the winches for the lift bridges.

We fired up the diesel, pointed it south, and started hitting banks. Pretty soon, I got the hang of holding the center of the canal with good accuracy, but sharp turns and pointing the bow when stopped and/or reversing took a while to figure out. We made it through the tunnel without incident, and over the big aqueduct that immediately followed without falling off (real impressive drop of the starboard side of the boat, no rail... you could just step right off the stern deck into space with a 40 meter free fall into the valley below). I got to demonstrate my boat handling skills in front of a dozen or so moderately drunk locals at the Poacher’s Pocket Tavern, which was the recommended dinner stop. I did my best to gracefully moor in between other moored boats while the locals quaffed their pints between giving me pointers and mocking my efforts. We eventually got the boat pinned down, went past the locals sitting on the wall, and ate like pigs. Humilometer rating fairly high, but after I was full, I didn’t care.

We moored across from a cow-pasture and slept hard.

Day 4: Sunday, 7/13/08: 10pm GMT: JKS

We woke up, opened the curtains and saw Holsteins staring in at us. Fortunately, they didn’t try to board.

Got to our first lock at New Marton. We were behind some pros, so we watched how they worked the locks. It all worked slick... quite impressive for machinery and structures nearly 200 years old. Went under tons of stone bridges, most of which were for farm equipment and livestock, very few had roads over them. The bridges were often on blind curves and only a few inches wider than the boat. We soon learned to honk and prepare for emergency full throttle reverse in case oncoming traffic beat us to it. Saw lots of sheep.



Passed the British Waterways headquarters and garage in Ellesmere. We visited the town for supplies and stayed the night nearby moored near a beautiful lake that we could see just outside and below our porthole windows.

Day 5: Monday, 7/14/08: 10pm GMT: CDS

Today we continued canal boating. When we stopped for lunch, there was a boat going for a lift bridge. I went to see it. It was a manual bridge. Afterwards, we went under two hydraulic ones.

Day 5: Monday, 7/14/08: 10:20pm GMT: JKS

Just when we were starting to have fun, make good time with the boat, and get the knack for handling it, Lori made us stop and take a hike. We moored outside the Mosses National Nature Reserve and followed the footpath signs. This reserve is a former peat mine, now better described as a recovering peat bog. Grudgingly, we allowed Lori to prod us forward into the swarm of mosquitoes (the first ones we had seen). We now can't agree on whether to call this hike our "bog slog," or our "sludge trudge." At any rate, the mosquitoes were fierce, the signs warned of "deep drains," and advised us that, "if bitten by an adder, keep calm and seek medical attention." The "deep drains" turned out to be ditches and sinkholes that were all filled with slowly oozing pools of what looked like slightly diluted creosote. We nearly lost Kent to a muck hole, and meanwhile, Lori (well protected from mosquitoes with long sleeves and pants, unlike the rest of us) was lollygagging behind us with her field glasses ooohing and aaahing at all the pretty birdies. The rest of us were all looking for adders, and were disappointed that we didn't see a single one. We finally all ditched her and jogged back to the boat. She got on just as we cast off at full throttle to try to get going slightly faster than the mosquito's terminal airspeed.



More lift bridges, both manually operated (hang on a chain and then dodge the counterweight) and positive displacement gear-pump hydraulic ones. Clark made me sit with him and explain the hydraulic plumbing, and he then accurately sketched mechanical and fluid path schematics in his sketch book. Getting out at our night-time mooring spot, Clark found out about nettles. He doesn't like them. Kent's I-pod crashed and has requested an OS reload. He was really depressed about consigning yet another of his precious electronic gizmos to the body bag. He's already pestering Lori to borrow her I-pod 'cause "I need it to survive!" I fear that she's weakening and may give in.

Day 6: Tuesday, 7/15/08: 2:00pm GMT: CDS

Today we saw some staircase locks, 4 of them in a row. Every time the water was released from one, a 2-foot tidal wave appeared.

