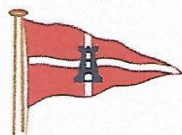


***EAST COWES***



***SAILING CLUB***

**Postcard from Gravelines**

**Meridian Cruise 2019**

**May 25<sup>th</sup> to June 9<sup>th</sup> 2019**



**Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2019** – A few interested folks got together in the ECSC Centenary Room to discuss the itinerary for the following day's Meridian Cruise. There were no likely participants apart from the organiser so we repaired to the newly refurbished Victoria Tavern behind the club to continue our conversations. All agreed that the new publican had completely turned the pub around.

Early interest in the cruise had dissipated for various reasons. As a result, it looked like *Gina* would be the only participant.

The programme had Chichester as the first stop on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> May followed by Brighton. The weather forecast was quite reasonable for the Saturday, but increasingly marginal for Sunday so your correspondent decided to go direct to Brighton on Saturday.

**Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2019** – *Gina* departed East Cowes on Saturday morning with a fair tide which carried us through the Boulder and Street buoys marking the entrance to the Looe Channel. I never quite shape the approach accurately and invariably enter the channel at too acute an angle. Three hours into our passage, the tide was running fast. *Gina* passed rather too close to the Boulder buoy and we heard the alarming swoosh of the tide rushing past the buoy as we entered the channel. The weather was overcast but we enjoyed a speedy passage with the tide through the channel past the Mixon beacon and then East Borough Head cardinal marker marking the end (psychologically at least) of the Looe Channel.

Your start time from East Cowes is determined by when the tide turns east; being about two hours before low water Portsmouth. On our journeys eastward, we generally run out of favourable tide off Worthing and, depending on wind direction, we frequently seem to run into a lumpy sea between Worthing and Brighton. This time, in particular, the waves were rebounding from the Brighton Marina walls creating a confused sea.

Ivan and Denise from *Tarim* sent an email saying that they were staying at Sparkes Marina in Chichester (the original first night stopping off point for the Meridian Cruise) and intended to make for Brighton the following day. *Tarim's* journey started with a double-reefed mainsail. With the weather closing in they experienced even more difficulty with confused seas reflecting off the harbour walls than did *Gina* the previous day. Shortly after *Tarim* arrived the weather deteriorated markedly.

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019** –The crews of *Tarim* and *Gina* enjoyed a drink in the Brighton Marina Yacht Club followed by food at the local Wetherspoon's. It was Ivan's and Denise's first visit to the marina and to Brighton and they intended to take a bus into town on the Bank Holiday Monday. Denise later wrote that they returned home on the Tuesday.

**Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2019** –*Gina* took advantage of a weather window in the morning of the Bank Holiday to make the short trip east to Newhaven and layover until the next batch of weather passed over.



1 - *Gina* in Newhaven

I was glad to see that the Rampion Wind Farm support vessels had moved to their permanent home on the other side of the harbour. Last year there was a whopping great 'Windcat' in the berth occupied by *Gina*. Not only that, but for years 'Windcats' have blocked the fuel berth and diesel was available only in containers. On the plus side, you supplied the containers; marina staff filled and returned them. Repeating the process until your tanks were full. The fuel berth is now clear but there is not a great deal of depth at that end of the harbour at low tide so portage may still be an option.

A little deeper into the harbour behind the Lifeboat berth is the Newhaven Wholesale Fish Market. I didn't walk that way last year but passed a couple of years ago. Imagine my surprise when I revisited my old route to the town and noticed that a meat market had opened up in the building. I bought a couple of generously sized rump steaks at a very reasonable price. My crew not being on top form declined the offer of a steak; so I popped one under the grill for lunch and so enjoyed it that I grilled the other one for breakfast :-)

There is an old-fashioned, well-stocked independent chandlery next to the harbour. I took the opportunity to replace *Gina's* two domestic batteries with a pair of deep cycling 85 amp hour units. The chandlery gave a 10% discount, delivered the batteries to my boat and carried the old batteries away for recycling.

Well worth a visit is The Hope, the pub overlooking the harbour. We always make time for a visit when in Newhaven Marina. The beer and food never disappoint.

*Gina* stayed two nights at Newhaven.

**Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2019** –To catch the tide around Beachy Head, the intention was to set sail once the scheduled DFDS ferry had reached its berth at 0500. The ferry arrived early at a few minutes past 0400. I thought I'd take advantage of the noise of the ferry berthing to start *Gina's* engine. *Gina's* engine failed to start with a series of clicks from the

starter motor solenoid. I dropped into fault finding mode; the battery was fully charged; there was conductive earth connection. It turned out that the starter motor had vibrated loose. I tightened up the motor immediately and resolved to add a lock nut to prevent a future reoccurrence.

