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LILY HEADS EAST - PART ONE

By Alison Alderton and Roger Harrington

In April this year we decided to head east and cross the border into Germany. Our ultimate destination was to be the Mecklenburg Lake District but due to work commitments the journey would have to be completed in stages. The first leg would involve a ten day cruise to the German city of Hannover.

Travelling across Holland's northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen, much of the route was a case of revisiting already discovered waterways. However we had never visited the city of Groningen, the namesake of the province, so this gave us the opportunity. Climbing Groningen's most important monument, the 97m tall Martini Tower and fourth highest church tower in the Netherlands, is the best way to get an overview of this lively university city and surrounding landscape. There is a real mix of architecture here ranging from historical warehouses to some very modern and unique buildings with strange names such as 'The Wall House' and 'Monkey Cliff'.



Oosterhaven Groningen

Leaving the city moorings we took a south-easterly route travelling through the industrial outskirts passing interesting factories and ship builders. At the small town of Veendam we joined the Oosterdiep; a short 7 mile canal with 30 lift bridges all of which have to be opened to allow passage! Last year we had visited Friesland's Turf Route and learnt all about the industry, the town here had similar connections growing up around the local peat colonies to become not only an important centre for the Groningen turf industry but also a centre for shipping, at one time even having its own maritime school.



Lily on the Oosterdiep

An early morning start saw us making good progress through what seemed a never-ending cluster of lift bridges, some so closely spaced there was barely enough room to fit *Lily* in-between them. We were soon on the Stadskanaal, which with recent investment from the European Union is upgrading its waterfront towns. Most of these seem to be following in the footsteps of Friesland's Turf Route and using the past connections to attract tourists to the area. The town of Stadskanaal has been given an extensive new concrete quay adorned with several sculptures depicting various turf cutting tools. The linear moorings offer both water and electric and with the town's good selection of shops is an enticing place to stop. A similar upgrading is currently underway at the town of Ter Apel where we were required to book passage through the Haren-Rütenbrock Canal, the waterway crossing the Dutch/German border.

The journey through the Haren-Rütenbrock Canal has to be completed in one, no stopping is permitted. It takes approximately two and half hours to complete and during high season boats travel through in convoy. There is no border control simply a sign informing craft they have entered Germany at which point we removed our weathered Dutch courtesy flag, exchanging it for a German one which colour co-ordinates very well with the Athlone IMAI burgee it flies above. Throughout the journey we never set eyes on anyone yet every lock and bridge worked without the need for us to do anything, everything is fully-automated and works efficiently, German engineering at its best. At Haren, we finally encountered a lock keeper who collected the €5 canal toll before safely seeing us through the town lock.



Inside Meppen Lock

Emerging onto the waters of the Dortmund-Ems Kanal there was a sudden change of character, the narrow waters lined with neat little houses typical of Holland had disappeared. We were now on a wide river navigation with sweeping bends, excellent depth and commercial craft. The surrounding countryside soon began to rise leaving behind the rich pastureland and turning into wooded slopes and hills which after two years of being based in the flatlands of Holland proved quite a novelty. As the massive structure of Meppen Lock, our first on this waterway crept into view we threw anxious glances at each other, the architecture looked like something out of a Cold War movie, dark, stark and utilitarian. *Lily* had arrived in the land of giants and was suddenly looking very small and vulnerable! As we passed beneath the huge gullotline gate, it dribbled water making us feel we were entering the watering mouth of a starving animal. We tied in and waited, there was no one in sight and the only sound was the gentle drip of water, it was a little eerie to say the least. After a few minutes the gate creaked into action and we were soon rising in the vast chamber. Being constructed specifically for commercial craft, we soon discovered the bollards too widely spaced to allow fore and aft ropes to be safely used and the best way to secure *Lily* was by using a centre rope attached on her point of balance, once we got the hang of this locking became easier.



Commercial barge and rainbow Dortmund-Ems Kanal

The Wet Triangle is the name given to the confluence of the Dortmund-Ems with the Mittelland Kanal, the lock island creating the watery shape after which it is named. Here we joined Germany's purpose built Mittelland Kanal, the main commercial waterway running west to east for over 300km across the centre of the country. It boasts some impressive aqueducts the best known being at Minden across the River Weser and at Magdeburg across the Elbe Valley yet it has only two locks along its entire length. Most literature describes the route as dull and boring, it is indeed straight but this makes for relaxed cruising and the pretty wooded banks with flowering wild

cherry trees and spring flowers are pleasing on the eye. Speed limits are strictly enforced and water police are very evident but if you have enough crew onboard it is possible to motor on all night making it a popular thoroughfare for leisure boaters heading to holiday destinations such as the Baltic. Being a federal waterway there are free sports boat moorings (for craft under 15m in length) usually situated at either end of the large purpose built quays for the commercial craft, so you really do get to rub shoulders with the professional skippers along this waterway.

We broke our journey along the Mittelland at Hannover from where Roger flew back to Denmark and two weeks of work whilst I stayed on, enjoying the warm hospitality of the Yachthafen Seelze. Boating to a deadline had left us exhausted but full of satisfaction to have reached our first destination. We would have loved to linger at many places and explored some of the Mittelland's branch canals leading to such places as Osnabrück and Hildesheim. Hopefully we will get an opportunity to do so on our return trip, whenever that may be?

