
Beaulieu
Rendezvous
Report

From Our
Honsec

Crossing the
Channel in the
50's

Rendezvous in
West Wales
16th - 18th
June
2015

The Old Worcesters' Yacht Club Newsletter



THE COMMODORE'S REPORT

Andrew Lansdale

A Commodore's Rendezvous is mainly about reunion and comradeship, but the weather plays a large part. When I first mentioned the 3rd – 5th June, a member immediately said, "Oh I can't make those days, I have a school reunion." So I suggested June 10th-12th. there was no dissent, so those dates were chosen.



In actual fact the first week in June was a washout. There was never-ending rain and little sunshine.

We found the personnel at Bucklers Hard Marina to be very helpful and flexible when making the arrangements, as were the hotel people at the Master Builder's. His Lordship's staff at Beaulieu were also extremely helpful with the arrangements for the chapel service. At Buckler's Hard there is a little chapel; or rather a tiny chapel

which might have seated 25 schoolchildren: but not 60 OW's and wives, so we were invited to use the Abbey chapel. By way of thanks I sent a couple of our Old Worcester books to His Lordship and invited him to be my guest at the dinner, but his health is very poor and he graciously declined.

When it got closer to June, the member who had requested a change in dates was absent from the applicants. When contacted they said they couldn't come because they had a school reunion that week. "But you told us that it was the week before, which is why we changed the dates." Thank goodness for mistakes. 'If no one made mistakes they wouldn't put rubbers on the end of pencils,' as the saying goes. And the weather was fine, hot and sunny the whole way through.

On the first day there were visits from one boat to another; most were moored alongside the refuelling jetty, which sounds ghastly. One can imagine the stink of diesel and petrol pervading the atmosphere, but not a bit of it. It was a very pleasant place to be and closer to the bar than those who moored up in the marina: Always a large plus for OWs.

The BBQ on Tuesday evening took place not outside, but inside the restaurant with the food cooked in the hotel kitchens. For the price quoted I was expecting a burger bun, a hamburger and a sausage. But there was a wide variety of dishes, as much as you could eat and very attractive salads and seafood. The hotel did us proud.

On Wednesday some went up to the nearby gardens at Exbury, established by Lionel de Rothschild at the beginning of the last century. It is noted for its rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias and rare trees and shrubs in 200 acres. The myriad of colours was quite a sight at that time of year.

The dinner in the evening was well attended with guests from Conway and Pangbourne. The Hotel wanted us to choose from three main courses with orders to be placed the week before. This would have been impossible so I reduced it to a choice of two main courses and said that all the members were very flexible: Cook half of one and half of the other. I gathered afterwards that no one was disappointed. The food was very good.

On Thursday morning, we had church parade at the Beaulieu Abbey chapel which was well attended. The Old Worcester choristers sang heartily, 'Eternal Father, Strong to Save.' It is said that before a performance opera singers have a glass of port wine to lubricate their vocal chords. I think that with the quantity of wine consumed at the dinner the night before, port was unnecessary for the OW choir.

Many went back to the Master Builder's Hotel for lunch. The only criticism was that the bar service was very slow and that we weren't allowed to use the restaurant bar. I noticed some OW yachtsmen sneaking back to their boats and bringing back bottles of wine: No names, no pack drill !

So in 2015 we can look forward to sunny Pembrokeshire for Bob Lineker's Rendezvous. We hope that many will make the trip by boat. Ian Ward shifted *Spirit of Worcester* from Milford Haven to Portsmouth. But by now, his sturdy craft will find its way back on its own, I am sure.



HON SEC'S REPORT

Peter Gormley

In the Spring we heard that Ray Newbury, our Master was too ill to attend our Beaulieu rendezvous . He died on the 5th May. His funeral service was attended by Ian Ward and many OWs. in Cardiff . Ray and Barbara were loyal members, who attended most of our Yacht Club functions over the years. Ray's obituary will be appearing in the January Dog Watch. Mike Smith '48 also died in May

A thank-you to members who made a financial contribution to the Yacht Club funds. Ian Ward again paid for the blue plaques given to the sailors who arrived at Bucklers Hard under sail. Maggie Gormley who made a contribution towards the Bucklers Hard Rendezvous. Peter O’Gorman sent a generous cheque and I was very happy to get a telephone call from Peter during a brief stay in London. We met up for lunch and filled in a fifty year gap since leaving the Worcester. I am also thankful to those members who make a regular direct debit contribution.

