

Two 'Cornish' Shrimpers, "Boyers Shrimper" and "Scalawag" boldly went where no other boat had been for five years.

Having decided to attend the National Shrimper Week in Brest, which coincided with Brest 2000, it seemed a marvellous opportunity to carry out a retirement ambition of mine to take my Shrimper up the French canals. Our research at home showed some 50 miles of river/canal was navigable from our proposed launch site for Shrimper Week, Port Launay, including some 35 locks!! It seemed just perfect, so we (that's me and Claud and Sheila Lanyon) extended the official programme by a week and arrived seven days early.

Having travelled via Brittany Ferries overnight from Plymouth to Roscoff we launched our boats at Port Launay on the Saturday morning leaving our masts and sails on the trailers. Whilst doing so we were greeted by an English lady who had moved to France some five years ago and now seemed to own the village. We were asked not to moor in front of her house as that was reserved for larger, more affluent boats rather than our humble Shrimpers. We duly obliged, mooring down stream as requested. During the afternoon it became apparent that we might be setting out on 'mission impossible', everyone we spoke to (luckily Claud and Sheila appeared to speak French) implied that the canal was not navigable. Despondence set in and we even talked about recovering our boats and travelling to another canal. However Claud had done his research from home via Fax, the Internet etc and the Local Authority SMATAH had assured him the canal was open. So we decided to give it a go the next day.

That evening we went for a short trip down the river. After about 150 yards this very posh 40ft yacht approached us. Someone was waving from the bow. Who else but Mike Pollard (owner of Shrimper 444) enjoying a corporate weekend's party with a client – all right for some! We were later invited for drinks on board only to meet our English lady again, drinking their gin. So that's what she spends her time doing, as she was a complete stranger to them also.

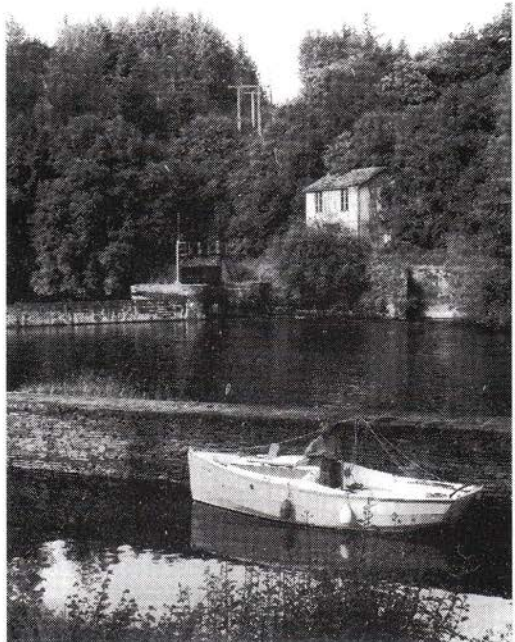
During the evening we were suprised to find the water level had risen about 2 feet. I thought it was a fresh water canal but no, the tide had come in and the water was salt. Claud was not amused as I had persuaded him to put the wheels of his Discovery in the water when launching. 'It's fresh water Claud' I said, oops sorry.

Having not been invited to the English lady's DRINKS PARTY after church on Sunday (I hope you enjoyed yourself Mike, we will have to buy a bigger boat) we decided to set off up the canal towards Chateaulin in the rain. Sheila had already been dispatched to get a lock key at 06.30hrs from the lock down stream (200 Franc deposit). Unfortunately the weather was to remain unsettled with frequent showers all week but at least it was warm. Rain was to be the least of our problems.

