

Hobo's Last Cruise

The Canals of France and back home to Wales

Steve Pickard

Award

Plans for all of us were as ambitious as in any other year and in my case got off to a flying start. In late January we were sipping wine at the Jonquieres blessing of the vines in the south of France and in a moment of weakness I agreed to swap *Hobo* for my son Rohan's *Cramar* - with suitable cash adjustments. Not having read the small print as one is inclined to do in these family deals I soon came to realise there were several entailments, the most serious of which was a promise to get *Hobo* back to N Wales this very year. Pausing only in late March, to buy back Deirdre's favourite yacht *Raffa*, our escape vehicle in 2000, the Covid crisis struck.

Back in England I took stock as the lockdown began. The problems were summarised as follows: in France I had two boats, both of which I could not get to. One of which, *Hobo*, was trapped in Beaucaire behind a broken lock which was not due to open till 2022. In England I had the lovely *Eidothea* to dispose of and I was supposed to be shielding.

Eidothea proved not to be a problem. One days exposure on eBay and two buyers sprang out of the ether. One hesitated and was lost, the other persuaded me to deliver the boat up to the Ribble Cruising Club.

Lockdown over, Ryanair came good and I was on the second flight out, mask, visor and a long snorkel up to the vent. Rohan came too, no doubt to beef up my resolve. In France it was hot, very, and for the first week I dithered in the vague hope of getting special dispensation from the VNF to open the lock to the Rhone.



Hobo airborne

By week two I had booked a lorry and two cranes to drop me into the Med at Port Camargue. By week three Deirdre arrived and the game was on. Would we, wouldn't we? Could we, couldn't we? On verra!

The Med was in tempting form as I motored across to the Grau du Roi. How brief the visit.

Day two saw us on the Rhone in thick fog steaming up to Avignon. The major fears on this part of the journey were the possibility of rain in the Alps or a low in the Med. One producing a flood and the other a Mistral.

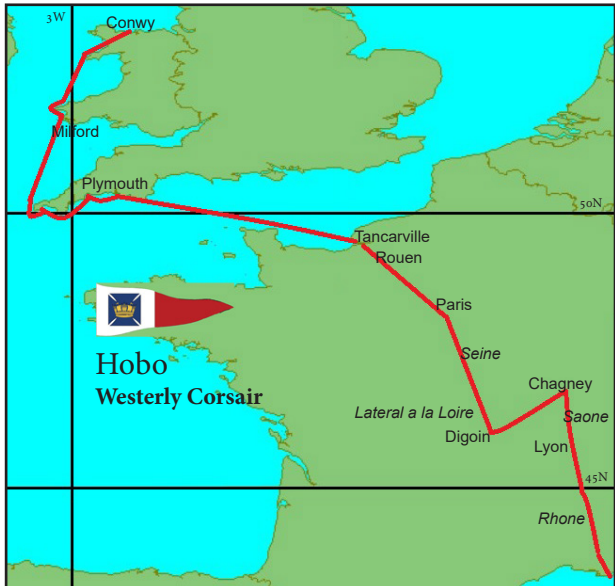
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Both sides of the Rhone could not be seen so I favoured the west bank as this would prevent inadvertent entry to the Durance (vile). Good progress was made despite the forced wait for barges that have precedence and in some cases (gas, oil) prevent access. It was tempting to stop at Viviers and revisit its black lava streets but the desire for progress saw us pass the night on the upside of Chateauneuf. All locks on the Rhone have marina grade pontoons above and below and cannot be bettered for a good night's sleep, conditions being good. In our case it was so hot that I dozed on the cockpit cushions until circa five degrees was shed.

The next day was survived by pouring copious amounts of water over the head. Meanwhile the fresh water tanks were empty as a result of a loose connection. Nil desperandum, we had enough in bottles to reach Lyon. Tournon came and with it the warming hilltop words of encouragement, Jaboulet and Charpoutier... Gervans that night and two thirds of the Rhone conquered.

Sure enough we arrived in Lyon the following evening as darkness fell and, amid a torrential rainstorm, I filled the tanks outside the VNF office then crossed over to tie up on the amazingly free town quay. Above, the fairy tale Basilique Notre Dame de Fourviere pierced the clouds.