I will leave it to Andrew Lansdale to write a piece on his successful Rendezvous at Bucklers Hard and Bob Lineker about his plans for his rendezvous in Pembrokeshire in 2015. Trevor Crawford is already working at his Commodore’s rendezvous in 2016 with ideas on the East Coast. Finally Bob Kitching is planning a get-together in Vancouver BC in 2017 but more later.



Ed: I thought it would do no harm to show that our Hon. Sec. does get afloat some times and in passable weather too by the look of it?

Attending the recent AOW AGM, mention was made of the various forthcoming events and it is difficult for events not to clash. Remembrance Sunday Service at All Hallows Church 9th November when many of our OWYC members attend. 2015 AGM luncheon 22nd April in Dover.

I was asked if the Southampton Boat Show and visit to a liner is still being planned. Sadly it appears through lack of interest and difficulty of arranging a suitable liner, with their quick turn around make these visits too difficult.

Our next function will be the OWYC AGM/Dinner to be held at the Farmers Club on Friday 9th January 2015. Do put it in you diaries now

At the last AGM a lot of discussion was made about the direction of our Club. I am amazed when I look through our many photograph albums of past rendezvous. They were immensely popular which was reflected in the turnout of members and their sailing boats. The organisation and planning which went into the various arrangements to put them together. Sadly those days are over and with this in mind members were asked to complete a questionnaire. Ten per cent of you responded and the replies are interesting to help guide our future.

30% said that they would not be able to attend future events
78% said that they were happy with the Farmers Club
100% did not think our rendezvous were too expensive
39% thought that the Dog Watch adequately covered our activities
82% are happy to receive the Newsletter by Email only
100% were agreeable to open our functions to AOW members

These points will figure on the AGM Agenda in January to be discussed, Please would any member who wants to place an item for discussion on the Agenda let the Secretary know please.

I am pleased to report that there has been one applicant to take over the position of Hon.Sec. in the New Year, Clive Bradbury but it is still to be decided whether this should be a Job Share role or whether I shall retire. A volunteer is needed to take over from Ian Ward as Treasurer. Ian has done a great job for many years so I do hope that someone will come forward shortly.



I am amazed how many of you manage to read the small print in the newspapers and picked out that brother Antony had been knighted in the New Years honours for services to the Arts. Our family were amazed when brother Brendan received

a KCMG in the birthday honours. After Cambridge he spent nearly twenty years with Oxfam and then joined the DEC – Disasters and Emergency Committee as Director General. His feet were hardly under his new desk when he had to grapple with the problems of the Asian tsunami which generated £300 million in contributions from the public. I have passed on your good wishes.

It is pleasing that the AGM/Dinner in January and the June rendezvous attracted sixty

members and friends. Our Worcester ensign still flies proudly

NEWS FROM AROUND THE COAST

I here make an editorial apology for my appearance in a photo more than once, but it's how it came out in the wash.



The summer cruise aboard our ketch “Sharifa” was south from Falmouth across to Camaret, Audierne, Loctudy, the Glenan Isles, Port Louis, Crouesty, the Golf du Morbihan and on the return we visited Douarnenez for the classic boat festival, this was a bit of nostalgia for me as I first attended in 1988 plus several more in between. While travelling in France we encountered the Worcester ensign twice, first in Port Louis with John & Jane Eastwood aboard their Barbican “HASIMARA”. Like so many UK owned yachts that we have met over the years they

have a mooring on the Villain

Next an East Coast reunion, Ben Peace and Michael Wheeler (with their respective wives Rosie and Vicki) sailed from West Mersea to Burnham on Crouch on Michael's boat 'Golden Fleece' while Clive Bradbury and Howard Evans sailed there from Levington on Clive's boat 'Matilda'. Michael reports “We had an OW Reunion (Class of '60-'61!) onboard 'Golden Fleece in the evening” and the attached is the photographic evidence with Michael holding one of the 'Worcester' cushions that he had made with assistance from Bob Baldwin.