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On arrival at the first lock at Chateaulin in the center of town, fear was setting in, would I be able to negotiate the locks single-handed? We moored down stream and walked up to the lock to investigate. Claud started to speak to a French onlooker. However he turned out to be Spanish working locally as a sailing instructor. He was able to explain how the lock worked. We opened the lock gates and in I went. Fortunately being 6'4" tall I was able to reach the rings to tie-up. No such luck for Sheila or Claud who are 5' nothing, so they rafted up to me. The lock proved to be the exact width for two Shrimpers alongside each other. We used this system to negotiate all the remaining locks, i.e. mooring up down stream, opening the gates, leaving Claud on top to do all the work winding the handles and opening the gates at the far end while Sheila and I took the boats through single handed. (Great, Claud was doing all the hard work I thought to myself). I would then return to the lock to collect Claud when he had closed up. On my arrival in France I was under the impression that French locks were manned for you, NOT SO ON THE BREST / NANTES Canal. Anyway after about an hour and a half with Claud's tent crutch only just fitting under a bridge we had successfully completed number 1 lock. No it was number 236, we were going in reverse order.

Having looked round Chateaulin and stopped for the mandatory sticky bun, it was off again up the canal. Although progress through the locks was slow, over an hour per lock, our system was improving, however Claud was doing the majority of the manual work. On our arrival at lock No 232 Aulur it was time for our first overnight stop, moored against the wall just before the lock with the sound of water cascading over the weir. Sheila volunteered to cook for me for most of the trip and it's a long time since I have had such a healthy diet. Although we were to eat out on numerous occasions during the next three weeks, I did come home half a stone lighter. Thank you Sheila!



The next day MONDAY we made good progress. The scenery was beautiful, so peaceful and quiet. It was a lovely stretch of water, a few fishermen at each lock and just one or two people

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walking or cycling along the towpath. Paradise! However there was one surprising thing, we hadn't seen any boats since before Chateaulin.

Each lock has its own lock-keepers house/cottage and many of these have recently been sold to private owners. At lock 228 Koat-Point we met an English couple and their family. They had purchased the lock house two or three years ago and now supervise their caravan site in Cornwall from France via the Internet. Their son by chance had skippered a Shrimper for 10 months at some adventure center! It was quite clear we were the first boats they had seen passing through the lock. They showed us photo's of the flooding last Christmas, which made us grateful it was now July, and raining less.

As we approached lock 227 something was strange, there was no water coming over the weir. We moored up to investigate. Disaster, there was no water in the next section of the canal. Was our journey over? Claud knocked on the lock-keepers door and it is here that we met Daniel. It soon became clear that Daniel liked his drink rather too much and admitted he had a problem. He lived alone with his three dogs. He became a good friend of ours and was most helpful. After long telephone calls to SMATAH and their Canal Engineers Department, we were promised that the canal would be filled in the morning. At 6pm already on overtime 'Jan', one of the Chief Engineers, arrived and promised us that a man would close the sluice gate at 8am the following morning. The canal would apparently take 4 hours to fill up but then would be navigable without problems. He must have been joking. Claud was taken off on a pub crawl by Daniel in his 2CV, the car seemed to know its way along the towpath.

Tuesday 8am came and went, NO MAN and NO WATER. After many more phone calls and Jan obviously becoming more fearful of Clauds sometimes forceful approach (in a joking manner) the man arrived at 11am. A lorry equipped with a grab crane, which had been organized by Daniel who knew the gate would not open, followed him shortly afterwards. They started to dredge the lock for us. Were there going to be more other hidden problems they were not telling us about. Sheila and I did some drawing that morning. Daniel arrived, first laden with a gift of local biscuits, then fresh salads from a local farm. How friendly everyone was being. It became clear we were the first two boats up the canal for five years when flooding had done extensive damage.

By 1pm we were on the move once more but disaster was going to strike again very shortly. At the very next lock Claud asked an onlooker if he would open the gates for us. For some reason he could not operate the lock as the handles would not fit. We go ashore to investigate only to find he was correct. Daniel happened to arrive in his 2CV to check on our progress. More telephone calls and Jan comes to see us, then goes off to obtain another handle. The opening mechanism had apparently been recovered from another lock system elsewhere in France

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and was different. Jan was grateful for this discovery as the canal was to be officially reopened the following SATURDAY and this would have to be rectified.

