

ON THE CANAL TO RECOVERY

*Chase editor **JOE CAWTHORN** heads up to Hebden Bridge to discover first hand how a community can pull together in a time of total devastation*



December 26, 2015. Britain experienced some of the worst rain since records began and the Calder Valley area of West Yorkshire struggled to cope.

Rivers and canals began to rise, banks began to burst and towns began to flood.

There was nothing anyone could do, let alone the business owners and residents of areas such as Sowerby Bridge and Hebden Bridge – except watch as their homes and livelihoods washed away in the dirty water of the River Calder.

But this isn't a hard-luck story, far from it.

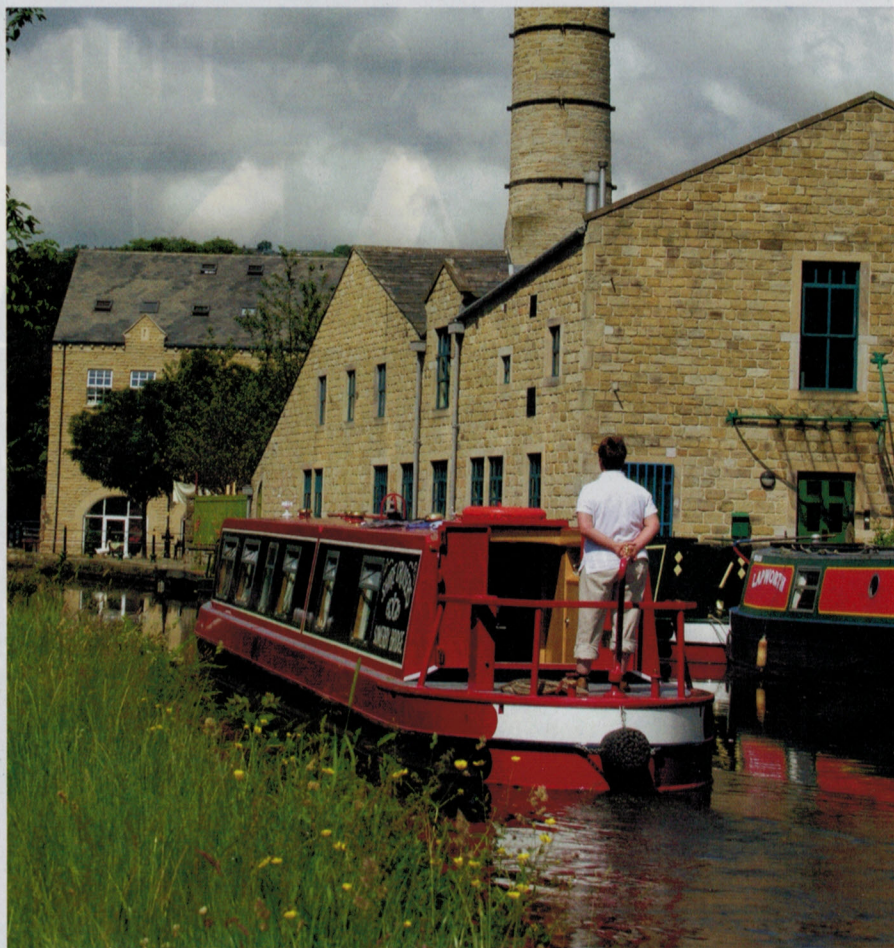
Chase decided to visit Hebden Bridge – one of the areas hit hardest – to see the green shoots of revival for ourselves.

We couldn't think of a better way to get to Hebden Bridge than on the very thing that flooded it in the first place, the canal.

We started our journey at Sowerby Bridge – another Calderdale market village that was affected by the flooding – the home of narrow boat aficionados Shire Cruisers, a long-established family firm who make sure you are very well prepared before setting sail.

With boats to cater for all party sizes and enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff to help novices like us, it is clear to see why Shire Cruisers have earned such a trusted reputation in the boating communities.

There's a pre-trip manual and DVD sent through the post, there's an on-board induction and then a three lock demo –



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ours was by the very accomplished Will – before you are off on your own, on the five hour trip up the Rochdale Canal to Hebden Bridge.

