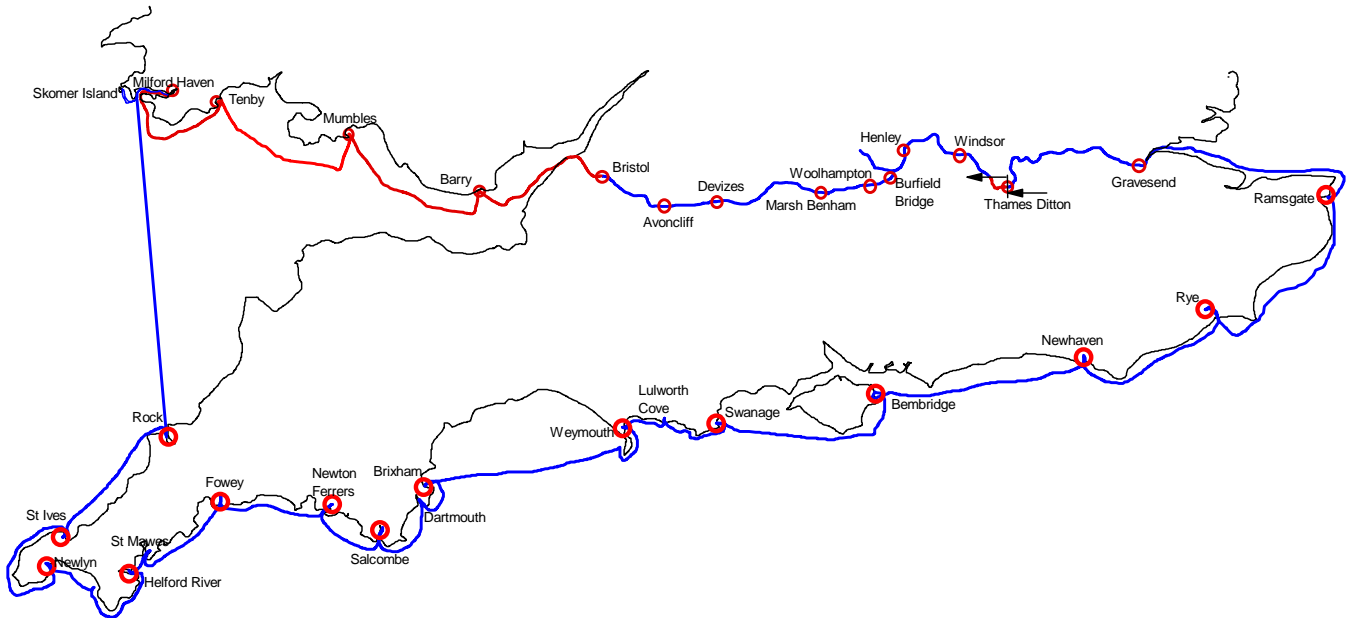


South Circular voyage of Bumble Chugger (124) - 2004 by Robin and Gillie Whittle

The south circular voyage in Bumble Chugger was planned to start and finish at Thames Ditton on the Thames. The first part of the plan was to motor, with the rig down, up the Thames to Reading and then take the Kennet and Avon canal down to Bristol. The second part was to sail from Bristol down the Avon Gorge to the Bristol Channel and then along the south coast of Wales to Milford Haven, where we would meet twenty other Shrimpers for the National Week. This would be the third part. The fourth and final part was to sail from Milford Haven down to Padstow and then on round Land's End, along the south coast to Dover and then up the Thames back to Thames Ditton.



Part 2: Bristol and the South Coast of Wales

We were moored up to a small pontoon in the Underfall Yard surrounded by historical structures and buildings. The yard is registered as an Ancient Monument and owned by the Underfall Restoration Trust. Brunel built it in 1832 as a mechanism by which the harbour could be kept free from silt. Alf, our engineering friend who had brought us here, was in sole charge of the yard with an open ended contract with the Trust. The slipway, to which our pontoon was linked, was known as the 'Patent Slipway'. It was originally built in 1850 by the boat builders Ross and Sage and rebuilt in 1890 by John Ward Girdlestone. It was then restored by the present Trust in 1998 and is now used for checking quite large ships (up to 180 tons and 110 ft. length) for their annual insurance. There were an assorted collection of interesting and historic boats in the yard, some that Alf had bought and others that were being renovated. He employed a small group of dedicated and skilled artisans. Tied up next to us was a two master ex-Norwegian fishing vessel, 'Lista Light'. It was now owned by a lady, a GP from Bath, and she and her family were busy making some major repairs. She was caulking the teak deck, later her son, equipped with a large hammer and chisel, attacked the topside planking on the port side