By 0600 we were ready to leave the berth and called port control for permission to leave the harbour.

We left Newhaven harbour into a grey morning and slight sea. We cruised past the magnificence of the Seven Sisters and rounded Beachy Head. There then followed the approach through Eastbourne Bay to Sovereign Harbour. The marina is well to the east of the town but unmistakable from a distance as a clump of high rise buildings.

It was still early when I rang the lock operator to ask for a berth. The lock operator works alone at night and is responsible for running the two inbound/outbound locks and the two bridges in the harbour.

A sizable fishing fleet operates at all hours of the day and night. Many (but not all) fishing vessels are in the north and south harbours behind said bridges. When leaving or entering the harbour, fishing vessels like to synchronise their bridge with whichever lock is operating outbound or inbound for that cycle. The lock operator is also responsible for topping up the water level in the harbour; an operation that causes some turbulence and needs a VHF commentary during execution. So it was unsurprising that operator took a while to answer the phone.

I radioed again on the approach to the harbour and was given permission and the green lights to enter the port-hand lock. I was requested to stand-by when the lock opened into the marina. The operator was busy opening the bridge to the north harbour. After a few minutes he came down to the lock and pointed out our allocated berth. Once we'd taken our pontoon, I'd changed into mufti and went up to the marina office it was well past 0800, the day staff had arrived and

the control centre with its double bank of C.C.T.V. monitors was a hive of activity.

Once we'd rigged the cockpit cover, broken out the mains electrical kit and hooked up the electricity, the next order of business was that lock-nut on the starter motor.

**Friday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2019** –We departed Eastbourne on the 0900 lockout, bound for Dover. The passage was unremarkable except that the foot of the genoa U.V. strip partially detached resulting in a strip of blue fabric fluttering away in the breeze.

Dungeness was kind, as too was the sea state on the long approach to Dover. The harbour entrance was lumpy as is almost inevitable for small craft.

Dover Port Control has changed its procedure since we visited last year. You contact them as usual at 2 miles distant to ask for permission to use your chosen entrance. Port Control responds by asking you to continue closing with your chosen entrance and to call again at 200 metres out. You check the entrance lights and make the call.

The old routine changes at this point. Port control gives you permission to enter the port itself but asks you to radio again before entering the Wick Channel. This was not in my pilot book but I reasoned it must have something to do with the approach to the marina. This channel used to be monitored by the marina but now Dover Port Control has reasserted its authority.

I can't remember noticing the channel being light controlled on previous visits but I certainly paid attention on this visit. We arrived at 1400 and were directed into the Granville Dock by the marina berthing master.

Dover has changed considerably. There's a new retail park next to the town centre and a new (not quite open yet) all-tide lock into the Wellington Dock as part of a massive port redevelopment. The change in the space of less than 12 months, since Gina was last here, is impressive. I can't say the marina ablutions have kept pace; but neither have the prices :-)

The genoa U.V. strip was repaired using blue 'Duck Tape' which I keep on board on the off-chance that it might prove useful.

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2019** –We left Dover harbour as soon as the Granville Dock opened at 0730. I shaped a course above the voluntary ferry cross-Channel route, to leave open the option of making direct for Gravelines, thereby avoiding a stopover in Calais.



## 2 - AIS Track Across the English Channel

There would be an east- going tide but could I make it between the breakwaters and up the tidal 3 kilometre canalised section of the River Aa to Gravelines marina before I ran out of water?

The situation is not as dramatic as it sounds. At a push, I could anchor off the shore but the traffic up and down the Dunkirk approach channel generates considerable wash which would make for an uncomfortable between-tide stopover. A few cables up the canal there is a chance of a berth at either Petite-Port-Phillipe or (in extremis) on the opposite bank of the river at Grande-Port-Phillipe.

The river takes a sharp turn to starboard on the approach to the gated marina. On the nearside gate there is a large L.E.D. sign which shows the depth of water. There is also a waiting pontoon in front of the gates which is kept clear for visitors.

As it turns out, we reached the marina with half an hour to spare and the harbourmaster was waiting on the visitor pontoon to take our lines.

The approach to the river entrance from seaward is dominated by tall industrial

structures on the Dunkirk side of the river. On closing the entrance, sight of the Nuclear Power Station disappears. Indeed, Petit-Port-Phillipe is a beach resort with a broad expanse of sand and nothing spoiling the view.

