

SHORT TRIPS BY HOVERCRAFT

Between the storms this year visitors and locals alike have seen a fresh tourist attraction on the North Wales coast. A hovercraft operator from Cheshire has been running short trips out to sea from some of our beaches. [Allan Barham found it at Colwyn Bay.](#)

Standing on the promenade, waiting for my ship to come in, I glanced at their poster in a kiosk window. It was small but very informative, giving all the basic details you might wish to know about the hovercraft and its pleasure trips, but then I started to laugh.

One paragraph read "We are hovercraft enthusiasts and we are glad to bring back some British heritage to all of you." I said out loud "How ridiculous. How can something as modern as a hovercraft be seen as part of our heritage?"

But then, as the truth dawned upon me, I remembered that a Mr Cockerell had invented the hovercraft 50-years ago, and most of us haven't seen one for many years. And when at last the beast arrived, not majestically by sea but by road on a trailer, the crew were quick to point out that the world's first hovercraft service went into operation way back in 1962.

That, for people like me who are numerically challenged and have absolutely no idea how time flies, is 45-years ago when Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister, people were going mad with Beatle-mania and I thought I looked smart in a jacket with no lapels. >>



In other words I gradually realised this weird looking contraption resembling an assemblage of sports car, rubber dinghy, and windmill, could indeed take its place, not only in the litter of our heritage, but indeed in a museum.

It might be a painful thing to realise but the children of today, who after all are the judges in such matters, would almost certainly pigeon hole the hovercraft with the steam engine, regarding the blast from the rear end of Mr Christopher Cockerell's invention, as it surges across the beach in a swirling shower of sand and sea spray, as a blast from the past. But no matter, they can say what they like; this one on the North Wales coast still works.

As they pumped up the big floats that surround it one of the of the owners, Geraint Roberts, responded to my questions with considerable pride. "It's an Air vehicle Tiger12 and it was built at Cowes on the Isle of Wight in 1979, but because it wasn't used very much it's only flown for 2,000 hours. I bought it two years ago and we've completely renovated it, reducing the seating also from 12 to 10 for improved comfort."

I was beginning to learn. In floating on a cushion of air it was apparent that these things were 'flown' rather than driven, but when I asked about the engine there came the real surprise. In fact two surprises.

"It's powered by a V8. 6 litre Chrysler engine." He said "And with a fuel consumption of up to 5 gallons of petrol an hour it's very fast. She'll do around 65 miles an hour, and because the journey is that much shorter by sea we could take you from here at Colwyn Bay to the Liver Buildings on the Mersey in about 25 minutes. And what's more important is that in spite of everything it's very clean. You get less harmful emissions from this than you do from a so called smart car."

Although the hovercraft literally hovers and is therefore designed to travel over any surface, sweeping over both land and water with an ease that is quite uncanny, they do have their problems. In particular when it comes to picking up passengers where no expanse of dry sand or a good slipway is available. Understandably, not many people would be willing to pay £10 to slip and slide over rocks to get aboard, or less still paddle out to sea, and therefore tide tables come into focus.



With the craft checked over, and the blades of the huge fan spinning ready to glide down the Eirias Park slipway, the team of three got together to outline their strategy. There was Geraint, a retired radiographer with a family background in Cemaes Bay and Llanrug, his blonde German partner Dagma Lensing, and Chris Simpson, all qualified hovercraft pilots now, and all telling me that essentially their continued aim is to run short trips and special party trips from wherever the conditions are right. This so far has meant launching anywhere between Penmaenmawr and Rhyl with passengers being brought back each time to the starting point.

When it came to the obvious question about seasickness I can only quote the senior pilot. "Well." Geraint said. "In a bad sea the other day my cup of coffee on the dash board didn't spill, and that speaks for itself. But with the public we don't go out if it's rough.

Partner Dagma said it's a shame so few operate now, and she not only reminded me that it was a British invention, but furthermore reminded me about the world's first hovercraft service in 1962. "It was established right here on the North Wales coast." She said. "It ran from Rhyl to Wallasey on the Wirral. So you see it really is part of your heritage." I departed better informed, and suitably repentant. ■