From Seelze, it is a short train ride into Hannover, capital of Lower Saxony. Exploring this beautiful city it is hard to believe that during WWII it was almost completely destroyed. Since that time the city's historical monuments have been sympathetically restored. We enjoyed browsing in the flea market held along the banks of the River Linde where the colourful Nanas sculptures add a modern element to the old quarter of the city and taking coffee on the terrace of the beautiful town hall with its lakeside views. Since arriving in Germany we had seen many bridges adorned with brightly coloured padlocks, here the ornamental bridge was covered in them. Apparently it is a sign of love; couples scroll their initials onto a padlock before fastening it to a bridge and tossing the keys into the water below to symbolise unbreakable love! We have since discovered that Dublin's Ha'penny Bridge was once subjected to this. In 2012 Dublin City Council removed them at substantial cost and requested no more were put on for fear of damage to the protected structure.

Refreshed from our break and now having a feel for how things worked in Germany the second leg of our journey was more relaxing. Beyond Hannover we reached the first of the Mittelland's locks and shared it with a commercial barge from the Czech Republic.



Nanas sculptures and Flea Market in Hannover



Hannover's impressive Town Hall

The captain and crew were most pleasant and attentive ensuring we were happily moored behind them and had enough room throughout the locking process. Exiting was a test of nerves as the two parallel locks opened at the same time spilling forth a flotilla of shipping with us in the middle. Backing off to let the workers forge ahead we were buffeted this way and that as the wash from these gargantuan work horses of the waterways created a mini Aegir along the canal. *Lily* pitched and bucked for quite some distance before the waters gradually began to calm.

Coal, timber products, steel and scrap iron along with a variety of manufactured goods are the main commodities to be transported along the Mittelland. That evening we moored on the outskirts of a huge coal yard and discovered the wharf edge to be scattered with black nuggets, outfall from the loading/unloading process. It is surprising how having dog poo bags in every pocket comes in handy. We had soon gathered enough to top up our coal scuttle, when we light our stove for the first time this winter there will be fond reminiscing of this day!



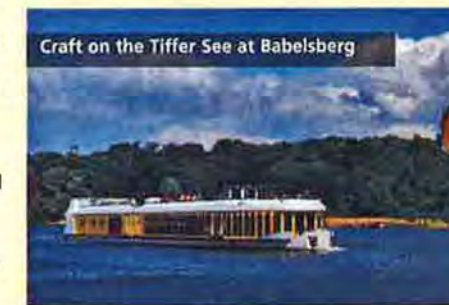
Sharing a lock with commercial traffic

With time on our hands we were able to visit more places including the town of Wolfsburg, home to the huge Volkswagen car plant. The Mittelland's well-kept towpath allowed us ample opportunities to walk Buster our dog or go for a cycle ride, these often resulted in visiting some of the small welcoming villages, most of which are adorned with beautiful timber-framed buildings and all seem to have a bakers where a single glance at the window display will add inches to your waistline!

At the eastern end of the Mittelland is the Elbe Aqueduct, the largest in Europe it is also known as the Magdeburg Water Bridge. Work on the aqueduct was abandoned during WWII but following the reunification of Germany waterway transport picked up and in 1997 the project was restarted. Just short of 1km in length the structure spans

the Elbe Valley and river to join the Mittelland with the 56km long Elbe-Havel Kanal. Taking 6 years to construct it is made up of 24,000 tonnes of steel and 68,000 cubic metres of concrete. When finally opened in 2003 this replaced the 1938 Rothensee Boat Lift which used to lower craft from the Mittelland down to the Elbe, allowing them to cross the river and lock back up to join the Elbe-Havel.

We entered the Elbe-Havel Kanal through the 18.55 metre deep Hohenwarthe Lock which has innovative floating bollards making the long dark descent easy. Hire boats now began to appear and by the time we reached the River Havel Lakes in Brandenburg there was a steady stream of them. The winding river linking a network of lakes suddenly felt more like Ireland and fond memories of our time on the Shannon flooded back; however Ireland's raw beauty was missing on the larger lakes which appeared commercialised. With water buses, taxis and hotel boats constantly plying the waters and steep banks dotted with spectacular mansions, in parts it resembles the Italian lakes.



Craft on the Tiffer See at Babelsberg

Potsdam is an independent city close to Berlin and having researched it prior to departure, we knew a few days stay here was essential. We moored in a small marina opposite Babelsberg Park, once home to the German film industry and a short walk from the town, however the place we wanted to visit was Park Sanssouci situated a cycle ride away. Covering 700 acres it began life as a summer residence for Frederick the Great in 1747 and over the years has developed into one of the most beautiful palace complexes in Europe with pavilions, follies and ornamental gardens. This was the perfect place to relax and collect our thoughts before embarking on the next leg of our journey which would take us through Berlin on the River Spree before heading north to discover the beautiful Mecklenburg Lake District.



Lily's crew in Park Sanssouci