Day 7: Wednesday, 7/16/08: 2:30pm GMT: JKS



Kent has had the tiller for the bulk of the last 2 days. He has a good touch at maneuvering, but did get us beached twice today, once pretty securely. We managed to get off without any aid and only the sheep and 1 passing boat saw us lodged sideways in the canal thus preserving Kent's humilometer rating at respectable levels. Clark used up all the "special" toilet paper that came with the boat, thus earning special ire from Momma.

Clark and I spent quality time today and yesterday analyzing more mechanical and hydraulic canal machinery. Big hand-cranked 2 speed loading crane (approx 6x and 36x crank ratios plus a foot treadle operated band brake at Ellesmere and the staircase locks with all their weirs, troughs, overflows, gates and other assorted plumbing. Had good local meat pies for lunch.

Got out and hiked a bit around the larger Ellesmere lake. Lots of scenery. Saw a genuine thatched roof on a cottage, it was beautifully laid, and reportedly can last up to 50 years or more if applied by a skillful roofer. Watched Cricket players practicing.

Day 7: Wednesday, 7/16/08: 6:30pm GMT: LMS

What a difference a fresh supply of T.P. makes. Clark wiped out our last half roll at one sitting and we were only able to snag a new supply because the woman at the marina was working overtime.

Other than that, I took the helm for much of the afternoon in the rain. Today was laundry day so the boat is full of clothesline.

Day 8: Thursday, 7/17/08: 10:00pm GMT: JKS

Long day. Up early, got boat pointed towards Llangollen, tough strong fast current and very narrow canals. Lori's strategy was to beat the traffic and it worked. Several narrow sections required full throttle to make any forward progress, and the dog-walkers still passed the boat. Arrived at about 10am and set off on foot to explore town. They'd just finished their big music festival, the International Eisteddfod, and town wasn't that crowded. Hung out in tourist trap shops and Llangollen town museum, then Lori marched us up to the "old Ladies' house"... Two women from Ireland that moved here in 1780 and apparently achieved fame and renown for having lived here. I couldn't figure out what either of them ever did of importance, but we forked over our money and got plastic yackety bricks to stick up to our ears and hear all about them and their "Gothicization" of their house. Interesting wood carvings throughout, but I would have preferred a nap. Before all that, we took a sightseeing steam train trip up the Dee valley (The Dee is the most sacred of all Celtic rivers in Europe) with a stop in "Glyndyfrdwy" – I think only a troll should be able to pronounce that word. Lunch was yummy pork pies procured from the bakery and eaten cold. They were stuffed with a hefty patty of coarsely ground pork and lard, with the patty coated in extra congealed fat for good lubrication before being wrapped in pastry. Clark couldn't quite choke his down, but the rest of us were tough enough.

I wanted to hike up the big hill and visit the castle, but Lori mandated a stop for "tea" first. This consisted of forking over £10 for darling little portions of food and one pot of tea, Lori being the only one who drinks the stuff. There were lots of doilies and lace about. I gritted my teeth and acted appreciative.



(LMS rebuttal: Actually, he didn't act that appreciative but I was not going to leave Great Britain without having afternoon tea at least once...and I retrieved my own jacket contrary to what is implied below.)



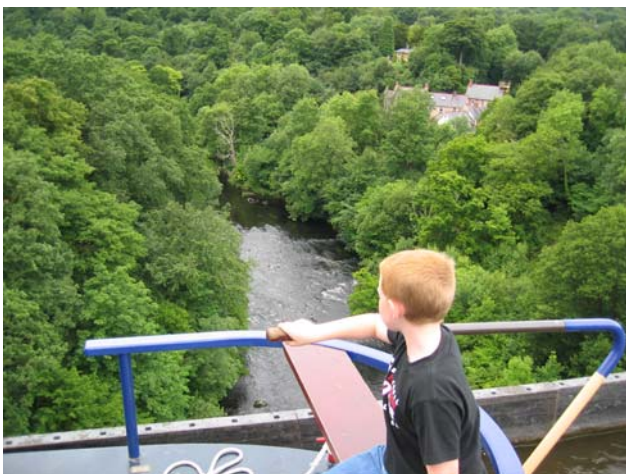
After tea and a jog back to the old Ladies house to retrieve Lori's coat, we found the footpath to the castle (Castell Dinas Bran). We had to go through many pastures and gates and up a whale of a hill. It was built ca. 1200 by the Welsh, and only used 17 years before the Welsh burned it themselves before the advancing hated English could conquer it. I don't understand how this castle could have been conquered; anybody climbing the hill would be too tired to swing a sword. Staggeringly gorgeous views from up top, but the castle has been a majestic ruin for centuries. Kent and Clark barrel rolled down the hill afterwards until they reached the place where sheep were actively grazing.