The Rochdale Canal is held in such high regard by the boating community that it recently appeared on ITV's Barging Round Britain with John Sergeant – the boat he used was actually from Shire Cruisers.

The Rochdale Canal is also home to the deepest lock (lock three) in the United Kingdom. The Tuel Lane Lock was opened on May Day in 1996 – which meant it was the 20th anniversary, to the day, of its opening as we passed back through on the homeward stretch of our journey – to replace two old locks and has a fall of 19 ft 8.5 in.

The full-length lock will use about 134,250 gallons every time it is filled (as much water as a bath being filled and emptied nearly 3,850 times).



CAPTION: (above) A Shire Cruisers boat sailing up the Rochdale canal and (right) a map of the route we took.

Due to its sheer size, the Tuel Lane Lock is manned by lock-keeper Billy, who is more than happy to help with any early issues, or even to just give advice about what is to be expected ahead.

Once you leave Billy's lock, you're on your own.

Luckily, there isn't another one to contemplate for around 45 minutes, so getting used to steering the boat and the speeds is easily done in this period.

The first lock we came to alone caused me and my partner a few issues, but after a few moments panic, we cracked it.

The feeling of slowly rising up as the lock fills with water is one that is hard to describe – it really does have to be experienced to be believed.

The locks themselves are physically hard work and demand a certain level of strength to be able to push and pull them.

The more people in your party, the better, I can't help but feel, but with just the two of us we had to muck in and get the job done.

In between locks the afternoon sun provided a beautiful backdrop to the rolling hills of Calderdale and the groups of ducks and geese with their little ones were delightful to see.

We made it through the series of locks and to Hebden Bridge, when our first (and only) mini-disaster occurred.

We were turning the boat around in a safe place to moor up for the evening and the unthinkable happened.

A slip of a rope at the back end of the boat sent it spinning around the propeller, cutting off the engine immediately.

This was followed by two-hours of me being shoulder deep in cold canal water, using a junior hack saw to cut away at the tightened loops.

I wasn't impressed and was ready to call it a day. As the manual said: "If your propeller is fouled, you will more than likely need a saw and perseverance, and we provide the first."

There was nothing for it but to keep going and fuelled by cups of tea, I got there in the end. There was a definite feeling of relief and accomplishment that enveloped me afterwards.

A thank you has to go to the very generous passing gentleman who – after seeing my misfortune – gave me his spare rope to moor up with that evening.

We both slept very well that night.

The next morning, a short walk down the canal side into Hebden Bridge was in order, so we could see with our own eyes what the situation was five months after the flooding.

Memories of the devastating Boxing Day floods still linger in the picturesque riverside village. Piles of sand bags in the winding streets and boarded up shop-fronts serve as a constant reminder of the almost Biblical-

scale havoc caused by the rising water.

The Hebden Bridge branch of charity Age UK is now empty – bar one or two dehumidifiers – and still has Christmas decorations hanging in the window, acting as another stark suggestion of what the floods had plundered from this humble village.

Nicki Lofts, family owner of Lucy and the Caterpillar Vintage Shop based in the Bridges Mill on St George's Square, was effected by the floods emotionally, as were many others.

She said: "It was emotional, I cried coming in and I cried going out because of the people who were here and the people who came to help.

