

It will be fifty years next summer since I first sailed in Chichester Harbour. When I was ten, my father, an Australian who had learnt to sail in Sydney Harbour, spent £18 on an old Brighton beach boat. She was clinker built, half decked, gaff rigged, with a bowsprit and a centre plate, and we kept her initially at Dell Quay. For the next five summers our life was dominated by the tide tables, and for me nothing was closer to heaven than the soft sand dunes of East Head or the wild bleakness of Pilsey Island. Only once do I remember leaving the harbour, when the conditions were perfect for a day trip to Ryde. We passed the huge alien shapes of the forts and arrived triumphantly on the beach for a short stop before returning to the shelter of Hayling Island.

I, of course, dreamed of having my own boat, perhaps a Duckling or a Heron if I was lucky, but this was not to be. I remember the bitter disappointment of my thirteenth birthday when I was given a gold necklace! A few years later in 1966 I just knew my new boyfriend would love sailing, and sailing in Chichester Harbour in particular. We used to pitch a tent on the South Downs and hire a dinghy for the day from Bosham Sea School. This was an uninspiring little fibreglass tub, but it served its purpose and soon Rod became not only my husband but also as keen a sailor as I was.

The next decade saw us produce three children and buy first an Enterprise and then a bright yellow Mirror dinghy. Unfortunately work took us to a variety of waterless homes, including Burton-on-Trent, which is just about as far from the sea as you can get in the U.K. We finally ended up in Bath, not noted as a sailing centre, but we had a series of very happy camping holidays at Locquirec on the north coast of Brittany with our Mirror dinghy. However, Rod wanted a new challenge and he seemed determined to take our growing family cruising. So he completed the relevant courses and sea miles, and we had a long series of flotilla holidays in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. It suited teenagers and adults alike, and our children were always keen to join us even as young professionals.

Thus we reached retirement without ever owning a boat that we could sleep on, and we soon made a decision that we wanted to do more sailing as it was something we really enjoyed. So, we needed to choose a boat and a home port. We considered a Drascombe and visited their boatyard in Andover, but the Lugger's sailing performance was very disappointing. We tried a Salcombe Yawl, but each time we reached the sea we saw these beautiful Cornish Shrimpers temptingly waiting. Perhaps we should raise the stakes and buy one?

We visited the SOA website and arranged to visit the RMYC in Poole where Trevor Heritage and Karen Weston would show us their boats, but unfortunately a Force 6 prevented us sailing. Still, we were really impressed, and after a trial day in Falmouth with Roger Cox from Select Yachts, we decided to take the plunge, consoling ourselves that everyone had told us that they held their price well. It was very exciting visiting the boat builders in Rock and seeing a hull grow into our boat.



Liz inspects 'Dreamtime' at the factory in Rock

Now we had to choose a home port. Falmouth, although perfect when you got there, was too far from Bath. Chichester beckoned: it was only a two-hour drive, and we eventually decided on Chichester Marina.

We particularly liked the NW corner by Salterns Copse and the convenience of being able to sleep on a boat at any state of the tide was for us, from Bath, great, so we asked for a berth there.

On March 1st 2005, as promised, *Dreamtime** (935) was launched, and a week later we spent our first night on board. This felt positively luxurious after our many years of mountain trekking, even though the canal nearby was covered with a layer of ice! On that first sail, we had the water between Itchenor and Dell Quay to ourselves and had never felt so lucky - in our own Shrimper on that large expanse of sheltered water surrounded by ancient oak woodland. Through March, April and May 2005, we had a number of wonderful days in the harbour, picnicking at East Head, and reaching first Eastoke and then the bar beacon. The sight of the Winner sandbank towering above us at low tide was quite awe inspiring.

But our real challenge was the SOA's cruise week. We had read the proposed programme on the website in the winter - Bembridge, Emsworth, Pilsey Island, Southsea, Wootton and Beaulieu. We contacted Christopher Sharland by telephone to ask if we could join the group, and he simply could not have been more helpful or welcoming.