Dinner at the Corn Mill. Got Kent a bottle of hard cider since it's approximately legal to do so here for teenagers, if consumed with dinner. "Danger of Death" is written "Perygl Marwolaeth Cadwch Allan" in Welsh, or Elvish, or whatever it is that they speak here.

Day 9: Friday, 7/18/08: 8:30pm GMT: KKS

Woke up for a 1 mile walk to the Horseshoe Falls at the source of the Llongollen canal. Turns out that it was more like 3 miles, each way. When we got back to the boat, Dad and I were ready for a nap seeing as we had climbed a small mountain the day before. I'm not sure if I mentioned it before but today was my 6th sighting of the "two skippers." Easily distinguished by their matching captains hats. I have seen them 1. Cruising down the canal behind us. 2. Moored behind us for the night. 3. Cruising back up the canal. 4. At table across from us at a restaurant in Llangollen. 5. Moored upstream from us. 6. Walking towards us on the towpath. I think they're following us.

We spy a busload of elderly people unloading into an "Acqueduct and Lunch" cruise boat. We figure that following this tourboat is probably the best way to get back down the tricky narrow sections fast, so we hightail it after the boat. Clark draws many concerned looks from the old ladies on the tourboat as he clambers over every surface of the boat. We make it to the Pontcysyllte (say "pon-ker-SHUL-tee") aqueduct in record time and take a short hike to the bottom of the valley to see how big this aqueduct is.



It's really big. Tragedy ensues when Clark's notebook was blown off the bow, either into the water of the aqueduct, or more dramatically over the side and hundreds of feet down, and then into the river below. All involved are saddened.

We chug back to Chirk pretty quickly and moor outside the tunnel. We take a short hike through the pastures and find ourselves at Chirk Castle. Chirk Castle is an Honest-to-God Castle with a grand Hall, Guard Tower, Chappell, Full Servant's quarters and a dungeon. It had withstood attacks and sieges and

been overrun twice. Built in the 1200's, it had been in the Middleton family since the Mid-1500's until it was handed over to the National trust. I thought the coolest things there were the coronation chairs. 2 from King George's coronation, and 2 from Queen Elizabeth's coronation. If you were invited to the coronation, you could buy the chair you sat in for a token sum, as a keepsake. I'll have to check Ebay for some of those. After touring the castle, we went out to the gardens which could be used as the definition of sprawling. Apparently there was a staff of 3 full time gardeners, 1 full time apprentice, and 10 volunteers to keep it running. My castle favorite: coronation chairs. Mom's: The rules for servants stating that "punishment for first infraction will be loss of beer privileges for one week, then one month, and then an interview with Mr. Middleton."

Day 9: Friday, 7/18/08: 9:30pm GMT: JKS



Had to hoof it up to the Chirk castle because it was getting late in the day. It was up a hill and beyond a bunch of cow pastures. Then there was another hill and a bunch of sheep pastures. Then there was another hill and a pasture with both sheep and cows. Many fascinating observations regarding cow pies. We got in just at the bell after the guide cut Lori a break and didn't make her hike back down the other side of the hill to the castle farm to buy the entrance passes. Much cool stuff including a giant hall dedicated to Medieval aerobics ("The fine ladies took their exercise by walking up and down this hall here" said the guide). One of the halls had a fancy painted ceiling for which mirrors were provided such that we could examine them without craning our necks. Kent objected that the art was reversed, so we took a second mirror to counter the reversal. The guide sort of sighed and made us set the mirrors down glass side down so as to prevent catching anything on fire should the unthinkable someday happen, namely the sun appearing and shining through one of the windows.



