

“Winkle’s” Summer(?) Cruise

Cardigan Bay, West Wales,

June 9 to 17, 2007



Each season Jackie and I like to sail “Winkle”, Shrimper 144, somewhere new or interesting. We’re not into epic voyages, but do enjoy coastal cruising and the anticipation of arriving at a new port each evening. Having decided that Shrimper Week in Brittany was not for us, we were investigating alternatives when Roy Harper’s suggestion for a flotilla cruise along the coast of Cardigan Bay (Winter 2006 issue of Shrimper Magazine) caught our eye. Roy’s plan was to head north from his home port of Newport, Pembrokeshire and finish, a week later, with lunch on Bardsey Island, off the tip of the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales. On the way he would be calling in at some of the picturesque but less visited harbours of Cardigan Bay, an area renowned for its natural beauty. My interest was roused because Newport was, for many years, also my family home and where I learnt to sail. In addition, the cruise could be looked upon as a natural extension to the West Pembrokeshire cruise (Milford Haven to Newport) that Roy arranged after Shrimper Week in 2004.

So it was, early in June, that Jackie and I found ourselves en route to Newport with *Winkle* in tow. The cruise was scheduled to depart from Newport Bay on Saturday, June 9 and head north along the coast. Possible ports of call open to us included Cardigan, Newquay, Aberaeron, Aberystwyth, Aberdovey, Barmouth, Porthmadog, Pwllheli and perhaps Abersoch, but as much of the West Wales coast is essentially a lee shore, weather would dictate how far we actually got.

Newport is a tidal estuary that can only be accessed at best 2½ hours each side of high water, slightly less on neap tides. Although June 9th was the agreed departure date, Roy realised early on neap tides with high water around 1400, a Shrimper would be lucky to get out before mid day and this would provide only a few hours of favourable (north-going) tidal stream. The plan was therefore changed to leave Newport after high water on June 8th and spend the night at Cwm-yr-Eglwys, a small bay three miles SW of Newport on the northern side of Dinas Head. From here the fleet could get an early start the following morning.

As the only visiting boat we decided to launch a day early to allow time for a shakedown sail, so *Winkle* was floated off her trailer as the flood tide entered the river at Parrog Beach, Newport, just before mid day on June 7th.



Roy arranged an overnight mooring and after a morning spent loading gear and topping up with fuel and water, our small flotilla of *Lady Eleanor* (921- Roy Harper), *Pyg Ddu* (93 - Sue & Mike Greenwood) and Jackie and me aboard *Winkle* left Newport estuary shortly after 1400 on June 8th, bound for Cwm-yr-Eglwys. Although warm and sunny, a calm sea ruffled only by a very light westerly breeze did not provide for a fast passage, so it was approaching 1730 before the fleet picked up moorings just inside the cove. Supper aboard in the sun provided a very relaxing start to the cruise.



Saturday June 9, 2007: Newport Bay to Newquay (25 miles)

Saturday dawned fine and calm and the crews were in high spirits as, just before 1000, the boats slipped their moorings and headed out across a mirror calm Newport Bay into a very light NE breeze. Within an hour this euphoria had been dampened, quite literally, by the arrival of sea mist that soon thickened into fog with visibility at times barely fifty metres. Luckily, all three boats are fitted with GPS and radio, so felt no alarm at the lack of visual landmarks, but as a precaution agreed to plot individual positions every half hour to confirm progress. Despite the contrary breeze a favourable one knot tide pushed us steadily northeast along the coast towards our planned destination of Newquay (Ceridigion, not

Cornwall). Progress was so good that for a while we even entertained the possibility of making Aberystwyth, fifteen miles further on, but as the morning progressed the breeze headed and died so the idea was abandoned. It was also about this time that *Pyg Ddu* went missing.

