

Carlotta
Sails/motors to
The Festival at Paimpol Chant de Marin
1st to 4th August 2019
Lessons Learnt
By
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In a hectic summer that saw the birth of our grandson at the end of May, I decided to take a week off to visit Paimpol with Carlotta, my Heard 28. That was the first mistake. First lesson: it takes more than a week to get to Paimpol and back safely in unhurried steps. Paimpol is only about 60nm south of Guernsey, one day's sail. Beaucette Marina on Guernsey is about 90nm from the Needles Channel. That is about eighteen hours sailing and involves an overnight passage if one is to avoid arriving at the rocks surrounding Guernsey in the dark. My preferred passage plan especially if short-handed is to head for Cherbourg first.

Monday 29th July was sunny and there was fine southerly breeze. We had a fast beam reach down to Yarmouth where I left Graham (Hon. first mate) to make his way back to Cowes. I then motored over to Lymington to pick up Barbara. The plan was to make the Channel crossing on Tuesday, to Cherbourg, in daylight. A storm intervened and I spent Tuesday and most of Wednesday kicking my heels in Lymington while the crew wisely stayed at home. By Wednesday night we were already two days behind schedule which meant that we were not going to be able to present ourselves at the lock in Paimpol at 18.45 on Thursday as requested by the festival organisers. So, hey ho, we set off on Wednesday night, and got into the Channel by the north passage to avoid rough seas off the Needles.

We had a lovely sail for about two hours until the wind died. The Needles light and the Jurassic Coast seemed reluctant to let us go. We motored and we motored until 16 hours later, sometime after midday, we arrived outside Beaucette Marina and took up a buoy. We called up the harbour master and were told to await the call to let us know there was enough water over the sill, to allow us to enter. To my surprise the place was nearly full and we were directed to a finger berth. Yachts in the region of 55' to 75' seemed to have taken over the visitors' berths.

Showers, a drink in the welcoming bar/restaurant, a meal on board and early to bed for a crack of dawn start next morning.



Dawn. Beaucette Marina. Photo by PHR.

We motored out and took the NW passage. And we motored and we motored in a flat calm, for twelve hours. As we approached the coast a thick fog enveloped Carlotta. We slowed, hoisted the radar reflector and listened. We sounded the horn (one long and two short) and listened again.

Continuing like this for about an hour, we found ourselves off the Chanel de la Jument when the fog lifted. If there was any doubt that we were in the right place it was quickly dispelled by a large pilot cutter making her way slowly towards Paimpol under full sail. We followed along at a respectful distance as they sailed through the lock, which was on free flow. As she rounded up we nipped under her stern and started the hopeless search for our allocated berth. By a stroke of luck we found ourselves alongside John Crellin's Theta and immediately rafted to her. John and first mate Charles welcomed us and we quickly caught up with other Solent Gaffers: East Breeze and Witch Hazel. I contacted the harbour master and was told to stay put. As we were a day late and the harbour was full to bursting there was no easy way to warp ourselves into our official berth alongside Marie Ferdinand H23.



Marie Ferdinand. Photo by PHR.

The festival was in full swing. The larger boats were hosting shanty bands and random people were playing their instrument where ever they could find space. It was great to feel part of it all.



Photo by PHR

The next morning, I visited the local boulangerie where it transpired the croissants were sold out; we had to make do with pain au chocolat (it's a hard life). Next I visited the tent to collect our wrist bands and a box containing an assortment of fishy pastes and a huge bottle of beer and another of Bolée Cidre.



Local "bolée" ready to drink
Photo by Barbara Runnalls.

We visited old friends on their gaffers and made new ones. Food stalls were doing brisk business; the diners were seated at long tables on the quay. People thronged around the boats and went aboard some of the larger ones who kept their sails hoisted and sheeted home night and day.