After touring the zillion-acre gardens, we hiked back to the boat and decided that it'd be smart to turn the boat about before morning so that we could get that out of the way before returning to the marina at 9am. Turning around a 60 foot boat in a 16' wide canal presents some challenges. It's usually handled either by using an intersection of multiple canals where things widen out, or by using a "winding hole." Winding holes only occur every several miles or so... the nearest one was just south of us between the Chirk tunnel and the Chirk aqueduct. We headed through the tunnel again and emerged in a few minutes into a light drizzle where two boys were fishing. They looked to be about 12 and their bicycles were nearby. I waved and started my turning maneuver. No sooner had I reversed the prop than the nearest boy who was in a folding chair right on the immediate bank of the winding hole started squawking. "Oi! Whatcha doin! Cancha see we're fishin?"

Note: As explained earlier, the Debbie handles like a barge, and requires a large amount of persuasion in order to coax her into a turn. She requires full forward throttle with full rudder in order to sluggishly push the stern into a yaw, but this also drives her forward, so the slick way to maneuver more tightly is to begin a turning maneuver with a moderate reverse speed prior to the full forward throttle and hard-over rudder. The rudder doesn't do squat when the prop is spinning in reverse. With a decent sized winding hole and a

good touch on the controls, you can drive a narrowboat through 180 degrees in about a 5 point turn. Anything less than full throttle and good timing tends to doom the maneuver, or at least requires an extra several iterations.

When he squawked, I was startled and immediately cut the throttle wondering what was going wrong. Without the full throttle, I couldn't control the yaw anymore and I was heading towards the wrong bank. The stern was now inches from the boy who renewed his verbal tirade at me... something along the lines of "Cut yer engine! Yer killin all the fish – why don't you turn around at the marina!" I apologized to the boy, who was only a few feet away, and explained that this was a winding hole on a navigable international waterway built for the very purpose for which I was using it, and that I'd clear out as soon as I could, but this just brought on another burst of what was probably insults, but that I fortunately couldn't decipher through his accent. By this time, I was starting to realize that these 2 boys were here not for the sport of fishing, but for the sport of hassling passing canal boat traffic. They knew full well that a well timed distraction would cause maneuvering havoc and thereby lots of fun as the unwieldy boats floundered around. Anyhow, I ended up doing about a 9 point turn and churned up a lot of mud while both the boys hurled more insults and complaints at me. Still trying to not be an ugly tourist, I called out "Good luck on your fishing," but the retort was "Like that's bloody likely after your barging about." Once we were fully turned about and finally heading for the tunnel, Kent took some photos of them, which incensed them further. In retribution, since I guess they hadn't planned sufficiently to bring any rocks to hurl, one boy whipped out his camera-phone and started snapping pictures of us. I guess that made it even. I gave the boat full throttle to kill a few more fish and entered the tunnel as the drizzle turned into a good, steady rain... hopefully drenching the cheeky bastards on their ride back home.

Day 10: Saturday, 7/19/08: 7:30pm GMT: JKS

Clark and I shove LMS/KKS and all of our luggage off the boat at Chirk tunnel where we moored after interesting cultural exchange at winding hole last night. I stripped off the flat soft rubber from the harder resin core of the one blown out wheel on the 42# drag-on restoring it partially to roll-on status. Clark and I dropped off boat at marina and hiked back to RR station taking the Golf Course route. We did it in 20 minutes unencumbered by luggage.



We caught the train to Conwy and had a nice chat with two older couples at the station while waiting for the train to arrive. Stayed at the Conwy YHA youth hostel (which also caters to families and codgers). It was way up at the top of a big hill. We drug our luggage and our selves up there. 42# wounded drag-on developed a second blow out (bad compounding on outer rubber portion got too soft and gooey when going over asphalt thus developing chunking and flatspots). Hostel was not fancy, but was modern and clean with a million dollar view. We walked about half the outer perimeter city walls and the river front before having dinner back at the Hostel. The

boys both loved staying here... very kid friendly, plenty of common areas to spread out in, movies to watch, and "observatory" up top, couches to slouch in, games to play, other kids to meet. Lori bought Clark a new notebook with the red Welsh dragon on the front and a lock to keep his designs secret, thus soothing the trauma of losing the first one off the aqueduct.

