

Jon and Marie-Do Davies. Cornish Shrimper 402 'Flete Lady'

Our International Shrimpers' Week 2012

Part One....The Background

In the autumn of 2011 we were looking for a boat as a retirement project but hadn't come to a decision until, walking along the quay in Totnes one sunny afternoon, my wife Marie-Do pointed out a pretty little sailing boat moored in the river that she liked the look of. It was rather small and the single porthole didn't promise much in the way of cabin space, but it was different and looked elegant on the water. We discovered that it was a 'Cornish Shrimper' a boat with an excellent reputation for build quality and sailing. It was also just small enough to trail behind our car, and park at home on the drive for the winter. The downside was the asking price for such a compact boat; in good condition they were about twice the price of other boats of a comparable size. I decided to find a neglected Shrimper at a realistic price and work on it all winter to bring it back to its full glory. However I also knew that to remain motivated, I would need to set myself a target for the following summer. Perhaps we could plan a short cruise somewhere.

Everything fell into place far more easily than expected. Almost immediately we found a Shrimper for sale that matched our requirements within a few hundred yards of the original boat we had seen moored in the river. 'Flete Lady' was the dark blue and cream colour scheme my wife liked and was basically sound but, having no trailer, had been left forlorn on blocks in the boatyard for two seasons. The boat was rather neglected but undamaged. The outboard had been replaced but was old and didn't fit in the well properly, fouling the tiller and, although the hull had been polished for the sale, everything else was dirty and mildewed, especially inside the cabin. However there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the Shrimper and it represented an ideal project. Eventually a realistic price was agreed and 'Flete Lady' was ours. All that remained was to decide what, during the cold and dismal winter months, we could dream about doing with our boat the following summer once it was restored.

We joined The Shrimper Owners' Association and I discovered the website with its accounts of passages and cruises made by Shrimper owners, together with descriptions of the fun had during 'Shrimper weeks'. I read with interest that the next International Shrimpers' week would be held at Mylor in Cornwall. Cruising the beautiful Fal estuary in a warm and sunny June together with dozens of other similar boats sounded like an ideal way to discover the pleasures of owning a Shrimper, and Falmouth is within easy reach of south Devon. We decided that this would be our next summer's holiday and we now had something to aim for during the winter months: International Shrimpers' Week 2012.

A new trailer was bought and we were able to take the boat home where it was parked on our drive ready for a complete strip down and refurbishment of the interior. Dreams of an exciting Shrimpers' Week were however not forgotten, and one sunny day during the first week in February we decided to have a day out in Mylor to savour the delights of the Fal estuary and anticipate our boating holiday in June.



Flete Lady for sale dwarfed by the other boats



Winter Mylor pontoon with hardly a boat in sight

We were not disappointed. On a cloudless and mild early spring day with hardly a breath of wind the quiet marina looked idyllic. The Cornish scenery was beautiful with St Mawes appearing enchanting across the hazy estuary. Everyone we spoke to was welcoming and helpful, especially once we mentioned that we were planning to come to Shrimpers' week the following June. The chandlers on the quayside sold us a local chart at a discount price and the harbour master gave us a guided tour of the pontoons where we would be berthed. We then had a long walk along the beach. After a charming day out in the spring sunshine we headed back home to further long hours of boat refurbishment, but with the near certainty that our summer holiday was going to be a week of sun-blessed delight in a wonderful setting!

Work progressed well with the dry and often warm spring weather making things easier. I was also greatly helped by lots of advice from the ever-patient Keith Thatcher. At every step however our week in Mylor was taken into consideration: the weather in mid June could possibly be warm and humid in the evenings, so cabin ventilation needed to be taken seriously, and the midsummer sun could easily be quite fierce so we would certainly need some form of shade. A small awning that fitted over the boom was purchased to protect us when eating meals in the cockpit. We also anticipated long summer evenings sitting outside and bought a light that could be hung below the boom. Would it be possible to have barbecues on the pontoon? We weren't sure but decided to pack a gas barbecue just in case. The cabin did look rather small but in the expected fine weather we probably wouldn't be spending much time in there anyway.

After many hours refurbishing the exterior, changing the outboard block to accept a new Tohatsu 5hp, rebuilding the front cabin bulkhead area to give more storage space, installing a battery to give lighting with charging for a mobile phone and recovering the bunk cushions in dark blue to match the hull colour, the great day of the launch in Totnes arrived on May 18th. I handled 'Flete Lady' for the first time as I put it onto its mooring on the Dart, very close to where we had originally considered getting a Shrimper the previous Autumn. We were very pleased with the boat and particularly impressed with the stability although I soon discovered that accurate steering while reversing was not to be undertaken

lightly. We were relieved to find that the little cabin while 'cosy' proved to be more comfortable than expected and sleeping aboard for an entire Shrimpers' Week looked quite possible.