Photo by PHR

Far too soon it was time to set sail for home and we were first into the lock. All went well until the lock gates opened and we were unable to hold onto the rope that dangled down the wall. Lesson: moor up properly in the lock. I engaged forward gear and got us back into line and off we went behind a classic Breton two master. Then we motored all the way to St Helier to take advantage of the fuel berth which is accessible at all states of the tide and at any time of day as payment is by automated card machine (common in France but rare in the UK, I think). The berthing master invited us to raft up on the waiting pontoon. We were about six boats out and no one had shore lies so we were soon crunching bows with another boat. We decided to motor away to St Peter's Port. There was too much swell to anchor in St Aubin Bay or St Brelade Bay so: another six hours motoring; still not enough wind to sail! We arrived at 02.00hrs and had the waiting pontoon outside the inner harbour to ourselves. We fell into our bunks after a scratch meal of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon.

By 07.30 the harbour master's assistant, a friendly youngster, had relieved us of £26 for the privilege of staying five and a half hours on a pontoon which was covered in bird mess and had no water or electricity. We set off up the Little Russel with the current and were soon motor-sailing at speed up the Alderney Race, accompanied by other yachts heading for Cherbourg. We approached Bray Harbour but felt it was far too early to stop so setting a course for the Needles, we carried on motor-sailing. Evening came on and the Purbeck Hills came in sight. A strong wind warning was broadcast over VHF. We were at last able to stop the motor and sail on a broad reach towards the land. We took it in turns to get some rest; two hours on the helm and two down below. The autopilot did not function out at sea, especially as the wind was freshening. The tide carried us down to St Alban's Head before turning to the East and it became apparent that we would be running dead before the wind up the Needles Channel, and would have to gybe. We rounded up and dropped the main and continued under jib and staysail. The wind continued to get up and the sea state was at least moderate; we decided to take the North Passage rather than risk the Bridge and the Needles Channel. We bowled along at increasing speed towards the starboard-hand mark: North Head. The bright lights of two anchored merchantmen made it difficult to spot at times and we seemed to take a long time getting there but at last we turned towards the North East Shingles cardinal mark and entered the Hurst Narrows. It was rough. A large wave entered the cockpit, to our surprise and alarm.

"First wave fills the cockpit; second wave: down she goes," as Sam Heard has been known to say.

However there was no second wave and the cockpit drains took care of any water as we popped out into the smooth waters of the Solent and raced past Sconce. It was now midnight and the lights of Yarmouth made it difficult to identify navigation marks, but eventually we found the mooring buoys and took one. We felt it was unwise to try anchoring in the lee of Hurst with a strong wind warning in force. A hasty meal of left over Parma ham, apples and cheese and we fell exhausted into our bunks.

The next morning the harbour master greeted me as I flaked the main which we had left in a bit of a mess in the lazy-jacks. After a merry conversation commending our seaman like decision to take up one of his buoys rather than anchor, he relieved us of £17.50. A phone call to the harbour master in Lymington was rewarded with the information that we were welcome to use to harbour master's pontoon beyond the Dan Bran pontoon (for free) if we were going to just touch and go. It was low water and we were pursued by a ferry as we motored up the river, nearly getting stuck in the mud at the edge of the channel, even though we were inside the green posts. Barbara returned home and I motored back down the middle of the channel. Setting jib and staysail we rolled with the tide and down-wind to Cowes at an impressive six knots. I was almost home in time for lunch.

THE END

Lessons:

1. One week was far too short a time. We should have allowed four weeks and enjoyed exploring the rivers leading up to Treguier and Lezardrieux, for example.
2. Apart from the Channel crossing 30nm/day is a good day's sail for a crew of two.
3. Avoid the Channel Islands in August and especially the popular ports like St Peter's and St Helier if at all possible. Beaucette on Guernsey was welcoming and the fuel berth can be accessed at any state of the tide. However it does require an attendant and this is generally on a 9-5 basis. Bicycles are for hire and the restaurant/bar is excellent.
4. Moor up properly in the lock to avoid being washed away when the lock gates open.
5. We should anchor more. (Resolution: find some good, safe anchorages for the next trip.)
6. Be more like a proper Old Gaffer and learn to wait for the wind and tide to take us to our destination. By allowing plenty of time we could have avoided long days motoring.