By that evening we had progressed to lock number 224. Oh no! there was no water coming over the weir once again, Jan had been telling 'Porkies'. The



mooring walls on the approach to the last two locks had been rather overgrown. Was the canal becoming more derelict? We overnighted at 224 and admitted defeat and started our return trip on Wednesday morning.

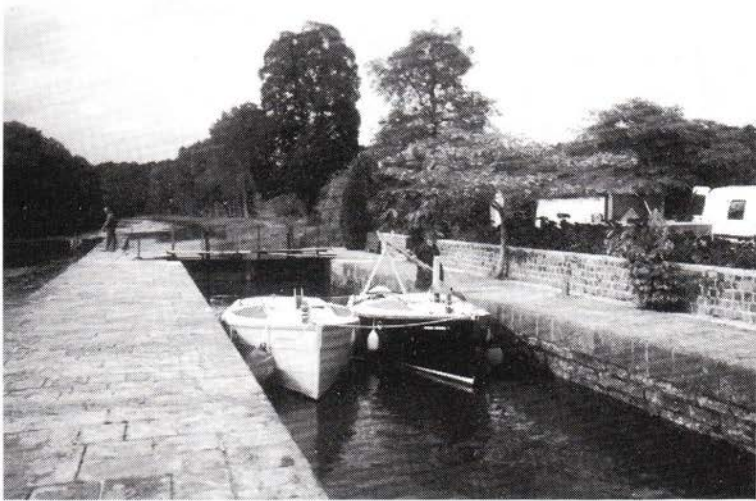
Looking back at the holiday I think we had already travelled far enough up without overworking Claud. An extra couple of crew / workers would have been helpful. (Possibly some fit teenagers with bikes to go on ahead and have the locks ready for us).

On our return trip there were no mooring places prior to the locks and our system had to change. I took Claud onboard, leaving Sheila well upstream of the weir on Scalawag in safety, while we tackled the lock. As there was little wind we drove up to the closed gates and tied up safely without being swept over the weir. We then had to fill the lock, open the gates, drive in then wait for Sheila to join us. That morning I spoke (in English) to two Germans who were cycling along the towpath. Some 3 hours later we met them again at Pont Coblant where we had planned to stay overnight. I thought to myself surely they are not going to cycle further that day and established that they were staying in a motor camper overnight. Plucking up courage I asked if I could borrow a pedal cycle, to which they agreed. I said 'I will bring it back' to which he replied 'I hope so'!!

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That afternoon I cycled up to Chateaufeuf du Faou lock No 218 which had been our target destination for our Shrimpers. It was a lovely ride. A section of canal did have no water. We would not have been able to continue anyway.

That evening we ate out again. Everything looked set for an uneventful return trip. However on arrival at lock number 232, the bridge over the lock, which had been in the middle on the way up, had now been moved to the



top and although we had been able to pass under it when the lock was empty we could not now enter the lock. Claud and I tried to move the bridge manually but it would not budge. Fortunately Marc the mobile toilet cleaner arrived and with his massive muscle power we were able to drag the bridge back along the lock to allow us to enter and get through. We then moored up overnight.

On our arrival at Chateaulin lock we were met by Jan and a workforce converting the bridge over the lock to a swing bridge. There was a short delay as the work was finished and whilst this was being done Jan invited us to a private room of the Fishery Observatory. The river Aulne is famous for salmon fishing. Each day we had met Jean a university student monitoring the movement of the salmon with his radio equipment as they progressed up the river. A large number of salmon had been electronically tagged. It was wonderful seeing them trying to jump the weirs. In this room we saw a large salmon swimming against the flow of water. Apparently they generally stay for as long as two days changing from salt to fresh water, although some pass through in as little as two hours. Each fish is filmed on video. If a fisherman catches a tagged fish, he must return the tag, as each one costs over £100. At one lock Yves a regular fisherman showed us his catch, a magnificent 2 ft long specimen, I hoped it would end up in Sheila's frying pan but no such luck. He was so pleased with his catch he was saving it for Christmas!

Back at Port Launay other Shrimper owners were arriving in torrential rain, 20 in total including the French boats. Others will log the next two weeks but I must say I really enjoyed it.