The last week in May gave us some beautiful weather and we spent a lot of time motoring on the Dart. Although I had put on the sails, I had no chance to use them in the confines of the twisting river and decided that actually sailing a Shrimper could wait until we got into the Fal estuary. One magical night was spent under the stars on a swinging mooring just off the Ferryboat Inn at Dittisham. If this was what Mylor was going to be like we couldn't wait!

From the beginning of June a lot of time was spent preparing for 'The week' starting on the 15th. A number of easily prepared meals were bought and carefully stored below as were bottles of wine, spare gas canisters, sleeping bags, books to read etc. We packed a lot of summer clothes, swimming things, caps, sunglasses and sun cream. Smiling, we also included a couple of lightweight raincoats 'just in case'. One final detail remained if we were to be considered as genuine Shrimper sailors; we ordered two fleeces embroidered with the name of our boat. 'Flete Lady' was finally ready for Shrimpers' Week!

Part Two... The Week

Friday

The 15th June arrived and we prepared to set off from Totnes. Surprisingly for mid June the weather forecast later was for high winds and squally showers, but that would probably have blown through by the time we arrived, the weather is a lot better in Cornwall isn't it? Full of optimism we set out at about 10am. I had only towed the boat a short distance previously and now fully fitted out it felt heavier. After 50 yards we slowly went over a speed hump and there was a worrying 'crump' from behind which shook the car. I got out half expecting to find the Shrimper lying on the road but could see absolutely nothing wrong; all the straps were tight and everything was still in place. From then on I ignored all the odd noises from the trailer and towing the boat was no problem.



Departure from Totnes. The weather is OK... for the moment

We were however a little disconcerted by the weather: there were strong gusts and warnings of danger to vehicles from high winds on the Tamar bridge, we were obliged to pull in to the roadside during one storm as the rain was so heavy the wipers couldn't cope, and then in the lane to Mylor Bridge we had to wait while a gang of workmen removed an uprooted tree that had blocked the road. The journey took a lot longer than expected but, eventually at a grey and windswept Mylor where the torrential rain had now subsided to mere drizzle, we finally turned into the harbour road and were directed to a motor caravan. There we received a warm welcome from the ever-helpful Mark Osborne who gave us a pack which, he assured us, contained everything we needed for a successful Shrimpers' week. We were impressed by the very detailed and well illustrated booklet and also the excellent organisation that was to be a feature of the whole week.

On to the boatyard and, since buying the boat we had hardly seen any other Shrimpers, now there were dozens. We spotted Keith Thatcher, the only Shrimper owner I had ever met before and he and his wife Jackie made us very welcome. However few boats had been rigged and no-one seemed in any hurry to get onto the water. Under the threatening black clouds, the strong gusting wind howling in the trees and humming through the rigging of countless yachts sounded quite threatening and it soon became obvious that there would be no boating today. Much of the rest of the afternoon was spent, as was to become a feature of the rest of the week, talking about boats, and after months of working in isolation this was very satisfying. That evening cooking looked difficult under the circumstances so we went to the Lemon Tree pub in Mylor Bridge for fish and chips, meeting yet more Shrimper owners. Our first night was indeed spent aboard the boat, but we hadn't anticipated the boat being still on its trailer. Rather than being lulled asleep by the patter of wavelets on the hull, we had the gale force wind shaking us and roaring through the branches above.

Saturday

Day came, it was still raining and the little harbour continued windswept so, as the tide wouldn't be high enough for launching until later, we walked around Falmouth town centre where the sea shanty festival was in full swing. On our return the wind had dropped and the rain reduced to light drizzle although it was still very dull. There was a steady stream of Shrimpers coming down the narrow lane and we were beginning to see and appreciate the camaraderie amongst Shrimper owners as the new arrivals were recognised and warmly welcomed by friends made at previous meetings. One boat we were particularly pleased to see arrive was 'Bluebell' the Shrimper we had originally admired on the Dart in Totnes. Bluebell's crew, who we hadn't previously met, turned out to be two jovial characters who appeared ready to enjoy every minute of their time at Mylor.

