

The River Usk.
Mainstream Weekend organised by Sue Humphries.

Friday 17th – Sunday 19th February 2006.

On Friday afternoon Philip Spackman, myself (Becky Spackman) and Pat Key arrived at the bunkhouse to find it exceptionally comfortable and very paddler friendly. The whole bunkhouse was decorated with ducks, they even had some real ducks in the garden! This meant we all felt very at home in our surroundings being such water lovers ourselves!

There was also a most incredible cuckoo clock. On the hour, every hour, out popped... a cow! Which mooed! We all loved it! Apparently there wasn't a duck themed clock so that explains it...

Ed and Sue did not appear until late as they were delayed, following which they had to do some emergency shopping at a near by Morrisons to make sure we all got fed over the weekend!

One of the things that makes Mainstream so special to me is the atmosphere, the fellowship we are able to share together and the wonderful opportunities we have to share and build our faith as a community of Christian paddlers. The evenings' conversation was relaxed and old and new friends spent several hours catching up and enjoying one another's company. I went to bed tired but looking forward to the rest of the weekend knowing that it would be both refreshing and exciting to get out on the water in such good company.

Saturday morning found some of us up bright and early, although being very quite, and others enjoying a more relaxed approach to the day with breakfast in a nearby hotel, aptly named the Gremlin.

We arrived at our get on to meet various paddlers who had not been able to join us the night before. By 10:30 we were getting on the water in four groups, two of open canoes and two of kayaks. We were about to begin on an 18k paddle, running the section from Talybont-on-Usk to Crickhowell with at least two good grade 3 rapids. The river was moving well, flowing low but with enough water that it was possible to run everything without portaging. The group I was in consisting of myself, Pat Key, Ed, Sue and Ben Humphries, Mike Brown and Penny, set off last and Penny who was new to both solo paddling and white water was given instruction by Sue and Pat on how-to-survive-without-getting-too-wet.

Before we had even reached our first grade 3 rapid Mike surprised us all by falling in while performing one of his usual stunts involving standing up in the boat. Those who were closest were too busy laughing to help as he self rescued. Mike later commented, "I put my foot down on what I thought was the boat but it was the water!" Well, ten out of ten for observation anyway!

Mill Falls looked like as much fun as the name suggests and there was a clean line river left. Everyone ran it and Penny demonstrated a natural talent for white water as she took it like a pro. At the back of the group I decided I wanted to be difficult and choose a different line so, after Mike had okayed it, I enjoyed an attempt at reading and running the middle of the falls and paddled through it looking very smug, according to Ben!

Enjoying a variety of smaller rapids, our lunch, and the beautiful scenery we arrived at the second grade 3 rapid, Spuhler's Folly ledge. Mike demonstrated the perfect line, as usual and the rest of the opens made their way down in good form, no swimmers at

all! I found the rapid exhilarating and interesting, enjoying the challenge of trying to read the water and control the descent, rather than just reacting as-and-when things happened. Making up for his earlier swim Mike ran the rapid twice more, the second time taking me down in the front of his boat. I didn't even need to paddle! However as we caught hold of my boat, conveniently tied at the bottom of the falls, Mike announced that we were sinking...as the boat filled up and rolled over with the force of the water from the falls running into it we both managed to get into my boat and ten minutes later after a lot of fighting against the water we were back on the river with two boats, both still intact.

Continuing down the river Pat and I spotted two pairs of falcons as they performed aerial tricks. The sun came out and the fog that had blanketed the river earlier was gone. The milder weather meant that our group were all fairly warm and able to fully focus on enjoying the paddling. The rapids and flat water were both met with equal enthusiasm and enjoyed by all.

Sue finished the really exciting events of the day by falling in on a rapid most unexpectedly. A rock must have jumped up and grabbed her when no one was looking! Not to be put off Sue managed to reach a safe spot and Ed quickly got a line to her while Ben made a very neat rescue of Sue's canoe. This must be the final evidence that families can paddle and work together if they really want to!

Arriving back at the bunkhouse Sue went to work and produced a fantastic meal that really was a very good ending to a wonderful day!

Ed gave an inspiring talk on a Bible passage that brought us back to what, for me, is the main reason that I paddle, my walk with the Lord as a Christian.

Sunday morning saw us all back at the Usk, this time setting off from Sennybridge to Aberbrân a much shorter paddle of about 8k. Our group was smaller, consisting of myself, Pat, Mike, Ben and Sue as several people had to leave us early.

Once on the river we moved on quickly, this time as the first group on the river and soon arrived at the first of two rapids that we were forced to portage as there were no safe descents. Leaving the rest of the groups behind we all warmed up quickly and I had the opportunity to lead the group down several of the smaller rock gardens and rapids that we encountered. No one decided to visit the fish and we all stayed fairly dry, enjoying the sunshine whenever it came out!

Reaching an interesting rapid with a limited view from above Mike shot it on the far right and encouraged me to come down without viewing it from the bank first.

Coming down without knowing what the river was doing helped me to focus on the water and develop my ability to react quickly to the rapid. Sue also ran it without viewing it first and came down in style.

Ben led us for a while, setting the pace and choosing the best lines down the shallow, rocky rapids. The rest of the trip was more relaxed and we had time to talk and to discuss what we had learnt and enjoyed over the weekend. Reaching the get-out I found I was quite happy to paddle on for another 8k or so but sadly that will have to wait for the next Mainstream event, which I look forward to in eager anticipation!

Saying goodbye once again to my extended paddling family and travelling home I reflected on all the opportunities, experiences, learning and friendships that Mainstream has provided for me. I am so thankful to the Lord for bringing me to Mainstream and for all the wonderful people who are involved and who work so hard to make it what it is. Knowing that there is always another river to paddle, friends to

meet up with again and new friends to be met gives me great encouragement as I face the parts of my every day life that are not quite so much fun.