

Aster day 5

We left Montchanin this morning at 9.00 am and arrived at Chagny at 7.30 pm having covered 29 miles and descended 23 locks. These were our first down-hill locks and presented quite a challenge to The Admiral. They are tricky because it is very difficult to 'spot' the exact lock entrance from the rear of a big boat. Aster handles very well generally, although it is quite physical work managing the throttle, gear lever and enormous tiller. Fine movements are possible but juggling speed and front and rear rudders is quite an art - particularly in the wind. The tiller incidentally has been made even larger as two broom-handles have been added as an extension. Although the arrangement looks a bit peculiar, it is useful should someone wants to brush the rear deck. Today it rained – persistently throughout the morning, then blustery showers later. Our real enemy is the wind, and at one point we experienced a really nasty shower on approach to a lock. We were literally blown sideways into the bank. No damage thankfully, just a delay as we reversed back up the canal and tried again.

To make things easier for the Admiral (who had taken responsibility for getting us through the down-hill locks) we had two 'point-men' on shore stood each side of the lock entrance to give the skipper a sight marker and count down the remaining metres from ten to zero via 2-way radio. For the first 11 locks bicycles were used to accompany the boat lock to lock, then a car via public roads when the towpath ran out!

Anybody seeing us from the shore witness a relaxed and efficient crew piloting our temperamental old barge through beautiful Burgundy with time for a chat and a wave to passers-by. But from within the boat it can be a different story – basics need to be addressed. For example the engine room can be a problem area – when the main engine stalls and there is insufficient pressure in the compressed air cylinder to re-start it, the compressor must be started to re-charge the air. This can take a few minutes. When the engine stalls while entering a lock, Aster must be stopped on the bow rope to prevent her destroying the front gates, and herself. It all looks efficient to the outsider but calmness and know-how are vital to sort things out. Today the black waste tank was full to the brim (there is no gauge to ascertain fluid levels) and the discharge pump failed to work. The Systems Officer and his cohorts had to open an inspection hatch on the tank and rig up pumps and pipes to keep our waste system operational. Basic requirements, but necessary.

Entering Chagny, the wind was howling so getting the boat to the shore and tying up safely tested everyone to the limit. It is so easy to lose control in a relatively small space in a strong wind. Praise of the highest order must go to the First Officer (Matthew) for guiding us in safely.

Today (day 6) we will stop for lunch in Fragnes before descending the 10-metre lock onto the Saone and beginning the last leg of the journey to St. Jean. We will moor on the river, the exact location to be determined by our progress, but the intention is to be at or near Ecuelles.