removing large areas of rotten timber. A wide and thick plank of wood, complete with the bark on, lay alongside on the pontoon ready to be cut to the shape of the growing slot. We later discovered that they intended to set sail for Brest before the end of the week in order to join the grand procession to Douarnenez. They would then sail to the Panama Canal and then on to New Zealand!



Alf showed us around the yard and pointed out a clinker open motor boat that he was renovating. It all looked very organised. We couldn't work out how he ran this and kept his Arup job going! He lent us keys to the yard gates so that we could come and go freely. and then introduced us to his local -the 'Nova Scotia'. It was a welcome relief to get out of the rain and cold and dry out with a drink. Alf left us there effusive with his thanks for the trip - amazing as it had been the wettest day of the journey. We left soon after and visited the Harbour Master to announce our arrival and arrange the details for our departure on Monday.



Sunday brought better weather with some bright sunny spells. The morning was spent raising the mast and rigging Bumble for the next leg of the voyage and making a foray to the shops. We then visited the lock-keeper, who also controlled the swing bridges, to arrange for our departure. It was important for us to reach Avonmouth at the top of the tide so that we could be swept down with the current all the way to Barry the next day. This meant that the main road swing bridge would need to be opened around 2pm. This arranged we joined Alf at the Nova Scotia for a pre-lunch drink. On our way back to the boat we stopped to peer through the window of the old pump-house next to the slipway. The operator came out and invited us in. In fact this 19th century building was the Hydraulic Power System pump house. It now operates the Entrance Lock gates, the Junction Lock gates, the swing bridge to the minor road and the Cumberland Basin sluices. It was first installed in 1871 and in 1887 expanded and moved to this building. It operates at a pressure of 750psi and an 'accumulator' is used to provide a pressurised reservoir. This is a 10ft diameter 20ft high weight which is lifted on a central post 40ft. The system was originally steam powered but in 1907 it was replaced by three electric motor which still operate today. Whilst the huge piston pumps switched on and off automatically our operator friend described how the system worked. Quite astonishing!



On returning to the boat we found a lady preparing to set sail in a clinker dinghy from our pontoon. She spoke to us claiming she was an absolute beginner and asked for advice on how to get started. We helped get her past Bumble and made a few polite suggestions. The wind was light and she looked well in control with the wind behind. The dock opened up into a good sailing area and she had plenty of room to practice her manoeuvres. About an hour later she returned looking quite pleased with herself. It turned out that she was the partner of the millionaire who had befriended Alf and provided a number of classic yachts to be restored by the yard.



All day Sea Scouts had been carrying out rowing races in the dock and reached the finals by late afternoon. They had carried on through some quite heavy showers and the eventual winners were cheered into the finishing line. Alf had arranged to meet us and two other couples from the Bristol Office who we knew quite well for a drink on the benches outside the pub. The weather just hung on until everyone had to move on. We ran back to



the boat in a shower expecting to get cooking for supper, but one of the crew from Lista Light explained that a couple had been looking for us. They had left a message to say that they would be at the Cottage Inn, a few hundred yards up the dock, in the opposite direction from where we had come. We rushed over and were greeted as long lost friends by Jim and Maggie, old 505 friends. We had sent them messages hoping to meet up but had not received any replies (they had got our number wrong). It had been very clever of them to find Bumble in the Underfall Yard. They had had a completely exhausting day, having sailed three races at Lyme Regis, packed up the boat, attended prize-giving and then driven back to Bristol to look for us!! This is a man who was over 70 and had had replacements for both knees!! We had a great re-union over supper and several drinks.