On one side of the river is the iconic disused lighthouse of Petite-Port-Phillipe. On the other side of the river is a cross, which I happen to know sits on top of a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The Grande-Port-Phillipe side of the river is a complete contrast; a very traditional community with its roots in the now defunct fishing industry. We stayed in a small B&B here a few years ago; thinking it made an interesting base for day trips to Dunkirk, Nieuwpoort and Bruges.



3- Old Lighthouse at Petite-Fort-Phillipe

This trip, we stayed three nights in Gravelines. The weather picked up for a while, reaching 28 degrees centigrade (the tidal gauge alternates its display of depth of water in the marina with ambient temperature). The seal in the cover picture, basking just outside the harbour, seemed only mildly interested when I approached.

The town itself is moated and walled. On a previous visit I'd resolved to find the, reputedly, almost Trompe l'oeil painting of a house on the gable end of a house and the moorings of the electric boats used by tourists to circumnavigate the town. Both of which ambitions were achieved together with a walk down the river to Petite-Fort-Phillipe.



4 - Nothing is as it seems

**Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> June 2019** –We departed Gravelines around noon as soon as there was sufficient water to leave the marina. The weather was on the turn and thundery rain was forecast mostly on the French side of the Channel.

On the crossing, the tide was setting Gina to the east but we managed to crab across until a thunderstorm hit us mid-Channel. I had difficulty rolling in the genoa in the squall. The flogging further damaged the U.V. strip.

There was a bolt of lightning about 5 miles away. Dover Coastguard reported visibility at 100 metres which seemed like an optimistic estimate the time. We popped our phones in the oven and the crew went below.

Suddenly, there was a lightning strike just behind the boat. I fancied I heard a sizzle but it may have been my subsequent imagination. Almost instantaneously, there was an almighty clap of thunder. So loud that I wondered why my ears weren't ringing :-)

The weather gradually started to improve until two miles off the eastern entrance to Dover there was a flat glassy calm.

We called Dover Port Control who acknowledged our intention to use the western entrance and noted she had us on her radar. As we closed the entrance the lights were against us. Port Control advised that a ferry would leave soon and we should stand-by for a few minutes.

The tide was setting quickly across the entrance when entry permission was given, so Gina had to throttle up to clear the breakwater.

Permission was granted for the Wick Channel and we contacted Dover Marina. The gates were shut to the Granville Dock so we were directed to the all-tide marina basin.

**Wednesday 5th June 2019** –We planned to leave for Newhaven at 1000. I had to remake an electrical connection to the oil gauge so we were delayed for half an hour or so. We left harbour into a moderate sea with wind over tide. That was a bouncy ride but the tide was due to turn in a couple of hours and before we reached Dungeness, the sea state gradually became slight.

The Lydd firing range patrol boat set me on a course of 230 degrees which I modified to take Gina further south when I heard the big guns firing :-)

Turns out I'd positioned myself parallel to the westbound shipping lane. When abreast the CS2 Channel buoy, I finally realised it would be dark before I could pass Beachy Head and make Newhaven; so moved inshore. Even so, the light was fading when I locked into Sovereign Harbour.

We intended to stay for a couple of days and make repairs to the genoa U.V. strip. In the end we stayed for four days while Storm Miguel passed over.

**Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019** –We locked out of Sovereign Harbour at 0700. There followed a bouncy ride around Beachy Head but the sea state calmed down as we passed the Seven Sisters. We made Newhaven as the 0900 DFDS ferry was leaving its berth.

Had I intended to drop into Brighton to break the journey home, I would have been disappointed. Brighton Marina is part-tide only. Vessels with a draught in excess of one metre cannot enter or leave the marina for two hours either side of low water.

There would be a fair tide through the Looe Channel around mid-afternoon; the weather was sunny and the sea state calm to slight with sufficient wind for the newly-repaired genoa to fill. There was no reason not to run the 67 nautical miles to East Cowes.

We settled into the passage. As we approached Littlehampton, I slowed the boat down. At the present rate we would enter the Looe Channel too early. I mentioned to the crew that I'd like to take the opportunity to go off watch for half an hour and doze in the cockpit. No sooner had I settled down than the crew let out an excited shout. She'd spotted a pair of dolphins frolicking and checking out the boat. They moved off after a minute or so but put paid to any thoughts of a nap :-)

We reached our home berth at 1900 on June 9th 2019.

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