I was however surprised to see something that would become rather a feature of the week; that a fair proportion of owners experienced problems with trailers, either during the journey or on the slipway. The local trailer dealers must have done a roaring trade in new suspension units, wheel bearings, tyres, jockey wheels and the replacement of various damaged and rusty trailer components. A couple of boats even arrived on the back of recovery trucks.

Once our boat was rigged (Keith kindly lent us his patent 'mast raiser') we drove to the slipway which was now surrounded by dozens of other owners, and when it was time to put our boat in the water we were given plenty of assistance and advice (some of which was conflicting!) However, soon we were safely on our pontoon berth and being helped to attach the sails. It was at this stage that it again began to rain heavily and our 'sun' awning was hastily brought out to give some protection from the downpour. Although later a rather watery blue sky did finally make an appearance it was too late for any sailing that evening as we had to attend the briefing session in the Restronguet sailing club. It was standing room only for most people as about 75 skippers and their crews crammed into the small building where we were introduced to the various organisers and given a briefing on the week's activities. As there were so many participants this year, and there was no question of the weather being good enough to sit outside, we were divided into two sittings for the evening meal at the Castaways restaurant. We found ourselves dining with some complete strangers. However, in what over the course of the week we came to appreciate was typically Shrimpers' fashion, we quickly discovered them to be charming companions and we all spent a very convivial evening, finishing up in the Mylor yacht club lounge.

Sunday

The day dawned dry and brighter but still quite breezy. With the outboard on we followed everyone out of the harbour keeping a careful eye on what they did. Most boats immediately reefed and we did the same. I was relieved to discover that a Shrimper is very well mannered under sail and we had a super reach down to the mouth of the estuary but decided against the run up to Porthcatho in the open sea with its subsequent beat back into the waves, and just sailed around getting to know the boat. Many other Shrimpers however went haring past us and then out to sea and some distance up the coast and back.

Later that afternoon, in spite of the event being described as for 'visiting friends only', we were encouraged to sail across the estuary to visit the hidden tiny inlet at Lower Tregorland and call in for tea with Claud and Sheila Lanyon. How glad we are that we did. Following hand signals from a carefully positioned shore party, we crept into the tiny pool and anchored below the church of St Just before rowing ashore to have a delicious cream tea in the most idyllic garden imaginable. What a privilege! The whole event was typical of the sort of special experiences that owning a Shrimper brings. Still shaking heads in disbelief at the magical setting, all too soon we had to leave as the tide was dropping. Dinner was back to reality and consisted of tinned curry on our one burner stove. We ate in the cabin to try to keep warm on a decidedly chilly evening and went to bed early.



The Black Rock buoy with St Mawes



St Just Church seen from the beautiful garden

Monday

At last the June weather that we had dreamed about the previous winter appeared to have arrived. I got up early in the bright sunshine and wandered down the pontoon quietly greeting the few Shrimper sailors who had emerged. Everyone was cheerful, the day was full of promise; at last the settled weather had arrived! I was however a little dismayed when several skippers announced that, as the forecast for Thursday was so bad with heavy rain and storms expected, they would be sailing up the Helford River today instead while the weather was suitable. Looking at the blue sky above, the forecast sounded very pessimistic and we had no intention of panicking and losing the chance to visit St Mawes. No doubt by Thursday the forecast would be much better anyway. After breakfast we made a leisurely start and in the company of several boats sailed over the sparkling estuary to St Mawes harbour where we were met by Mark who showed us where to anchor and then ferried us ashore in his dory



Early morning at Mylor . Everyone still asleep



Treasure hunt near St Mawes Castle

The treasure hunt was fun and, in the company of a number of other Shrimpers, enabled us to spend several delightful hours in the warm sunshine discovering the town. The best however was yet to come; we were almost the last boat to leave to harbour and followed Mark up the river to Freshwater boatyard. The occasion was like many during the week where we blindly followed everyone else, not really knowing what to expect. We were not disappointed. On approaching the pontoons in the bright evening sunshine we were impressed to discover about 30 shrimpers rafted up, and the sights and sounds of a big get-together in progress.



Freshwater



A very pleasant evening

A Scottish piper greeted us as we went ashore to collect our fish and chips from the specially commissioned van. It was then back to the boats for an impromptu dinner party where the drinks flowed as freely as the sailing anecdotes. Surrounded by a mass of excellent-humoured Shrimper sailors we had a charming evening before motoring in the company of twenty other boats back across the estuary into the sunset.