Conwy is on the northwestern coast of Wales and is a medieval walled town dating back to the 1200's. The whole thing was conceived, designed and built in 3 years, town walls, castle and all. It is in partial

ruin now with many portions having been restored and/or still in acceptable shape. It's approximately the same age as the other two castles we saw, but in moderate condition, contrasting with the near total ruin of Dinas Bran, and the excellent condition of Chirk.

By now I've definitely found my preferences for British newspapers. I read *The Financial Times* on the flight over, which was full of articles on the impending failures of the U.S. housing market, the plunging US economy and how those were going to drag the UK down with it. Once in London, I read *The Telegraph*, which had one interesting article regarding a canal boat that got hung up badly in a lock, but the rest was all about disastrous currency exchange rates and the latest humiliating showing of England's National cricket team. Shortly thereafter, I picked up a tabloid called *The Sun*, and immediately knew that I'd found my paper. Later I learned that a red banner is a good indicator as to whether the paper will be discussing the political nuances of France's First Lady (Italian singer/model Carla Bruni) visiting the queen (NOT), or the specifics (with photos) of some of her previous more liberal modeling sessions (Absolutely). *The Sun* didn't ever depress me with the approaching bear market, it let me know all the important things like Britain's epidemic of knife crime, and all the goods on Batman's Christian Bale (a Welshman) getting busted in London for a violent family dispute on the eve of his film's opening night. Plus *The Sun* always had a nice "Page 3 girl," - what a perfect vacation newspaper. Quite interesting how the trash newspapers in the U.S. are aimed primarily at women, while the UK equivalents are aimed at men.

Day 11: Sunday, 7/20/08: 8:30pm GMT: KKS



Woke up at a decent hour. Had a quick and simple breakfast before heading out to see more of Conwy. We walked down the section of wall that we missed the day before until we arrived at the Conwy castle. We paid our fare and walked into the castle through one of two entrances. (the English really know how to build secure castles) Outside the main gate was a courtyard where castle residents could throw stones at invaders from the towers and walls (called "murder holes"). Inside the gate was the outer ward which included a jail tower, kitchen tower, storage tower, and lots of garderobes (toilets). The well was quite impressive! At 91 feet deep, it wasn't the

deepest, but it had a huge circumference, you could have driven a car into it. Past the well, through another sealable gate was the inner ward, where the chapel and king's quarters were located, despite the fact that Edward I only stayed there twice for short periods of time. Had fun looking around and admiring the castle, but we needed food. We found a good deal on a Sunday lunch menu at a local café and decided to take it.

After lunch we wandered to the church yard and had a look around. St. Mary's was older than the castle but looked to be in a bit better repair. We were told that there would be a service in just over ten minutes, so, despite Clark and me complaining, we stayed for the service which was rigorously structured, not at all what I am used to.

After Church we headed over to the shopping street and found a cool shop that specialized in classic and antique toys. Somehow I spent £7.5 on 4 erasers and a deck of Beatles cards. (I guess the Beatles are licensed) We stopped at a local bakery to pick up some meat pies (**Not** pork) to eat for dinner. Went to sleep without much hassle. Pretty good sightseeing day.

Day 12: Monday, 7/21/08: 9:30pm GMT: JKS

We checked out of the Hostel and drug our luggage down the hill to the train station. While Clark struck up a conversation with a tall Dutch lady with a back pack and Wiccan earrings, I worked on the flat luggage wheel with my knife to remove the wrecked outer rubber portion, but slipped and sliced open my left thumb. It started spurting pretty good, but I managed to find the first aid kit and get it bandaged up before anybody noticed. Kent later referred to the incident as my “self inflicted knife crime.” More carefully, I peeled of the rest of the outer wheel tread and got the luggage to roll a bit better.

The train was packed, and we had to stand the whole way to London. We saw a big offshore windmill farm, and one of our fellow standing passengers was a civil engineer that was able to identify the gigantic mystery structure we could see far offshore as the windmill installation barge.