Monday morning brought clear weather with it. We had a leisurely start and walked into the town to get more petrol and a new gas canister for the cabin light. Alf arrived to say good-bye and wish us well for the next part of the trip. The lock Keeper called and said he was ready to let us through the locks. At last we were off motoring around to the first lock and Swing Bridge. These opened as we arrived and we continued into the Cumberland Basin to await the opening of the motorway swing bridge and the main lock (vast) to let us into the river Avon.



It was an impressive cruise down the Avon Gorge under the Clifton Suspension Bridge. The wind was against us and it was a slog motoring all the way to Avonmouth. At last we past under the M5 and could see the Severn Bridge up the Bristol Channel. We passed quite close to the concrete pier marking the entrance of the Avon into the Bristol Channel at 4.30pm. We were reminded of the 'Unlikely voyage of Jack de Crow' one of the funniest tales of a teacher rowing his way to the Black Sea in a yellow Mirror Dinghy. He had tied up to this concrete wall and climbed up the slippery steel rungs to report to the Harbour Master who invited him to lunch. He had deliberately tied up on a long line to take account of the tide rise and fall, but on descending back to his boat he had discovered it dangling several feet above the water. His antics in getting it back into the water with him on top were an entertaining read.



We hoisted sail and found ourselves in altogether new and unfriendly conditions. We had a strong current (3 knots) with us but were faced with wind over tide. This created an uncomfortable chop which we had to beat into. Very soon we had to take in both reefs and even then found ourselves ducking as each wave splattered across us in the cockpit. It was a rude shock to the system and Gillie found it seriously upsetting. We made quite long tacks hoping that there was still plenty of water over the main banks such as the English Grounds. We noticed a bermudan rigged yacht a mile ahead of us, also well reefed, and were surprised to realise that we were catching her up. We had no feel for distance and didn't recognise either Flat Holm or Steep Holm until we were quite close to them. This was after about four hours sailing from Avonmouth. We decided to leave Flat Holm to starboard and take a long starboard tack out to Steep Holm. By the time we tacked on to port we had overtaken the other yacht which appeared also to be making for Barry. We were very keen to reach Barry before nightfall and before the tide changed (10pm) so we decided to start the motor to help us. This made a dramatic difference and being on port tack the propeller stayed in the water all the time. We had soon climbed up far to windward of the other yacht and were moving faster.



Even so we didn't reach Barry until 10pm. By now it was low tide and we crept into the outer harbour and moored up against a large yellow pleasure cruiser. After a rapid meal of eggs and bacon we turned in for a short night so that we could catch the next ebb tide in the morning. Just as we getting in to our sleeping bags we noticed the other yacht motoring past. It carried on past us into the inner harbour

Tuesday, 29 June saw us rise at 4.30am, had breakfast and listened to the forecast - 4/5 gusting 6 from SW. We decided to go, which says a lot for Gillie's grit, and left at 6am. The sea was less choppy in spite of the strong breeze and we made good progress over the land (7 knots). We noticed that the log was not working so we had to rely on the GPS. Mumbles was our next destination and after another long cold and wet sail we arrived at 1pm having covered 36 miles. We moored up amongst other yachts near the quay and warmed ourselves up in the cabin with some hot soup. Later we motored over to the quayside and Gillie went off to find the shops, while Rob kept an eye on the boat and watched some boys enjoying themselves leaping off the quay into the water with much splashing. Gillie returned with fish and chips for supper. We ate these back on our mooring. That night we were woken up briefly as Bumble went aground at dead low water. The bumping only lasted for half an hour and then we were afloat again and fast asleep.



Wednesday brought similar weather conditions and the forecast mentioned that a front would be passing through at some stage. We set off at 6am and tacked out to about four miles into the Bristol Channel. There was enough south in the wind to allow a very long port tack so from then we made very good progress (7 knots) over the ground. By 8am we considered the possibility of trying to get all the way to Milford Haven. Having decided this was a distinct possibility we looked ahead to see some very dark clouds coming towards us. It turned out to be the front! We immediately reefed down and rolled the jib to less than a third. The wind rose sharply to seven plus, the waves increased steadily in size and the rain added to the continuous spray over the boat. The worst of the storm lasted for about two hours and then it slowly dropped down to a 6/7. We had immediately reverted to the original plan of getting to Tenby and freed off slightly to sail east of Caldey Island to try and find some shelter. It is amazing how one is hit with several problems all at once. First Rob tried to start the engine but it was dead as a Dodo. Second Gillie tried to get the centreboard up a bit but it was jammed. Third on checking inside the cabin we discovered it was filling up with water.