Tuesday

Another sparkling early morning on the pontoon before a leisurely start up river in the company of Robin and Gillie Whittle and John Montgomery and Maggie. Once again we were not too sure where we were heading but someone had mentioned the Pandora's Inn for lunch and this sounded good. In perfect gentle sailing conditions we followed the other boats up the river to the picturesque pub in Restronguet Creek. What a beautiful place! In a scene reminiscent of 'Swallows and Amazons' we gently beached the boats, laid out our anchors on the foreshore and walked across the shingle and seaweed to the pub for drinks.



On the beach in front of the Pandora's Inn

Later we anchored in the river and the ladies were able to sunbathe. It was then a very gentle sail aided by the tide up the river, past the huge ferry filling the whole valley outside the Smugglers' Inn and on to the Ruan pontoon. There we were informed that although most people were mooring up for the evening, a number of intrepid souls had decided to carry on up river all the way to Truro, although time was now very tight. As we had done for most of the week, we made an ad-hoc decision to follow them. Following the increasingly narrow channel we motored on and on as the scenery changed from wooded banks to industrial buildings. The last part steering between sticks poking up out of the muddy water really didn't look navigable and we were about to turn round when we met Andy Mullins coming back down who assured us there was still lots of water and we had plenty of time. We crept up around the last bend to see three boats still moored outside Tesco's. Pleased that we had reached such a difficult goal and feeling like sailors in a foreign port we made a quick dash into the store for provisions and then we were off before we got marooned, although apparently things were not quite as tight as we had thought.



Truro



Luckily the ferry was securely anchored

Back down river to the pontoons where we were met by the stirring sight of about 40 Shrimpers moored in the middle of the river. Once rafted up we spent a convivial evening visiting other boats and admiring the meals that some very enterprising cooks had produced in the confines of the extremely limited Shrimper galley. There might have been some stretching of the rules, but the results were nevertheless amazing and the judges had a very difficult job. The evening was very pleasant although our own supper of tinned chilli was just a little less exciting than some of the other meals we had seen. As we were now close to the longest day, sunset on the river was very late and most people went happily to bed before it got dark. It had been a perfect day!



The cooking competition

Wednesday

We awoke to a cloudy sky. Disappointingly, after yesterday's sunshine, rain was forecast for the afternoon. We motored down river back to the wide stretch off Mylor where we had been told everyone was expected to participate in the racing. Two morning races were organised, the even numbers in one and the odds in the other starting ten minutes later. In spite of the excellent race organisation there was a certain lack of discipline or basic understanding of the procedures from a few boats and the first start was a little encumbered by some Shrimpers from the second group still sailing close to the line within about a minute of the first boats' start. Despite that and someone managing to leave their radio on 'transmit' throughout the whole racing leaving us with the clear throb of a Yanmar diesel rather than the race officer's instructions, the whole event was quite enjoyable even if we did finish well down the fleet and get overtaken by a couple of extremely fast boats from the second group who had started 10 minutes after us. (I did later learn that some really keen people had completely emptied their boats and removed their engines from the well in order to gain speed). It was then back to Mylor for lunch before the fastest boats from the morning's racing returned to compete for a trophy in the afternoon. We had intended going for a sail but the threatened heavy rain turned up exactly as forecast and the rest of the day was spent quite convivially chatting and doing puzzles in the harbour side cafe. We weren't too concerned as we still had the BBQ at the smugglers' cottage to look forward to.

The weather that evening was awful and there was no question of taking the boat back upriver so we were very pleased to be offered a lift up to the cafe. In spite of it being almost the shortest night of the year the evening was more reminiscent of bonfire night. In driving rain from the leaden skies and in the semi-darkness under the overhanging trees cars drove cautiously using their headlights. With the heater on we headed through what must have been beautiful countryside and then across on the picturesque King Harry ferry, but appreciated little of it. Could this really be the mid June we had dreamed of?

Luckily the Shrimper owners' magic worked again and once packed inside the little cafe we had a very pleasant evening meeting more new friends including a couple from Germany. I was surprised to see that some hardy crews had even brought their boats up to the cafe. Anyway there was always more sailing tomorrow ...

Thursday

Thursday dawned blustery and cold although initially dry. The drizzle started after breakfast and it came as no surprise that the planned trip to the Helford River would not be possible. We sat in the cafe hoping the weather would improve until it was glumly announced that the bad weather was set to continue all of Thursday, all of Friday and into Saturday. Some people immediately said that they would be taking their boats out that afternoon. We decided to do the same.