Finally while Sally and I were in the Golf du Morbihan, I had a fleeting glimpse of a Worcester ensign and managed to exchange a wave but the congestion prevented contact. I was only able to read the yachts name and so we were very pleased to meet up again in Audierne with Gary and Penny Fry aboard "JALA II". We had a very enjoyable wine or few aboard Sharifa and I was very taken with Gary's personalised wine bottle with Jala II etched onto it. A great idea buy the wine by the box, then decant it and chill !



There is at least one other OWYC member in the area, Gavin Davies who lives close to the Villain River and keeps his boat there, but has not yet spotted.

THE 2015 RENDEZVOUS

Bob Lineker

Milford Haven – Tuesday 16th to Thursday 18th June



Our 2015 rendezvous will take place in one of the UK's largest natural deep water harbours. Milford Haven is situated within the UK's only coastal National Park. Just offshore are Skomer and Skokholm Islands, run by 'The Wildlife Trust' and in June, home to hundreds of thousands of nesting seabirds and seals. Within the harbour there are 24 miles of coastline, providing marvellous and safe sailing opportunities.

Our rendezvous will be centred on [Neyland Yacht Haven](#), where we have arranged for OWYC yachts to have special rates. The Yacht Haven is some 7 miles up the Cleddau River, above the natural harbour of Milford Haven, and provides excellent facilities for visitors. For those who would like to be afloat but feel it is too far to bring your own boat, then there is a charter company in Nayland Marina with a range of yachts. Details on website: <http://www.pembrokeshirecruising.co.uk/charter.php>

Milford Haven's sheltered tidal waters are surrounded by a diverse 200 mile coastline providing habitats for an abundance of wildlife. There are many tributaries waiting to be explored, but those not familiar with the area should always be aware of the tidal state when venturing off the main waterway.

The unspoilt scenic qualities of the upper and lower reaches were recognised in 1952, through the designation of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, the only coastal National Park in the UK. Many foreshores are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The whole Haven is included in a European Marine Special Area of Conservation - the highest designation in Europe. The Pembrokeshire Marine SAC contains marine habitats and species of European importance that are required by law to be protected and maintained for the future.



The Haven is a wetland of international importance and is home to one of the most diverse estuarine communities in the UK. In spring and summer the peaceful embayments and rivers provide breeding habitats and crèche sites for a multitude of birds. Wildfowl and wader counts have observed significant numbers of shelduck, teal, widgeon, curlew and redshank, with numbers reaching over 25,000 in winter.

The Rendezvous will follow the normal format, with boats (and others) arriving on Tuesday 16th (or before!) owner/crew either remaining on-board for the period, or booking into the [Cleddau Bridge Hotel](#) for the time, where again special rates have been negotiated for those attending the rendezvous.



That evening there will be the Commodore's Cocktail party, which will include a hot BBQ – hopefully outside if the weather is kind, but inside if really necessary. Please keep your fingers crossed!

On Wednesday 17th arrangements are being made for a day trip to the [National Botanical Gardens of Wales](#). Although nearly an hour away by coach, the trip is well worth the effort, the gardens and surrounds are really wonderful, and June is a good month to view! Alternatively Pembroke Castle, the birthplace of Henry Tudor is close at hand and well worth a visit.

On returning from the gardens, the formal dinner will be held in the Cleddau Bridge Hotel, meal to include wine and Port. The Commodore has eaten at the Cleddau Bridge on a number of occasions (His wife's 60th birthday party was held there with 80 guests) and can assure visitors of the quality of both food and service. Well, worth the trip!



On The Thursday (18th) there will be a Church Service held in the small village church of St Tudwal's in Llanstadwell, hopefully led by Rob Watson as usual.

St Tudwal is an historic parish church on a site which has been a holy place for over 1500 years, although the present church dates back only to the reign of King Stephen (1135-1154). Richard II was entertained on his journey to Ireland in 1394 by the vicar of St Tudwal's, for which the vicar received the

handsome sum of 40 shillings to defray expenses. The church still has the original invoice. (Unlike the picture – no snow is expected!)

Milford Haven is a long way from the South Coast, but well worth the trip. A stop in Padstow (North Cornwall) leaves only a day trip across the Bristol Channel, and it is hoped that a number of boats will make the effort – Club members are not getting any younger, and time for sailing trips may be running out!!!