Winkle and *Lady Eleanor* had been sailing on starboard tack heading north when the mist rolled in, but managed to stay in visual contact. Mike and Sue had been on port tack heading east towards the shore and soon vanished from sight. As the tide seemed stronger further out we continued north and by 1330 were about two miles west of Cemaes Head, on the south side of Cardigan estuary. It had been assumed that *Pyg Ddu* had followed us and was perhaps a few hundred yards away concealed in the fog, but a routine radio check revealed that they had opted to stay inshore and were now about a mile astern. Splitting the flotilla this early in the cruise did not seem sensible, so it was decided that *Lady Eleanor* and *Winkle* would wait until *Pyg Ddu* had caught up. This proved to be easier said than done as both waiting boats were being sent north east at over one knot by the tide. After spending over an hour going around in circles without seeing anything the three boats eventually regained visual contact by motoring towards each other along the same line of latitude.

The one highlight of this escapade in the fog came as *Winkle* and *Lady Eleanor* were motoring north east along the coast heading for one of the various rendezvous positions. Our two boats were about 15 meters apart, with *Winkle* slightly ahead, when Roy suddenly approached at speed making over-arm motions. Jackie and I both thought he had finally flipped until, between the boats, three dolphins surfaced. Suddenly, we were surrounded by the whole pod and they continued to play around us for over ten minutes, often coming so close that we could smell their fishy breath as they surfaced alongside the boat. Just as suddenly the dolphins were gone, no doubt chasing the mackerel we caught later in the cruise.

Sadly, all this manoeuvring in the fog took its toll on our passage plan, so it was well past two thirty before all three boats once again regained their course towards Newquay. By now the fitful breeze had died away completely, so for much of the next four hours we suffered the steady rattle of our ageing *Mariner 5* as the flotilla continued to follow the coast, passing Cardigan Island, Mwnt, with its tiny chapel, and the missile test range at Aberporth without ever seeing any of them. By 1700, still heading ENE, we had reached a position about four miles west of New Quay Head. For the next 1½ hours we steered due east until, just before 1830, the cliffs of Newquay Head suddenly loomed out of the mist and we broke through into glorious sunshine. Fifteen minutes later the fleet was riding at anchor in about five metres of crystal clear water just off Newquay beach. As the anchors hit bottom there was an almost audible sigh of relief from the three Shrimper crews that they had actually made it. The boats had been at sea for just under 8½ hours, covering about 25 miles, most of it under power and in fog. Surely the weather could not throw up anything worse?

Waiting for us at Newquay were Tim Newby and Allison Court aboard *Tompot*, Shrimper 975, who had sailed down from their home port of Aberystwyth with an overnight stop at Aberaeron. This was Tim and Allison's first full season with their Shrimper and they chose to join the cruise to expand their experience. Little did we know, as the crews met at the Ship Inn, Newquay, to enjoy a well earned pint, that their learning curve would prove to be rather steeper than they intended.

Sunday June 10, 2007: Newquay to Aberystwyth (15 miles)

Newquay looked wonderfully inviting in the morning sun and we could easily have stayed another day, but Bardsey Island was calling.

After a quick trip ashore to for a few essentials (bread, marmalade and a dustpan), *Winkle* and the other Shrimpers were under way just before 1100 heading north for Aberystwyth and its marina.



At first the faint northerly breeze allowed some progress under sail, but around midday this died away and for an hour or so we resorted to mechanical propulsion. To alleviate the boredom mackerel lines were produced and an hour's towing a spinner resulted in four very small fish, sadly not big enough to eat, that were returned to the sea to swim another day. *Lady Eleanor* and *Pyg Ddu* enjoyed better luck and, by the time a light northerly breeze eventually filled in around mid afternoon, had each caught a good half dozen sizeable fish.

The northerly wind gave us a close reach towards Aberystwyth and for a while the fleet made excellent progress, but shortly after four pm the wind once again dropped and headed, forcing us to motor the last five miles to the harbour entrance. By 1830 we were alongside at Aberystwyth marina and heading ashore for a well needed shower.



Monday, June 11, 2007: Aberystwyth to Aberdovey (10 miles)

Yet again the day dawned bright, clear and calm, ideal for lazing on the beach, but not for our intended passage to Aberdovey.

Aberdovey is a tidal estuary with a bar that can only be crossed within three hours each side of high water. (Slightly less with a strong ebb against an onshore wind). With HW on June 11 at just before 1800, entry would not be possible much before three, so a late morning start seemed sensible. Roy suggested that supper might be a beach BBQ to make use of the mackerel caught the previous day, but not having any to cook we set off in search of a suitable alternative. We eventually decided on



Photo Mike Greenwood



some delicious looking pork and pepper kebabs from the local Somerfield store. After topping up the spare petrol (we had done over ten hours motoring during the previous two days), we were ready to leave by 1145.