The slipway was very congested as locals had also turned up to launch their boats. We had to wait in a long queue as it seemed that every Shrimper ahead of us discovered a problem. Rusty jockey wheels needed hammering, launching trolleys with broken wheels had to be painfully dragged on to their trailers, boats got jammed sideways and had to be pushed back into the water several times, and a centreplate would not fully lift, stopping the boat seating onto its rollers. All this to the accompaniment of some choice language, rattling rusty winches and the smell of burning clutches. However the spirit of Shrimper week still prevailed, everyone remained cheerful, even those who had fallen into the water, and there was no shortage of willing helpers (luckily as in a number of cases brute force was needed as a last resort). A couple of hours passed and, just as I thought the tide had dropped too far, it was our turn and with a lot of help, as the trailer was barely submerged, we managed to winch the boat onto its rollers. As soon as our boat was on its trailer the rain started again in earnest.

Later that day, dripping wet and clad in pullovers, jackets raincoats and boots we rather despondently wandered around the harbour. I was just calculating how many gas cartridges it would take to warm up our cabin for the evening, or whether we would get asphyxiated first, when we were approached by John Montgomery and Maggie; 'We've got a holiday cottage nearby with plenty of spare room. Would you like to spend the night there with us?' Good manners made us hesitate all of 3 seconds before saying that we would accept with pleasure. We were pleased to hear that Keith and Jackie would also be there. Now that our enjoyment was no longer weather-dependant, that evening we had a great time discovering Porthleven and eating in a quaint harbour side pub.

Friday

The weather had improved slightly and after a delightful breakfast 'en famille' in the little cottage we went into Falmouth to see the J class yachts, meeting a number of other 'Shrimpers' who were doing the same. It was then back to Mylor to finish preparing our boat for the journey home. In the boatyard quite a good-spirited acceptance of the rather premature end to the sailing week prevailed and I chatted to various owners as they packed up. I also took the time to measure and photograph a number of mods to trailers and boats that I might be able to use. As the day progressed the weather improved and at times I wondered whether our hasty decision to take the boat out had been premature. However by this time we had dropped the mast and were well on the way to packing everything away for the return.



J Class unlikely to be mistaken for a Shrimper



Packing up as the weather improves

Friday evening was the grand final dinner in the Princess Pavilion Falmouth. It was a surprise to find all the people we had met and had grown accustomed to seeing in dirty jeans, lifejackets and anoraks, now dressed in their finest. Some were almost unrecognisable. We enjoyed our glass of Pimms and had a good meal before the speeches and presentations. Everyone agreed that in spite of the weather the week had been a great success. The official part of the evening was concluded by a group singing an interesting song entitled 'You can't make love in a Shrimper'. It was on this note that everyone made for the bar and, chatting with glasses of wine in hand, we enjoyed the unofficial conclusion to Shrimpers' week.

Saturday

The weather had improved considerably by the time we got up for another excellent breakfast with our kind hosts and after a second very good night's sleep in a comfortable bed were feeling rather guilty, for almost as soon as they had made their generous offer, the rain had eased off and it had warmed up.

We headed back to Mylor and in bright sunshine had many goodbyes to say before reluctantly setting off. The main road between Falmouth and Truro was very busy and previously I had decided that I would

not attempt to turn right and cross the Saturday morning holiday traffic at the junction, but would turn left and drive some distance in the wrong direction down the road to a roundabout where I could turn the trailer in safety. Keith, who happened to be following us, arrived at the junction, saw there was nothing coming in both directions and drove straight out. We meanwhile had a 3 mile detour. The journey home was otherwise easy and we got back to a sunny Totnes mid afternoon to find Robin and Gillie in their boat on the river near our mooring and preparing to explore the Dart. They had said they would be coming but it was bizarre to see them again so soon in totally different surroundings. After all, they belonged to Shrimpers week! Robin told us that they had been held up by a police roadblock near the Saltash Bridge. They were stopping all boat trailers and taking them to a weighbridge for checking. Luckily Robin's exotic hydro-pneumatic multi-tubular trailer had passed muster.

All that remained was to put 'Flete Lady' back into her home waters, as our Shrimper's week adventure was sadly over. It hadn't been quite the week we had dreamt of back in January, but in many ways it had turned out to be even better than expected. The organisation had been excellent, the sailing, when possible, had been everything we had hoped for and the company had been charming. We seemed to have something in common with everyone we met, and we very much appreciated the ever-prevalent good humour (especially in adversity) that we encountered throughout. We had also learned a lot about Cornish Shrimpers!

Needless to say, planning for our International Shrimpers' Week 2013 is already in place!