Please make the effort to attend, with or without boats!

FRENCH FESTIVALS

For those who have never been I will offer a short taster of a maritime festival which I believe the French have no equal in organising. My first visit was to a small local event in Concarneau which was twinned with Penzance in 1982 and I continued to attend this one for the next 13 years or so. It was this small local affair which encouraged me to go to Douarnenez back in 1988 and this was a real eye opener. 500 boats were expected and over 800 arrived and yet they still catered for everyone.

The museum started in the late 1980s as a means of revitalising the local community after the decline of the local sardine canning industry. The prime mover was the now internationally renowned magazine Chasse Maree which is also published in the town.

It was the early Douarnenez events which encouraged Brest to stage their first huge gathering of around 2000 craft in 1992 and eventually the UK to stage the International Festival of the Sea at Portsmouth in 1998, where I was lucky enough to be the civilian Harbour Master and was delighted to welcome an OWYC contingent.



The morning after the crew party !



This years Douarnenez festival which is held every two years was staged inside the Port Rhu, the site of the Douarnenez Maritime Museum much of whose exhibits are afloat. On each occasion the town opens an invitation to suitable craft to register for the event. These can be traditionally rigged, gaff, lug and square as well as classic bermudan's from the 60's and 70's. Also small open day boats of similar vintage, coracles, Cornish Pilot Gigs, the 12 oared Atlantic Challenge boats which have representatives from the nations bordering the ocean including USA, and Canada. Traditionally rigged craft are not restricted to only wood as it's the rig itself which is in the spirit of the event, as are wooden motor cruisers from the immediate post war era are also welcome.

The festival usually lasts about 4-5 days and includes traditional Breton music, Shanties and this year even some classic orchestral for the Son et Lumiere finale. The participants and their crews are multinational, this year for example there was a Dhow from Dubai as well as other craft from all over Europe and Scandinavia. The organisers try to focus on a particular region to encourage a good sample from that area, this year was Cornwall, a few years ago Holland and before that Galicia.

It's a great opportunity to meet up with old friends and make new ones while for those who own more modern craft it makes a wonderful spectacle. Entry for boats and their crews is free but the public are charged to enter and enter they do in their thousands. The French public are not only very appreciative but also very knowledgeable, late pre war and early post war British yachts are very popular with French owners.

So if you are interested keep an eye on the yachting press, the next joint Douarnenez and Brest festivals will be in 2016, there will superb Sea Shanty event in Paimpol on the North Brittany coast and the Semain du Golf in the Morbihan both of which will be next year.

A SALTY YARN OF YESTERYEAR **Kevin Hart**

In response to my plea for bits of news about members activities over the past season Kevin sent me the attached tale of his cruise aboard a former Admiralty cutter "TOMMY" over the 3 successive summer holidays. The amazing thing is that these were done between 1953 - 1955 and he visited many of the Channel ports which had suffered such dire consequences from the 1944 invasions ! Here is Kevin's story first published some 10 years ago.....

NB The page numbers that now appear are from the original publication

TAKING THE "TOMMY" TO FRANCE

1953 - 1955

A few recollections

INTRODUCTION

This is a series of recollections from three trips to France on three consecutive years, more than 50 years ago, in a somewhat less than seaworthy boat, manned by a very impecunious crew. I took my boat, "Tommy", over to France during the two-week summer holidays for the three years 1953, 1954 and 1955. My companion on each voyage was my great friend Ron ('Brom') Bromley. On the first trip, in 1953, another good friend Bill Turner made the third member of the crew. Being so soon after the end of World War II, the demolished Channel Ports and villages along the canals were still in ruins and waiting to be rebuilt. Also, the sight of a small boat flying the Red Ensign was still a novelty and a warm welcome was received everywhere the "Tommy" went.



"Tommy" alongside in Dover

THE BOAT

"Tommy" was an old converted naval cutter, circa 1920, 20 feet in length, clinker built and gaff cutter rigged (originally, in her heyday, that is). Her original rig had deteriorated by the time I took over the boat. She now had only one jib, so we dispensed with the bowsprit. Her mainsail was rotting away at

the foot, so it always had to be set to the first reef points. However, with only one jib and a reduced main she was still fairly well balanced under sail – even if somewhat slow! Lack of funds prohibited any improvements or replacements to her rig.