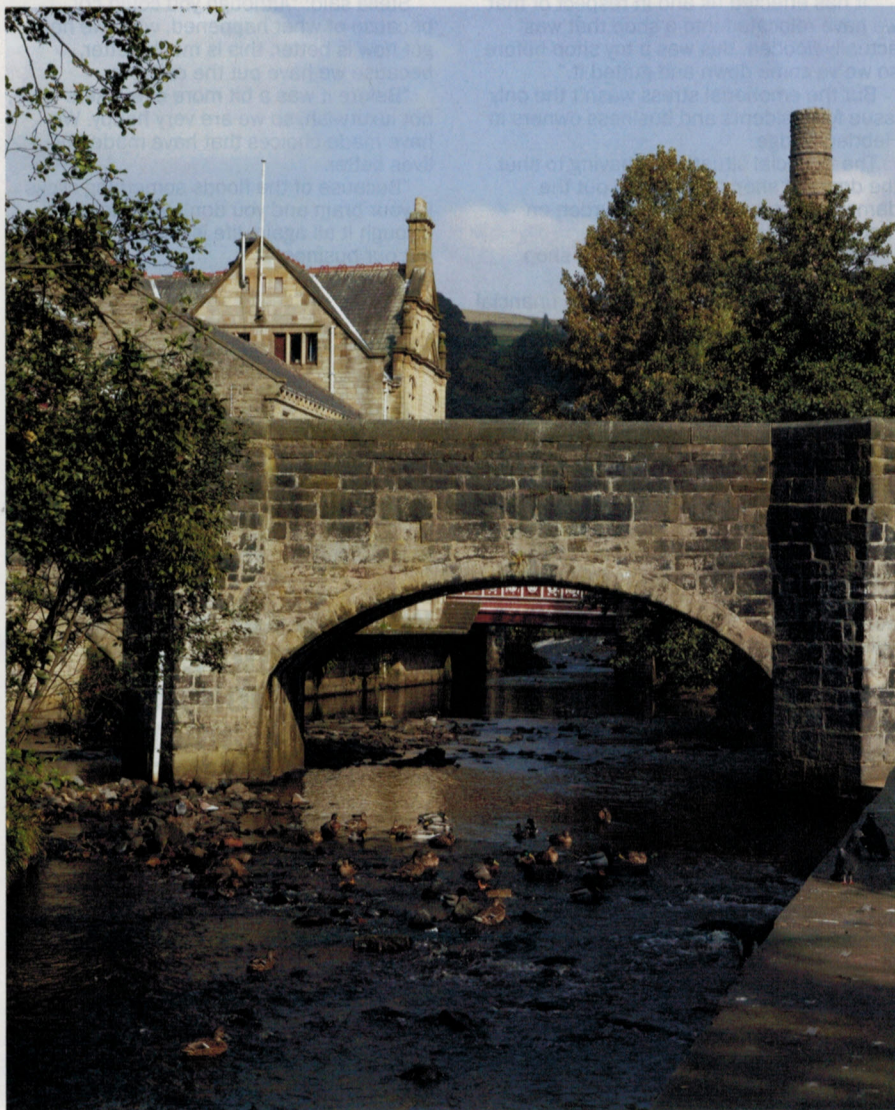
"We've relocated since the floods from an upstairs location to a downstairs one, so we weren't directly effected by the floods as a business.

"We were effected in the way that Hebden was under water, so our business was literally shut down for three to four weeks because we were more concerned about helping other people for two weeks after Boxing Day.

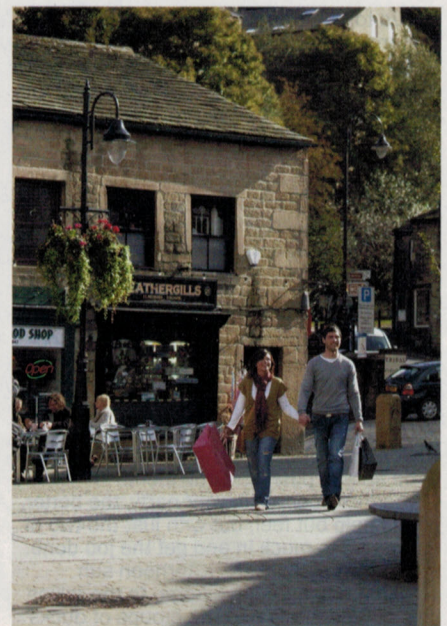
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HEBDEN BRIDGE SHOP OWNER



The Old Packhorse Bridge in Hebden Bridge.



CAPTION: (left) The interior of our boat and (right) the centre of Hebden Bridge.

"It has effected us and in respect of that we have relocated into a shop that was actually flooded, this was a toy shop before so we've come down and gutted it."

But the emotional stress wasn't the only issue for residents and business owners in Hebden Bridge.

The financial situation of having to shut the doors of shops and pay to put the damage right was also a big burden on many small businesses.

Lucia Kazmierski (18), who is a shop assistant at the small sweet shop Something Sweet, spoke about the financial loss.

She said: "We shut for three or four weeks after the floods, the walls are still drying out now and we were told we may have to shut for longer, but it will dry quicker if we are open and we have people in the shop."