As if by magic the brutality of the Rhone gave on to the bucolic charm of the Saone. Cows paddled on the sandy beaches, campers set up their socially distanced camps and in yacht clubs tables were filled on the lawns leading down to the river. Before dark we achieved the impossible and found a berth on the town pontoon at Tournus. Next door the talk was full of gloom, it was believed that all routes to the Seine were closed. We would soon find out and at 1030 the next morning as we filled up with fuel at Chalons sur Saone it seemed that the Centre was still open but with shallows. Onto the first lock on the hill that leads to the Loire. Amazingly it opened as we approached, a momentary triumph. Anxiety soon followed when we learned that the long pound through Chagny was missing much water and could not be filled because if water was added, it flooded a man's cellar! The future seemed to loom as we passed a sailboat dry to its keel propped up against the canal bank. The depth finder could not be looked at because at best it showed only three



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inches clearance. To add extra torture the appearance of the longed for lock gates could not be regarded as a passport to loftier pastures, the downside of locks is a sill where the detritus gravitates.

A quiet night at Monceau les Mines was followed by a rush to the summit.



“Mauvais herbes”

“All downhill from here” says I to the lockkeeper only to be greeted with the news of “Mauvais herbes”. Apparently, weeds with heads like the top of a monkey puzzle tree were infesting the run down to Digoin. This was beginning to resemble Homers odyssey, what further tasks lay ahead? We made the weeds acquaintance shortly after and I made the first of many plunges to clear the prop. I found that goggles were unnecessary as bare eyes were just as good. The weed was easy to tear off but there was always the fear of fish hooks in the mix.

We stopped at Paray le Monial, a fascinating pilgrim town. Our early stop was occasioned by the lurid tales we had heard from the VNF boys about boats being stopped dead by the Sargasso sea on the last stretch to Digoin. This was Friday and we were told that a sort of undersea lawnmower was on its way to clear the run on Monday. We had visions of following it at our ease. Fortunately next morning we regained our senses and had a relatively trouble free run to the magnificent aqueduct that paves the way to the Loire, in fact the aqueduct soars over it at about a 100 feet.

The Lateral a la Loire is a very pleasant canal, when conditions are good. The weather was lovely but the water seemed a little scanty. It wasn't till halfway through the next day that I learned, to my chagrin that the canal was only being maintained at 1.4 metres; as we drew 1.55 in sea water, the horror of the next task became clear. We were at *écluse* (lock) 10 and the situation continued till the 21st. One ray of hope was

Approaching the Haussman aqueduct over the Loire



Steve Pickard



Steve (author)

that we had already covered four locks in these new conditions..

On the next pound we dragged through gravel for the whole length and on the next but one we truly believed we had reached our nemesis. Grinding to a halt under full power I jumped overboard and walked round the boat, the same everywhere and at least 800m to where there might be another inch or two. I threw out the anchor and we rang the VNF. They were very good for shortly after a man in a van hailed us from the bank. He promised to put some more water in the pound so we settled down for

the night. This involved a drink or two and encouraged I hopped over to have another look. It occurred to me that the mud was slightly softer a couple of yards to port so had a go at reaching it, we did and slowly ploughed our way to the next lock. The lock keeper was thrilled to see us.

More torment at Nevers where the Medusa like heads of the weeds joined the oh so close sandy bottom to impede progress but finally we were clear for the run down to Briare. A mishap occurred on the climb out from Briare. The locks were deep and automatic. The bow line had a tendency to slip off the bollard so I put my foot on the line from bollard to boat. The line slipped off the bollard and I staggered a bit. This is the incredible bit, I did it again! Fortunately the lock was nearly full so my plunge was of short duration.

In next to no time we joined the Seine where for five days we wound our way to what was, for us, the holy grail, Rouen, for it was here that the mast would be raised. The last lock is a good 60km above Rouen and it was strange to think that



Poor Notre Dame



Diedre

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only bridges lay between us and Wales. Rouen was a disappointment. It rained all the time we were there and crucially, the crane in the boatyard was hors de combat and likely to remain so. Several arrangements to raise the mast were made at Tancarville and Le Havre. These were abandoned as at the last minute, as Deirdre was sitting in the hire car ready to leave for the airport, with Rohan winging his way over to take her place, like the Vatican on the election of a new pope, a puff of smoke was seen over the travel lift.