She had a metal drop keel housed in a great box in the centre of the boat and lowered by a large metal lever. Originally an open boat her previous owners had added a plywood cabin top. This provided some protection, but only 'kneeling headroom'. All space forward of the cabin top was 'lying headroom' only! Her facilities comprised two mattresses, one either side of the keel box, a portable paraffin cooking ring, a frying pan and a 5 gal plastic water carrier. Having seen the only saucepan doubling up as the 'heads' by the previous owners, this was quickly 'lost overboard' and replaced!

ACQUIRING 'TOMMY'

The agreed purchase price was £90. That was £4 10s per foot length, an average price for a second hand boat of that type. When I acquired her from two lads in Maldon she had no engine, so, between us, we sailed her from the Blackwater to what was to become her home port at the Rochester Cruising Club on the Medway. On the first night out we dropped anchor in Bradwell Creek behind Pewet Island. We had the Creek to ourselves and spent a quiet hour ashore at The Green Man in the company of one or two local fisherman. The only bar, smoke filled and light by oil lamps, was in sharp contrast to today's lively 'Pub/Restaurant'! Next day, on the way across the Buxey Sands in a light breeze, we suddenly nudged to a halt as we ran aground. To my surprise one of my companions immediately stripped off, jumped over the side and started to push us back into deeper water! A manoeuvre they had often employed, apparently. On arrival at Rochester I discovered that it was just possible to get under the Bridge by lowering the gaff and waiting for low tide. Membership of the RCC cost £3.00 per year plus an extra thirty shillings (£1.50) for a deep-water mooring and use of the dinghy pontoon.

ENGINE POWER

Feeling the need for an auxiliary engine, because I had longer passages in mind, I first acquired an old 4hp Anzani outboard. Sadly this was lost irretrievably when, whilst at anchor in the river, I propped it up in the cockpit without a lashing whilst I went below. A passing ship caused a large bow wave, which rocked the "Tommy" and sent Anzani overboard with an almighty 'plop', never to be seen again. How often at sea one learns one's lessons the hard way!

The next engine was a stationary generator motor attached to a feathering propeller. It proved to be a complete failure. Having started the motor, as soon as the propeller was engaged the engine spluttered to a halt again through lack of power.

The final solution was found in an old 1927 Austin 7 motor car engine, an absolute gem, with a Wortham Blake gearbox conversion that provided ahead or astern gears only. Brom, who was something of an engineer, helped by friend Bill, installed the engine, petrol tank, cooling water system and propeller shaft. It is a credit to their expertise, and to the little engine itself, that it never faltered during countless hours of use - despite once being filled with sea water that found its way up the exhaust pipe whilst rolling at anchor off Whitstable.



Whitstable Harbour

The following week-end after the Whitstable 'filling' Brom stripped the engine down, dried out the cylinders, scooped out the emulsified orange coloured oil from the sump, put it all together again, refilled the oil - and off we set for France.

The engine also had a secondary, equally important, function to fulfil. The Tommy always leaked badly. Despite repeated efforts at 'caulking', and a gallon of tar from

the local gasworks to seal the cracks, water always found its way through the planks. Pumping out the bilge was therefore a very regular and essential part of life aboard the Tommy - and why she always lived in a mud berth! Brom devised the perfect solution for all the time the engine was running. He fitted a two-way tap to the cooling sea water pipe and connected this to a second pipe that went into the bilge. Thus, whilst the engine was running it doubled up as a mechanical bilge pump. And by a happy coincidence, with the engine vibrations increasing the ingress of water, the cooling pump capacity closely matched the speed with which the water seeped into the bilge!

NAVIGATION and PILOTAGE

Navigation relied on a compass, three small-scale charts, 'Thames Estuary', 'Dover to North Foreland' and 'English Channel, Eastern Section' An Esso Road

Map of Northern France, which also showed the canals, had to suffice for our inland passages. Without any further information, locks and bridges had to be dealt with as we encountered them en route. Electronic navigation aids were non-existent for small boats – even for those who could have afforded them. No Decca Navigators, no GPS, no VHF radio, no Auto Pilots and no Echo Sounders. Occasional soundings would be taken with a lead line, but when approaching shallow water, the most efficient warning was when the keel lever would begin to rise up in the box indicating that the drop keel was touching the ground two feet below the keel.