At first the weather was similar to the previous two days, calm sea with almost no wind, but once past Sarn Cynfelin, a shoal about two miles north of Aberystwyth, the wind filled in from the northwest and steadily freshened to give an excellent sail to the Aberdovey Bar buoy.

Lady Eleanor led the way into the river, pushed

along by a strong flood tide and freshening following wind and by 1545 we were all safely inside and looking for a suitable BBQ site. Unfortunately Aberdovey, like many west Wales estuaries, is wide and shallow, with limited access to the areas outside the river channel, even at high tide. After a couple of abortive



attempts to find a suitable beach (during which *Winkle* ran aground and had to be pushed off by her skipper jumping overboard) plans for the BBQ were abandoned and the fleet picked up the moorings in the river allocated by the Harbourmaster. This left the problem of the pork kebabs, which resulted in some experimental cookery at supper time.



Tuesday, June 12, 2007: Aberdovey

Overnight the onshore wind had remained fresh, so Aberdovey bar did not look too inviting when viewed next mooring from the Dovey Yacht Club veranda. The intention was to make for Barmouth, about eight miles north, for which Roy proposed a departure time of 0930 to make use of the favourable north going tidal stream. With HW Aberdovey at 0617 we were aware that leaving this late would be cutting it a bit fine over the bar, but everyone was keen to give it a try. Unfortunately, the fleet did not slip their moorings until close to ten, reducing still further the available depth of water and, with the onshore wind still blowing a good force 4, the surf was starting to build nicely as we headed down river. As the boats neared mouth of the river our echo sounder started showing less than two metres in the troughs and, as we had yet to reach the shallowest part of the bar, it was decided that to continue would be foolhardy in extreme. By 1115 the fleet was once again safely moored in the river and planning a trip for essential supplies ashore (in Allison's case, to look for a cake shop). A pint or two at a local hostelry rounded off an eventful morning.

The sun returned as the wind dropped during the afternoon, which brought the students of the local Outward Bound School out onto the water and we watched with amusement as they attempted to keep their canoes heading in the right direction. The enforced lay-day provided some welcome rest and relaxation, topped off by an excellent supper at the Ship Hotel.



Wednesday, June 13, 2007: Aberdovey to Pwllheli (25.5 miles)

Having learnt the lessons of the previous day, the fleet was under way shortly after 0800 and by nine had safely crossed Aberdovey bar. The boisterous weather of Tuesday was fast dying away and steadily improved as the morning wore on, despite a Coastguard forecast of SW 4 to 5 that prompted the boats to set off with one reef tied in. The mountains astern soon disappeared into the clouds, but out at sea visibility remained good and the wind favourable.



A crew briefing over supper the previous evening had indicated three possible destinations; Barmouth, about 14 miles, Mochras Lagoon (just south of Harlech Castle), about 20 miles or Pwllheli, 26 miles. With the wind forecast to veer southwest, Pwllheli seemed the logical option, so having passed to seaward of Sarn-y-Bwch shoal the fleet continued heading offshore to pass outside Sarn Padrig (St Patrick's Causeway), a rocky underwater promontory extending twelve miles southwest into Cardigan Bay.

According to Welsh legend, Sarn Badrig, together with Sarn-y-Bwch and Sarn Cynfelin, just north of Aberystwyth, are remnants of the dykes that once protected a low-lying and fertile kingdom of Ceredigion in Cardigan Bay. This kingdom was supposedly flooded one night in the fifth century when the dyke keeper, Seithenin, became drunk and omitted to secure the sluice gates. More likely the shoals are glacial moraines left by the last ice-age, but whatever their origin (and the romantic in me tends to favour the legend), Reeds suggest that Sarn Badrig presents a significant hazard to navigation and should be avoided. There is a narrow inshore passage very close to the beach about five miles north of Barmouth, but wind direction and our final destination pointed to the outside passage as offering the better route.

