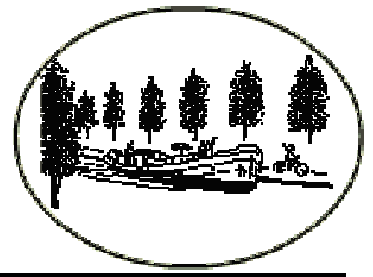


2005  
Season

# The Barge Company

*Relax, Unwind and Let the World Float by...*



## The 'Actief' is our - Barge of the Month - October 2005



From 18—24 September The Barge Company was privileged to be aboard the gloriously English [Actief](#) barge, cruising in refined elegance on the Royal River Thames between Oxford and Windsor. Fine food and wine (much of it organic) was enjoyed by all. Please read on for an invaluable insight into this 'must do' cruise, brought to you exclusively by The Barge Company.



This delightful cruise which was to take us from Shillingford Bridge to the heart of Windsor, began just outside Oxford where the barge was serenely moored up next to a private lawn, next to the picturesque Shillingford Bridge and Inn. The pick-up at the Goring Hotel in the centre of London went very smoothly and everyone was on board the supremely comfortable minibus within minutes of the appointed time. About an hour later we received a warm welcome on board by our crew; Andrew (Cruise Manager and Chef), Lee (Pilot and Guide), Hannah and Beth (Hostesses). So far so good!



Our cabin (see pics above) was the spacious and pretty 'Wolsey Suite' which can be arranged as a twin or a double cabin (i.e. two single beds or one large bed). The décor was light and attractive with a very English 'country house' feel to it. We particularly liked the newly refurbished bathroom with lovely modern shower cubicle and plenty of shelf space for toiletries. The full length mirror on the door was also very handy and a great luxury—not all barge cabins have the space for one this size. Two high level windows allowed light and fresh air into the room, and during our cruise we enjoyed watching ducks and swans at eye level on the water just a few feet away!

The open plan living room has a very cosy feel to it with the use of warm, rich coloured textiles and fabrics which continues the elegant but relaxed country house theme. Varnished woods and richly patterned floor rugs add to the air of opulent comfort. The bar area (where you can help yourself to drinks at any time, although there is usually someone there to serve you), is very discreetly and prettily incorporated into the far end of the open plan area (see below). Reading the newspapers whilst sipping a cup of fine coffee or a refreshing Gin and Tonic is perfectly possible in this lounge area as there very comfortably cushioned bench seats creating, in effect, two separate rest areas when required.



At the other end of the saloon, opening on to the large sun deck with sturdy tables and chairs, is the dining area which consists of two alcove areas with large tables, seating 4 and 7 respectively.

Dining on the [Actief](#) was a sheer pleasure as Andrew our knowledgeable and world-travelled Chef proved himself to have a natural flair for pleasing everyone with his gourmet creations. A hearty cooked breakfast was available each morning which most people tucked into with relish; eggs, bacon, sausages, mushroom, tomatoes, black pudding, even kippers were there for anyone who wished to partake prior to a busy days' sight-seeing. He even made us pancakes with blackberry sauce and Maple Syrup on our penultimate morning. Needless to say we're now feeling the pinch with our waistbands but it was truly worth it! The pudding on our first night, Sticky Toffee Pudding (right), was a roaring success and set the culinary scene for the following week...





And here is Andrew, (left), entralling everyone with his introduction to each course (always something of a highlight to the evening!!)



Above right and left, and right, are some more examples of the culinary art that we consumed whilst cruising. Sweet or savoury, everything was a grand success, particularly the historic pudding called 'Eton Mess' - a triumph of meringue, cream and summer fruits—all mixed up together and completely perfect for a sunny English afternoon! Sorry—it was so scrumptious I forgot to take a photo of it!



The larger dining table can be seen below.



Mealtimes on the [Actief](#) were an opportunity to socialise with ease (there were only 9 aboard this week) and so we all came to be very relaxed with each other very quickly. The first and last evening meals on board were preceded by wonderful champagne served in the most elegant flutes, accompanied by a selection of 'melt-in-the-mouth' canapés, served on deck as the stars came out and twinkled overhead...

Excursions throughout the week were very enjoyable and of a very high standard. Our first was to Christchurch College, Oxford, the seat of many famous scholars whose portraits we were honoured to see in the Great Dining Hall of the college. A guided tour of the college and cathedral gave a fascinating insight into one of the oldest seats of learning in the world. Here is the fountain in the quad of the college (below right). The buildings all the way round it house the students' rooms.

The following day we enjoyed a private tour of the ancient watermill at Mapledurham House, which is still in use today (see our group becoming hypnotised by the moving water wheel, below!). Many centuries of milling history were shared with us by the Miller (second from right) and it was a really fascinating tour. Then, a leisurely tour around the grand Mapledurham House itself (below right) was enjoyed by all. The serene, uninterrupted view from the front of the house is a quintessentially English vision of beauty.



Later in the week we were treated to a night at the world famous town of Henley on Thames, location of the famous Rowing Regatta. There we visited the excellent River and Rowing Museum where we learnt a lot about life on the water through the ages and this particular corner of England (Henley, below right).

One other excursion we particularly enjoyed was a private visit to a boat builders' yard which has been functioning uninterrupted now for 300 years. They make only 5 boats per year, all by hand, and when you see them in person you can see why, as they're each one a work of fine art (see below right).

The grand old house of Cliveden, and her wondrous gardens, were another destination during our cruise week (see pictures below right).



The Duke of Buckinghamshire and the American Astor family were just two of her prestigious inhabitants throughout the last centuries.



All the excursions were guided and hence were very enjoyable. This really was the 'crème de la crème' of English culture and heritage that we were seeing and experiencing.

Our final excursion was to the world famous school of Eton in Berkshire. We toured the school, marvelling at the century old graffiti on desks and chairs (names such as Coleridge and Blair were noticeable), and learning about how the school functions today as compared with many centuries ago. There's even a museum that we were delighted to tour, with many old artefacts and items of memorabilia on display. See the old Eton schoolroom below right.

Just a stone's throw from Eton is Windsor Castle (below) where you may tour the many splendidly furnished rooms and learn all about the English Royal Family. We didn't visit it on this cruise, but it is certainly possible for those who wish to do so.



Back to the barge and it was time to prepare for our final evening meal. Whilst relaxing on the sun deck however, we were overtaken by some eager local rowers (below left) - you just never know who you'll see on the water. A warm and sunny evening, and Hannah was lending a hand on board with the ropes (below right)



The countryside that we cruised through was green, lush and totally tranquil; a world away from the usual hustle and bustle that we know as modern England. Somehow the [Actief](#) manages to offer its clients a peaceful, relaxing and cultural vision of England as she wends her way through the very heart of southern England.

We thoroughly recommend the [Actief](#) for anyone who seeks superb food and wines, a gentle and relaxing cruise without fierce heat, naturalists and birdwatchers (we saw so many native wild birds really close up), and walkers and hikers too. There isn't a tow-path that follows the canal all the way, but the barge crew will be happy to provide maps and directions for some wonderful rural walks through the cream of the English countryside, which can be enjoyed by all.

If you are interested in cruising on the [Actief](#) in 2006 please [contact us](#) without delay.