

21st October 2021

Navigation

**“You understand the limits of the world
around which you navigate each day.”**

Anton Chekhov, Letter to A. S. Suvorin, 1893

One of the most photogenic parts of the Lochaber area of Scotland is “Neptune’s Staircase”. This is a section of the Caledonian Canal, a waterway system which allows boats to navigate the sixty miles across Scotland, thus avoiding the time-consuming and dangerous journey round the north of the mainland. Linking Loch Lochy, Loch Oich and Loch Ness, the canal begins at Corpach at the head of Loch Linnhe. Soon, vessels are faced with Neptune’s Staircase, a series of 8 locks, stretching 500 metres, through the village of Banavie. Built by Thomas Telford between 1803 and 1822, the locks raise boats a massive twenty metres. Neptune’s Staircase is the longest staircase lock system in the United Kingdom. It takes a vessel ninety minutes to move up or down.

My final year in Primary School was in Banavie, so watching boats in Neptune’s Staircase would often make me late home from school. In those days, the “sluice gates” – allowing the water to flow from one lock to another to equalise the level – had to be opened and closed by hand using metal “keys” in the lock gates. The huge locks themselves were moved by men turning a windlass at the canal-side. I loved the clanking of chains, grinding of the gates, grunting of the lockkeepers and the shouted instructions of the boats’ crews. Then the locks were “mechanised”. It’s all “push-button” now, hydraulics and the like – easier for the lockkeepers, safer for the boats, quicker for the journey. But not *nearly* as interesting.

Boats navigate the Caledonian Canal because of the engineering skill of Thomas Telford 200 years ago, the efforts of workmen, the dedication of lockkeepers, the invention of hydraulics, the care of canal staff – many, many people. They know what navigation is about. But so do you, because, as Chekhov said, you understand its limits every day.

So then, as I marvel at the wonder that is Neptune’s Staircase, join with me and thank all those people who help us navigate each day, even a little part of *our* journey.

A prayer for today

Lord, help me trust those who help me navigate the hard parts of my journey. Amen

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