** 'Dreamtime' is where Australian aboriginals think they have come from.*

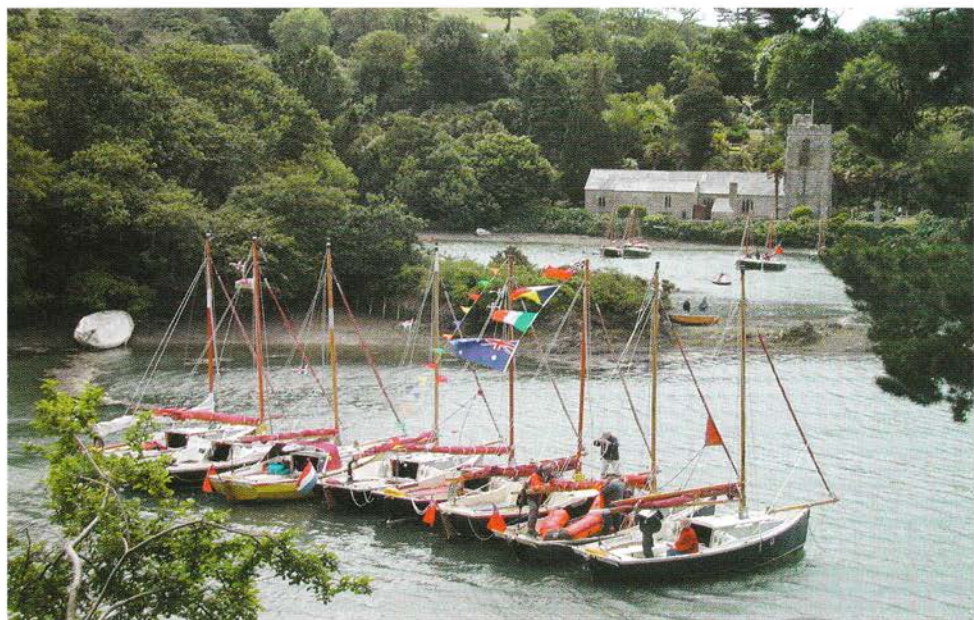
We met him and two other boats at Fishery buoy at the appointed time and crossed the bar out into the Solent. This first crossing to the Isle of Wight was in a light, southerly wind so we tacked back and forth until Bembridge appeared and we followed the other Shrimpers up the narrow, winding, shallow channel with sandbanks, bathing huts and mud flats almost near enough to touch, to our berth. The group we met that evening were so friendly, and the experience and knowledge that they shared with us that week was invaluable. Cruising with this group gives you the confidence to try things that might on your own seem rather too much of a challenge.

There is always just the right amount of help available with everything you have to think about from berthing, provisioning, navigating and, of course, the sailing. There is also an understanding that peace is an important part of the experience, and a night at anchor in an uninhabited but sheltered place is to be prized. So, that first week we learnt how to bleed the engine, clean the paddle wheel on the speed transducer (Rod says this reminds him of changing a heart pacemaker!) and set the sails for maximum effect. We ate freshly caught mackerel, swam at dawn off Pilsey Island after sleeping in the cockpit to admire the night sky, and rafted up with four other boats at the top of the Beaulieu River to enjoy our fruit cake and tea together. It made us feel really young again!

The second week we spent with the group was a mini-cruise in the west Solent from Beaulieu via Ashlett Creek to Lymington, then Yarmouth and Newtown. The winds were much stronger and the choppy seas in the west Solent made for some excitement but we also had some peaceful moments, especially in Newtown. Here we had a beautiful sunset with birds calling all around us. Most evenings we met the group for a meal at a local sailing club or a pub or a BBQ but at Newtown we ate on board to get the full experience of such a beautiful place.