We checked back in to our hotel and did a bunch more London sightseeing. I stopped to pay homage to the bust on the Thames of Sir Joseph Bazalgette – “Engineer of the London Main Drainage System and of this Embankment.”

For Dinner, we all got tube passes and followed Clark into the underground system and just followed him as he randomly chose trains. We ended up popping up at the Baker Street Station on the Bakerloo line where they had a nice statue of Sherlock Holmes. Ate the Nando’s Portugese Peri-Peri Poultry house. On our way home, the boys insisted on a pilgrimage to Kings Cross station and platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$.

Saw a parade of troops going into Parliament and later, followed them in for a visit/tour. I was lectured severely by security at Parliament that my Leatherman tool, with its lock blade knife (with which I had sliced open my thumb), was illegal in England (because of the recent “knife crime epidemic”) and that if stopped by police; possession of it was cause for me to be arrested. In the end, they checked it in for me, gave me a claim ticket, and let me in with the rest of my snickering family. I had carefully left this tool in my luggage during our first couple days in London, but I was so used to having it during the boat trip (where it was often useful), that I spaced out and accidentally left it in my pocket this morning.

Once in, we gazed about for a spell – plenty of impressive structure, statues, paintings, blah blah blah. I would have loved to have spent more time, but was worried about getting arrested. They had taken my name and snapped my photo before letting me in (same as with every other visitor), and I was envisioning my file at New Scotland Yard being annotated with “KNIFE CRIME CANDIDATE: PICK UP FOR IMMEDIATE QUESTIONING AND PLACE IN NEAREST DUNGEON.” We queued up for observing a debating session of the House of Commons – they were arguing about public housing. This became much more interesting a day later when we read in *The Sun*, that the liberal MP (Lembit Opik) we saw debating in parliament had just suffered a split from his 24 year old pop-singer fiancé who is half of the group *The Cheeky Girls*, and is from... get this... Transylvania. What a country!

Day 13: Tuesday, 7/22/08: 9:30pm GMT: KKS

Woke up early (8:00) and stuffed our face at the breakfast buffet to make up for the breakfast we missed last time we stayed here. We caught the #24 bus to Trafalgar square, but got off at Westminster Abbey. We got robbed by the man at the admissions gate, £28.00 for the family. We walked in and were awed by

the sheer size and beautiful architecture, at least Clark Dad and I were. Mom had already been there. The Audio tour was rather informative. Dad liked how both Newton and Darwin were buried here.

Day 13: Tuesday, 7/22/08: 10:30pm GMT: JKS

After the Abbey, we took a 1-way boat tour downstream (that is, if the tide's not coming in) to Greenwich by way of the Thames Barrier. We all marveled at the barrier, though perhaps we weren't so impressed once we found out that it's not designed to prevent London from flooding, it just slows it down long enough to evacuate all the tubes.



We had Chinese food in Greenwich, then hoofed it up yet another hill to the

observatory. Highlights there included the prime meridian, a bunch of really cool clocks and brass inserts set in a wall that once upon a time (long before we started watching vibrating Cesium atoms), defined the official British units of length (yard,

2 feet, 1 foot, 6 inches and three inches).



We did a bit of gift shopping in Greenwich... I found 2 places that carried (reputedly) illegal lock-blade knives. I eyed them longingly, but noticed a nearby CCTV security camera, and got out of there pronto before the Bobbies showed up. We had a (too) short visit at the Naval Museum, then did a long and complex tube sprint back to the West End for our dinner and a performance of the Monty Python-based Spamalot. We liked the show, took the #24 bus back to our hotel again, re-checked into our rooms for the 3rd time (they were short on rooms and we had to stash our bags in the dungeon and change again). This time, we had two rooms, and we made the boys share the 2nd room.

Day 14: Wednesday, 7/23/08: 6:30pm GMT: JKS

Trudge to station – Gatwick Express to airport. Snacks and long flight home. Lousy in-flight movie, but luggage appeared promptly. Larissa and both her parents were there to pick us up.

Conclusion: Least disastrous Sprague family vacation in ages. I didn't get arrested, and only bled a little. We had fun.