

WHILE KAYAKING ON THE ESK, OSKAR ASKED ABOUT THE BRISK USK...

is a suitably alliterative, if somewhat contrived headline.

Paul G. once asked me if I wore glasses when driving as I never seem to be able to spot the eddies. It's worse than that. Half the time I don't know which river we're on.

It doesn't help their all having such short names. I suppose early mapmakers couldn't be asked to name a river using more than five or six letters. In the case of the Avon they couldn't even bother to give it a name. Vellum didn't come cheap in those days, I guess. Lest you think I'm only having a go at our British lads, consider the Po. Hardly taxing for Italy's cartographers. However, this was definitely the Usk. I remember the taste from last time.

In dawn's early light, seven of us met at lake Twelve, collected some kit and headed for Abergavenny to meet up with six Swindon Club paddlers. From there we drove to the put-in near Talybont. The temperature was above freezing and the weather dry. The river was brim full, brown and swift.

I've decided to write this report from my own point of view, as I recall it. The nature of events dictated that we were not always together in one group. Apologies if it seems self centered and I've got something incorrect or missed something important.

The stretch from Talybont to Mill Falls took no time at all and was generally without incident. Mill Falls was inspected and Rob advised that Johnathan and I give it a miss. No arguments. There was a strong flow of water, full width with several large stoppers. There were ten successful runs, with one swimmer. Fortunately, the kayak and paddle conveniently made the drop in formation and were safely retrieved. We then had a bit of bad luck in the stretch immediately above Llangynidr Bridge, when one of the Swindon lads suffered a dislocated shoulder.

Obviously, this became the major priority. Most of us were out of our kayaks, either helping the casualty, phoning for an ambulance or inspecting the flow under the bridge. We were well spread out.

Johnathan was parked upstream in an eddy and started making his way to the eddy immediately above the bridge. Unfortunately, he didn't make it and found himself heading for the bridge in reverse. In attempting to miss the cutwater he capsized and shot under the arch. After shouted warnings, rapid launching of kayaks and a sprint along the bank, he was rescued, with help from another trio of kayakers who were below the bridge. He had retained his paddle but the kayak was out of sight. He and Colin decided that the best option was to return overland to Colin's van, back at Talybont.

The story of that trip is for them to tell.

Once the Swindon lad was safely in the ambulance our trip continued. I'm sure some waves are smaller than they look while others are a little bigger. My impression of the second half of the trip is that stretches of flat water alternated with fairly long sections comprising half metre standing waves at two metre intervals in weak cocoa, interspersed with giant floating heads of cauliflower. There's a recipe there - Chouxfleur au chocolat a l'Usk. Mmm. Sounds nice, Max.

Johnathan's kayak was found downstream and towed by Rob and Mike (Swindon Club) to the end.

I didn't have too much trouble with the regular waves at right angles to the direction of flow but I came unstuck on hitting a wave, carelessly parked at fortyfive degrees. Time for my first swim, but no trouble really.

Further down on a similar stretch, I was making progress, minding my own business when, after going over a low drop, I stopped dead, stuck in a stopper. (I now understand why they are so named.) The river around carried on at the same pace but I swear I actually went backwards. I couldn't get out and opted for another swim. This was considerably longer and bumpier than the previous one, but fortunately I still had hold of the kayak and paddle. With help I got to the bank. However, it was not possible for my rescuers to stop and they carried on - with my kayak. The bank, slippery and wooded with hawthorn, immediately rose steeply up from the river. No brambles, I'm pleased to say. Time for a little calm assessment. No one was going to be coming back up the river. There was no way progress could be made on foot along the river's edge. And getting back into the

water would have been an insult to those who had just put in so much effort getting me out. Staying put, hoping someone would come back overland was an option but terribly bad form.

I began climbing, glad I had a pair of gloves with me and the paddle which made a good climbing aid. I was relieved to find a flat path at the top of the hill and began jogging. The path began climbing, and veering away from the river. However, after a bit I spotted our group with my kayak about a hundred feet below. I slid down and rejoined the trip. It's hard to judge how long that took. Thanks for waiting, chaps. I may have taken another dip, but I can't be sure, when or where.

The get-out at Crickhowel was bathed in warm sunshine. Very nice. Colin and Johnathan soon arrived and after changing we drifted to the pub, where we were regaled with Kayaking horror stories and shown unsightly scars. Did you all know that Clive had been bitten by a woodpecker?

On some parts of this trip I was a bit out of my depth, but I'd sign up for similar one tomorrow. Thanks for organising it.

Incidentally, another good headline would be MIM MIMICS MONNOW MINNOW. That is a story yet to be written. I can hardly wait.

Alan Fagan 27. 1 09