We had a very lucky escape when approaching Gravelines harbour for the first time. We were aware that the harbour dried out at low water but, on arrival, thought there was sufficient depth for us to enter between the long wooden moles that stretched out from the shore. On approaching closer, however, the boat was caught in a huge swell that carried her perilously close the end of one mole. To have crashed into it would have spelt disaster. Fortunately, the 'Austin 7' started immediately and took us out of danger to where we were able to anchor and wait for the tide to come up further.

SETTING SAIL FOR FRANCE

With limited holiday time the aim always was to work the "Tommy" round to Ramsgate or Dover on the preceding week-ends. How different from today those harbours were. With few, if any, other boats around, and certainly no Marinas, that had yet to be created, you just tied up alongside any one of the metal ladders around the harbour wall, keeping well away from the fishing boats. When leaving the boat for any length of time arrangements were always made with a local longshoreman or fisherman to keep a weather eye on the boat and her lines (and, in "Tommy's case, to pump her out regularly!). On the first Channel crossing we were becalmed half way across.



Kevin Becalmed Mid Channel 'Brom'

On the sea behind us appeared three small dots on the water. As the dots came closer they materialised into three canoes. They gave us some friendly waves as

they paddled past and must have arrived in France long before the "Tommy".

On finally arriving in Calais harbour we were confronted with much desolation and destruction – and not a little interest from anyone who happened to be around, including some American service men. In 1953 rebuilding the town had scarcely begun but it was still an exciting moment to be the only British boat in the harbour and to be among some of the first small boats to have visited France since the war. In fact our Red Ensign was acknowledged with hearty waves and friendly calls wherever the "Tommy" was seen.

HARBOUR PROCEDURES

In accordance with strict guidelines we always hoisted our yellow Quarantine flag on entering any harbour. After making fast we would make our way directly, through huge piles of rubble, to the Harbourmaster's office and to the Douanne. Despite the desolation all around them, at least, were already operating at full efficiency ('officiousness', might be a better word!). Details were taken of the boat, her skipper and crew; and a Pratique certificate was duly issued. On departure a clearance certificate had to be obtained to show that the boat had left French territory.



*Re-fuelling in Dunkerque
Mast un-shipped for canals*

A problem occurred on our departure in 'Year 3'. Entering the Harbourmaster's office to obtain clearance we were greeted with a sight worthy of a B-Movie. The little room was full of cigarette smoke, an empty bottle was on his desk and the man himself was slumped in his chair in a deep sleep from which we could not wake him. So, undeterred, we cast off and set sail for home.

Some months later, however, I received an official letter from the French Authorities claiming that because there were no clearance papers from the Harbourmaster, my boat must still be in France. Accompanying the letter was an invoice for 'Import Duty' more than the value of the boat itself. The only way to avoid payment was to prove to them that my boat was, in fact, back in the UK: and for this to be confirmed by a JP. That led to the next problem because, by then, I had sold the boat and I had lost the address of the buyer. However, I knew that the boat was still moored on the Medway and was luckily able to trace both the boat and the new owner, who kindly arranged for the necessary documents to be completed.

CUSTOMS PROCEDURES

These were rigorously enforced on both sides of the Channel - no more so than on returning to the UK. On pain of fines or imprisonment it was obligatory to hoist the yellow 'Q' flag on arrival, wherever the landing might be. On making fast in a harbour the skipper had to report to the Customs Office if no officer had come aboard immediately. There would always have been a visit by an officer to inspect the boat and ask questions before clearance would be given. Inspecting 'down below' on the Tommy after a couple of weeks away was almost beyond the call of duty for the poor unfortunate Customs man who happened to be on duty that day!

Making a landfall anywhere else along the coast, or up river, required a similar rigid procedure, but this time it was the duty of the skipper to find the nearest telephone box (mobile phones did not exist) and to advise the Customs of the location of the boat. He then had to return on board and wait for an officer's visit, often by car or bicycle, depending on the location. If no officer had arrived after half an hour, the crew was 'free to go ashore!' (Carrying their booty with them, presumably?)