"It has definitely been quieter since the floods in Hebden Bridge, there's some shops that have only just opened and some that are due to open any time now and there's some that it's going to take a while."

"Everything went - even things that weren't touched because everything in the building had to go."

"We lost an ice-cream freezer and a lot of stock, we're lucky that we've got a concrete floor so it didn't need replacing, but we still lost all of our stock."

We also caught up with the owners of The Electric Bicycle Den & Coffee Lounge, located right on the canal edge and re-opening on the day of our visit.

Business owners Stella Bird and Toby Rainland along with partner Claire Hague were enjoying opening their doors to the public again, something they hadn't done for over four months.

Stella said: "Although you could cry because of what happened, what we have got now is better, this is much better, because we have put the effort in."

"Before it was a bit more of a bikers' cafe, not luxury-ish, so we are very happy. We have made choices that have made our lives better."

"Because of the floods something clicks in your brain and you don't want to go through it all again, life isn't about mucking out our business."



WE HAD SEEN THE DESTRUCTION, DEVASTATION AND CARNAGE CREATED BY A NATURAL DISASTER AND WE HAD SEEN A PROUD VILLAGE BUILDING ITSELF UP ONCE MORE.

My partner and I both felt humbled heading back down the winding canal to Sowerby Bridge the following day.

We had seen the destruction, devastation and carnage created by a natural disaster and we had seen a proud village building itself up once more.

The good news is that - as I said before - this isn't a hard-luck story. Hebden Bridge and the surrounding areas are getting back on their feet and the stories of the community coming together in their time of need makes the hairs on the back of the neck stand on end.

Back at Lucy and the Caterpillar Vintage Store, Nicki explains: "It was an emotional thing but it brought Hebden closer and made it stronger."

"We had refugees, we had homeless people coming to help, there was an Indian family who came in with 300 meals for ten days, to give to the volunteers, because nowhere was open, there was no food and the electric was down."

"I'm hoping it will never happen again, but we've met people who we've never met before, we went to businesses we didn't know were there before to help, so we've met friends."

The community once again feels alive with a buzz of activity and the independent core of businesses are re-opening doors every week.

Lucia at Something Sweet believes that the community spirit was the one good thing to come out of the floods.

Mooring up the boat is a physical task while (middle) two boats share a lock. Cruising down the canal can be a relaxing experience (bottom).

She said: "The day after Boxing Day, everyone who works here was helping clear up, my neighbours came down and the town was mad with people.

"The Town Hall was open with free food for everyone, there was people wondering round not knowing what to do.

"There was a definite sense that the community had come together, there was a lot of people, everyone was here to help, it was great really."

Stella at the Electric Bicycle Den added: "Customers and strangers were coming along and mopping or giving us food, it really was lovely.

"We felt like we had to open, there was a responsibility to the community and the whole of Hebden Bridge.

"If every other business decided not to re-open, what we have as a community wouldn't exist.

"We've met people we would never have met. Meeting them on a human level rather than just a business level has been better."

The community spirit touched upon by the business owners we met can be seen on a daily basis – the example of the stranger who gave me his rope to moor up after the propellor incident being a fitting example.

If you're thinking of a day, weekend or even a week away somewhere in this country then there can't be many more places as visually stunning as the Calder Valley.

And at only just over an hour's drive from South Yorkshire, isn't exactly other side of the world to get to.

You could even throw in a canal trip with Shire Cruisers like we did – we'd love to hear your stories and see your pictures if you are brave enough!

But the important thing is that we come together, as a county – as God's own country – to support the people of Hebden Bridge and its neighbours.

Their resilience, hard work and determination to get out of the mire caused by a natural disaster is testament to the work ethic of the people and the selfless nature of the hundreds of volunteers who mucked in.

It's not about a visit out of pity, or to help them rebuild even. It's about standing shoulder to shoulder with our near neighbours and lending them a hand as they attempt to pull themselves out of the turbid canal water.

And trust me when I say, you won't regret the trip.



Head over to www.shirecruisers.co.uk for more on what to do if you fancy a sail up the beautiful canals. There's prices and contact info there as well as a whole heap of other information. You can visit www.Yorkshire.com for some excellent ideas on what to do around the county.