Already it was more than four inches deep. Fourthly the tiller extension suddenly came disconnected from the tiller. Rob checked to make sure that the rear lockers were firmly sealed and discovered to my horror that a rope had got caught in the starboard side hatch. This was quickly sorted out but the damage was done. Everything in the cabin, not in waterproof bags, was now soaked. We sailed on dismally and Rob noticed that Bumble was handling much more sluggishly with the extra weight. However we were now getting quite close to Caldey Island and we had to plan how we were going to pick up a buoy at Tenby



without the help of the motor. When we reached the Tenby Roads we were disappointed to realise that there was little shelter from the wind as there was no high ground to shelter us from the south west.

Nevertheless the sea was now much flatter and Gillie went forward to pick up the first possible buoy. Rob turned Bumble into the wind and fortunately arrived at the mark just as she came to a halt. Gillie managed to grab a rope and we were soon securely moored. It was now 12.30pm.

The rain had stopped and with the aid of a bucket we soon had most of the water out. We have a hand bilge pump which can reach down to the keel aft of the centreboard and we used this to get the rid of the remaining water. Gillie then started to take things out of the cabin for drying while Rob tried to discover what had happened to the centreboard up-haul. The rope had somehow come off the drum and jammed - easy to fix. Next Rob checked the tiller extension to find that we had lost the split pin and connecting pin. This again was easy to sort out as we had spares. Finally the engine... Rob removed the sparking plug and checked the electrodes were clean. Then checked that there was fuel and tried starting it again, without joy. We then got the manual out and couldn't find anything useful there so decided to ring Walton marina where we had the engine maintained. Luckily it was open and an engineer was there to talk to us. It took him a little while to realise that we were bobbing about on a mooring in a force seven but once that had got across he was very helpful and suggested that we check the stop button. In very wet conditions this could short and stop the engine from running. In order to check it we had to remove the connection to the engine body. Rob took a little time to find it but it was quick work to release and after taping up the free end and putting the engine cover back on he had another go at starting. And it did - first go!! After another delighted call to Walton marina our spirits started to pick up. By this time the sun had come out and it was perfect drying weather. We realised that we had arrived at a very picturesque place and were sad that we were not able to enjoy it more. Our original intention was to have anchored close to Caldey Island where there was a monastery still in use. It was still much too windy to contemplate moving so we settled down for an early night. The wind continued to stay above force 6 until the early hours of the morning.

Thursday morning brought better weather with it and we decided after listening to the forecast to sail the last leg to Milford Haven. Before leaving Rob reconnected the stop button and tried the engine with success. We motored sailed out between Caldey Island and the mainland soon after 6am and tacked out on port far enough to miss the Saint Gowan Shoals, about six miles offshore. Although the wind was now 4/5 the seas were still high with large rolling waves. The breaking water at the top of each wave provided us with a continual drenching. At last we were able to tack on to starboard and make for Linney Head. From then on conditions became easier in spite of the engine stopping again. We tacked up inside Torbot Bank to Sheep Island and found the east passage into Milford Haven. It was wonderful to find the calm waters past St Ann's Head, and to have the wind behind us - it had been right on our nose all the way from Bristol, requiring long grey tacks out to sea.

The engine started after some mopping up, and a few miles up the Sound we turned into the calm of Neyland Yacht Haven. We radioed the office, and someone was on the pontoon to greet us and take our ropes. Then lovely hot showers and a chance to wash some clothes. There was a brisk drying wind blowing, and soon "Bumble Chugger" was draped in towels and trousers and underwear. Papers and charts were spread out on the decks with our granddaughter's half knitted cardigan and balls of wool all of which had got soaked through during the flood in the cabin.

We were very relieved to have arrived!