To attend the International 25th Anniversary meeting down in Falmouth seemed like a natural progression from our first Shrimper summer. We had both sailed the area before and knew how much it had to offer, and the programme looked exciting. It was a challenge to tow our boat down there, but we knew from experience that the Shrimper fraternity would provide just the right sort of support, so it was no surprise when Mark Osborn produced an experienced team to help us with our first launching. The size of the Shrimper group (I think there were 86 boats involved) made it very different from the Solent experience but it was wonderful to be part of what looked like a line of Shrimpers stretching all the way from Falmouth to the Manacles.

Everywhere we went we found friendly crews to meet at the end of the day. I loved the Helford River with its silent, wooded creeks and I felt very grateful that so much of this and the Fal Estuary have been left in a natural state. It was fascinating to meet people from Portugal, Belgium and Holland and lovely to see old friends in a new setting. We also saw boats newer than ours, as well as the original Shrimper *Katy of Padstow (1)* and discussed the pros and cons of different fittings. We particularly enjoyed the lunch stop on a high tide at the pretty pool of St Just, where again there was just the right amount of help in anchoring, rafting up and getting ashore.

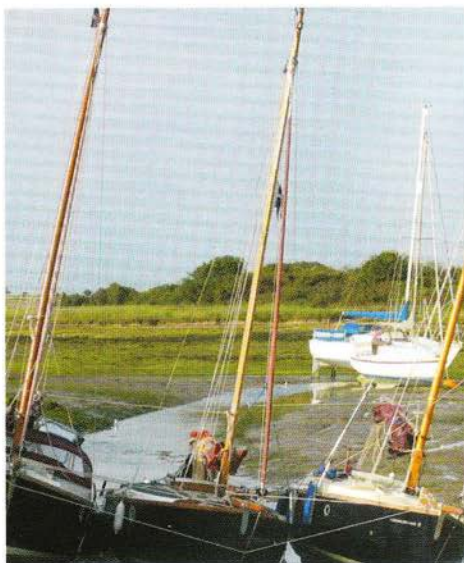


Shrimpers rafted up in St Just Pool – prior to going ashore for a Cornish Pasty

For me the highlight was our trip to Fowey and back during the second week: on the way there, we sailed past a turtle that paused alongside our cockpit before diving, and the return journey was perfect, a fast sail around Dodman Point in an easterly wind with white horses all around. We did have to spend a whole day in Fowey in what seemed like endless rain, but it was punctuated by drinks on board other boats and we even had a mini pontoon party in our waterproofs!

This year's Shrimper Solent week was spent in the central part of the Solent, and gave us the opportunity to visit places that we had never heard of, like Eling and Marchwood at the top of Southampton Water. Thanks to the research done by Christopher (*Shellback - 60*), Val and Kay (*Marigold - 354*), we could be confident of finding guidance to a safe berth, somewhere to eat (if that was what we wanted) and receiving the necessary help with the sailing. For example, before we set off for the far reaches of Southampton Water, Richard (*Gamba - 218*) gave us all an excellent description of the manoeuvres that the container ships had to make before they could dock. As it happened, one of these titanic ships was turning around to proceed astern as we passed, and it was comforting to see it do exactly what we had been told to expect.

This week we also spent a night in Newtown rafted up against the quay at Shalfleet, which dries out. This was a first for us and there was much helpful discussion about how to ensure a good night's sleep. The final sail from Beaulieu back to Chichester was excellent, in spite of a dubious forecast. We sailed just south of the Brambles and continued on past Gilkicker Point, catching mackerel to take home on the way.



The joys of Newtown Creek

I could not recommend the Chichester & Solent Shrimper group more highly. There is simply no way we would have been able to enjoy all this without their help and support. We feel we are very lucky to have joined this particular mix of people who offer so much. It is exciting, too, to know that the wider group makes the exploration of waters further a field so possible. Maybe we'll even get to Brittany next year.

Liz Thomas *Dreamtime (935)*