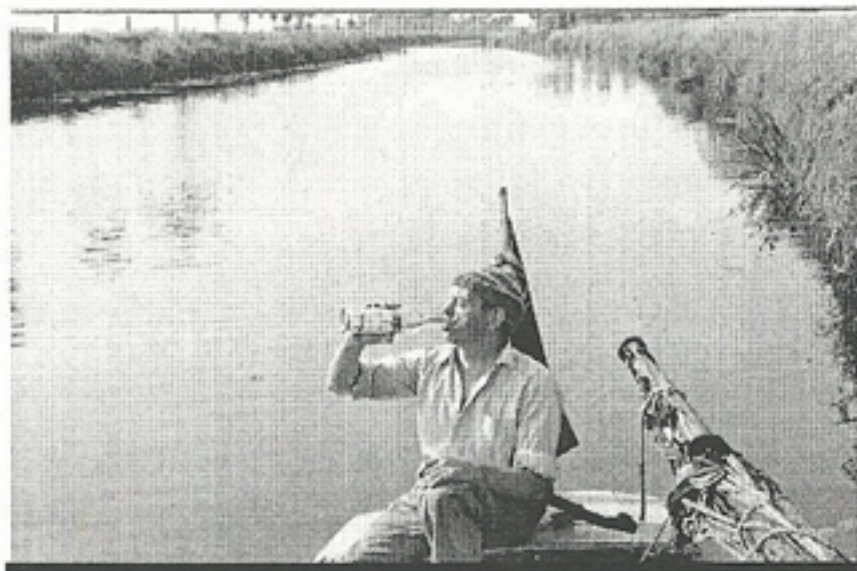
Such a rigorous procedure on both sides of the Channel was designed for commercial traffic, but because there were so few private boats involved at that time they kept the same rules for all vessels regardless of their size or reasons for travelling. And there was apparently a close co-operation between our Customs and the Douanne to ensure correct reporting on both sides of the Channel.

THE CANALS



Note the Rochester Cruising Club burgee, flying proudly!

Having arrived at our ports of destination we liked to enter the canal system in order to see a little more of the French or Belgian countryside, although the land and canalside buildings were in a very dilapidated condition after the war. Fortunately the giant lock systems all seemed to be in working order, but the lock keepers had little regard for small boats and treated them as if they were intercontinental motor barges. We soon learnt that a couple of Gauloise cigarettes sent back up in the basket together with the lock dues helped to remind the lock keepers to let the water in or out a little more slowly! (Still true today, I believe?).



“Preparing” for a cushy night ashore!

From our ports of arrival, Calais, Gravelines or Dunkerque we would spend a few days in the Canals travelling as far as Ostend to the East or to St Omer in the South. The reception everywhere was always most friendly. On one occasion we were moored alongside the canal bank because Brom felt unwell (hangover, actually) and he wanted to rest up before we proceeded any further. Some strangers walking along the towpath stopped to pass the time of day, but on hearing from me in my broken French that Brom was not well, they showed great concern. I must, unwittingly have exaggerated his malaise, because, on seeing the state of the living conditions on board the boat, they insisted on taking him to their home and putting him up for the night until he felt better. I was left on board with a thick head and not knowing where he had gone or when he would come back. Fortunately, he had 'recovered' by the next morning, having enjoyed dinner, a long night's sleep between crisp white sheets, and breakfast with his new found guardians. On his return we cast off, waved goodbye to the friendly strangers, and resumed our trip to St Omer - some of us more rested and refreshed than others!



*I tried to qualify too
(Note; There was more space for gear on deck than down below!)*



As the photos convey there were virtually no other pleasure craft on the canals at that time: and the commercial craft showed no mercy to the Tommy when they ploughed past. We were frequently washed against the banks by their bow waves or in imminent danger of being swamped. The hazards of being afloat were no less real when on the canals than when crossing the Channel!

Illegal Immigrant

We hear a lot about 'people smuggling' today. In 1954 we could have set the trend. Calais at night was desperately quiet; and the only café open was 'Les Trois Suisse' (still operating today, I believe). We were sitting at a table enjoying a couple of Pernods when an American serviceman joined us. He quickly came to the point. He had noticed that we had come off the little boat in the harbour and he asked us if we would take him back to England with us and drop him off on a quiet beach. He didn't explain why, but he accompanied his request with a very large bundle of Dollar bills. We declined despite our impecunious state. We imagined he must have been a deserter from the US Army – or perhaps he had a girl friend in England - but there was no way that we wanted to become involved. He persisted, and increased to size of the bundle quite considerably, but we did not alter our decision.