Monday morning saw us scrambling over the rigging and sails and Monday afternoon saw us under weigh for Plymouth. Night intervened, causing us to break two laws. The first was the interdiction on stopping en route and the second was the urgency of the outgoing tide which at 0300 impelled me to spark up the donks. For three hours we hurtled seawards with eyes everywhere for the Gendarmerie.

Dawn came as we sailed under the Tancarville bridge and passed Honfleur onto a calm and sunny sea. The passage to Plymouth was textbook. 5.5 knots over the ground while sailing at five. Pleasant views of Barfleur and Alderney during the night. Start Point showing up earlier than thought.



Tancarville at dawn

Rohan went home and John Richardson (RCC) was chauffeured over by Wendy. Time being of the essence we got under weigh toute de suite and found a keen but hostile west wind blowing. John being of sterner stuff encouraged progress and after a tack up to Looe we laid a course to Fowey where we had difficulty finding a berth, it was packed. A nice run down to the Lizard was followed by an uninspiring beat into Newlyn where all three of my three wishes came true. They did have an inexpensive pontoon berth, there was a pub behind the harbormaster's office and joy of joys, a chip shop lay around the corner.

The next day confounded both John and I. The tides round the Lizard and through the Longhips did not make sense and once in the Bristol Channel the westerly F5 produced the vilest conditions either of us could remember. The thought of another 24 hours of this torture was enough to make me bear off for Milford which we entered in a rush at 0200 finding a buoy in Dale. I have never enjoyed my cosy berth so much as that night as I lay there in peace with my mug of cocoa.

Dale is a trap if heading north as the passage through the Jack and Ramsey sound can only be taken once a day unless a moonlit passage is contemplated. We didn't, so a dawn start the next day was planned. The peace that passeth all understanding pervaded the ship that Tuesday. The clag outside a backdrop. A slight oversleep left

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us leaving in a hurry. The west wind was moderate but the visibility lead to a lot of inspired pilotage. Once through the Jack Sound we unreefed but as we approached the Ramsey Sound the wind came in strong from the north. A rapid reef left us wondering whether to heave to. We pressed on and in the turbulent sound we appeared to be stationary but were in fact being swept along at seven knots.

Round the corner we were swept along to Fishguard where, contrary to expectations, the massive harbour was empty but for one ferry about to leave and five fishing boats. The village ashore was two streets deep and would have remained unexplored had John not spotted what turned out to be a mini harbour hiding in the wall. The next day's run to Porth Dinllaen had an unearthly feeling to it, it was sunny and calm, contrasting strongly with the previous days. As on all of the west coast, not a yacht was seen. Once more lying nicely to a buoy, the shipping forecast was not encouraging and became less so with each new edition. The problem for our next and last day's run was the Camarthen bar. With a forecast F6 blowing onto it and with the buoys being very small and a long way from anywhere, except the banks, some concern was not out of place.

I slept well but the long wait till 1100 was trying. We hoisted sail and cast off, the shelter gradually giving way to the breaking seas. It was very quiet on board with no engine to break the spell. On time we found the first of the buoys and could see no big holes in the sea beyond. Committed we hurtled on with 10 feet under and the shoal mounted. Along came a big one, picked us up and for a thrilling 20 seconds or so we surfed at 20 knots. John a picture of concentration. We were now out of line but with a bit of clawing up managed to regain the channel.

The Menai Straights are a delight if you have never been there and with the now friendly wind pushing us on we sailed on through the Swellies. Conwy, our destination was now in sight and pushing the boundaries I ran aground. The tide was rising and with a little local assistance we floated off. John was sceptical when



Rohan was there to greet us
A touching scene ensued
where we switched boats and
flags. Both boats are now less
than 100m from where I sit
and write this. Not Conwy
but Hightown. I truly sailed
door to door!

I proposed another shortcut but this proved effective and we cruised in to Conwy on the top of tide. Rohan was there to greet us with my new boat *Cramar*, a Westerly Merlin.



Hobo, a Westerly Corsair