Marooned

Brom worked for the UK Atomic Energy Authority. This required him to have special dispensation to leave the UK, and only then for a strictly controlled number of days. That just covered our two-week holidays each year. On one occasion when we were due to leave Calais there was a full gale in the Channel,

which would prevent our sailing for, perhaps, several days, and would leave us marooned in Calais. But Brom had to report back within his stipulated time limit. The only answer was to take the cross channel steamer back to Dover and to return for the Tommy some time later. This presented another problem because we had used up all our French Francs and we couldn't afford the fare home! The solution was found by visiting the British Consulate and explaining our predicament. After much interrogation, phone calls and form filling we were finally lent £5 each, which was just enough to cover the cost of the fare, but nothing else, not even a snack or a drink on board. And it had to be repaid immediately after our return to England. Easier said than done, when £5 represented a week's salary for me at the time. The Tommy had to be left in the care of a casual dock worker who we drilled in the routine of pumping her out regularly to prevent her from sinking to the bottom of the harbour, and on the promise of payment if she was still afloat on our return.

Solo Crossing

As it happened, I had to return on my own. Brom had exhausted all his leave allowance and I couldn't persuade anyone else to come with me. I can't think why they wanted to turn down the chance of a channel crossing in the Tommy. Perhaps it was because they had seen her on her home moorings at the RCC, and decided discretion to be the better part of valour?

After a fortnight at home, and back at work, the weather forecast for the coming week-end didn't sound too bad, so I set off back to Calais. To my relief, the Tommy was still floating against the harbour wall. I paid off the dock worker who had done his job thoroughly, cleared with the harbour authorities and set sail for home on the Sunday morning – not without some trepidation. It was to be a long crossing. Our normal journey time from Dover to Calais, or vice-versa, was between six and eight hours. That day I was thirteen hours afloat and I never made Dover Harbour.

What started as a fine morning with a helpful breeze from the East had changed by noon into a strengthening Northerly and a sea haze. The sails were therefore of little use and I had to rely entirely on the little Austin 7 engine for many more hours to come. The prospect of having to cross the busy sea lanes in those conditions was not too good. With no navigational instruments other than the small compass, and with ever worsening visibility, my only option was to steer in a North Westerly direction until I sighted land or a sea mark. After several hours of seeing nothing the first mark I came on was the Varne buoy. Referring to the chart this showed me that the tide had pushed me further down Channel and right past Dover. There was nothing to do other than to alter course back Eastwards and to wait for the tide to turn. Fortunately, it soon did so, and with clearing visibility, I

was able to carry the flood tide with me all the way round the South Foreland and up to Ramsgate Harbour. The inevitable customs officer was waiting at the quayside, but he didn't offer to help me with my mooring lines! The next weekend we took the Tommy back to Rochester and to her berth on the Cruising Club pontoon.

A year later, in need of cash, I sold the Tommy for fifty quid.

CONCLUSION

Looking back, all these years later, the trips in the Tommy might now be considered to have been somewhat precarious, not to say foolhardy. But the prospect of a cross Channel trip did not seem to present any great problem. The condition of the boat and her lack of equipment left a lot to be desired maybe, but that did not prevent us. In fact we repeated the trip for three successive years, undeterred, it seems, by any scares or mishaps of which, as any boater will know, there are always plenty.

The greatest asset was my very good friend Brom who came on all three trips and with whom I continued to sail in other boats for several more years. Without him none of this would have taken place. He was a great companion, a tower of strength when anything mechanical needed attending to, and always ready for the next challenge.

To our surprise, the Rochester Cruising Club in its judgement (or could it be lack of knowledge of the actual facts?) saw fit to award the Valsler Cup 'for the best voyage of the year' to the Tommy in both 1953 and 1954. Today, those cups are a lasting reminder of one of the most enjoyable periods in a long career of 'messing around in boats'.



Please don't forget to send items to the Hon Sec for the AGM and if this edition of the News Letter has jogged the memory bank perhaps could be inspired to send me any interesting items for the next edition.

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