Sarn Badrig Causeway buoy was passed just after 1400 and the fleet altered course for the Fairway ISO buoy south of Pwllheli entrance. All, that is, except *Pyg Ddu*, which at first appeared to be making for Porthmadog. By now the favourable tidal streams experienced earlier in the week had left us, so from Sarn Badrig to Pwllheli, about 14 miles, the boats were heading the tide and, in the falling wind, barely making two knots over the ground. To make matters worse, rain set in shortly after 1600, so it was a somewhat bedraggled little flotilla that eventually came alongside at Hafan Pwllheli just after 1830. Luckily, Shrimper crews rarely stay downhearted for long and a hot shower followed by a pint at Pwllheli Sailing Club quickly raised morale. The evening was rounded off by an excellent and ample Chinese meal at the Bamboo Palace restaurant.

Thursday, June 14, 2007: Pwllheli to Barmouth (17 miles)

Inside Hafan Pwllheli weather conditions appeared calm and the sun even made a fleeting appearance, but the forecast pinned to the marina office notice board indicated otherwise, so any thought of lunch on Bardsey Island was quickly discarded. It had also been realised that to recover the Shrimpers in North Wales might present a few logistical problems, so a decision was made to return to Aberystwyth and haul out there. For Tim and Allison this had obvious attractions, but Roy also favoured the idea as he would be able to leave *Lady Eleanor* afloat and, in his own words, "Move her back to Newport at my leisure at the end of next week".

The only decision remaining was whether to remain in Pwllheli for another day, perhaps visiting Abersoch, and then return to Aberystwyth in one hop on Friday, or to leave on Thursday and split the passage somewhere. Thursday's forecast predicted 20 to 22 knot easterlies, not particularly comfortable but tolerable for a Shrimper if not too far offshore. For Friday the forecast indicated less wind, but from SW, which, if we stayed, would give us a predominantly windward passage of almost 40 miles. No-one seemed too keen on this, so it was decided to leave Hafan Pwllheli at 1200 on Thursday, pass inshore of Sarn Badrig and spend the night in Barmouth, a distance of about 17 miles, leaving an equivalent distance to be sailed on Friday.

Outside Pwllheli the fresh north easterly was kicking up an awkward half metre chop, but with two reefs taken in, we all made good progress across Tremadog Bay. Shortly before 1500, as *Winkle* was approaching Mochras Point at the northern entrance the Sarn Badrig East Passage, the wind fell away and for a while we were becalmed. The wind soon returned, still blowing about F 5, but having veered easterly and now directly offshore. This made the narrow passage difficult to navigate under sail, so with jibs furled the fleet motored through until clear of Bemar Bank, just south of Sarn Badrig. Once back in deep water everyone returned to sailing, but by now the wind was increasing and we noticed that, further out, the sea had suddenly become white. *Winkle* does not carry an anemometer, but the wind certainly felt more than the forecast 22 knots and we were told later that, soon after leaving Sarn Badrig, the dial on *Lady Eleanor's* indicator rose to 27 knots and stayed there. In these conditions Shrimpers start to become uncomfortable, but luckily we were still well inshore where the hills upwind still provided some shelter. Aboard *Lady Eleanor*, Roy was handling the conditions well, as were Tim and Allison, but *Pyg Ddu* was not so fortunate. shortly after leaving Sarn Badrig a shackle parted on the mainsheet and although the flaying boom was subdued using the reefing line, they were left with no option but to down sails and motor the remaining distance to Barmouth.

We continued to sail for another mile or so, but with the wind continuing to rise as we left the shelter of the land, this became increasingly difficult. To make matters worse, it had also started to rain, so after a couple of particularly violent gusts that had us both standing on the side of the leeward cockpit bench, we decided enough was enough and motor-sailed the remaining three miles to the Barmouth Outer buoy. Nearing Barmouth we were exposed to the full force of the wind, which by now was kicking up a nasty short steep sea and made holding the boat head to wind to get the mainsail down very tricky. After a particularly violent gust had, yet again, blown the bow off, Jackie, on the helm, was heard to comment that it would be a big help if the propeller stayed in the water.

Lady Eleanor led the way into Barmouth shortly after 1830, but once inside our problems did not abate. The harbour is sheltered from every wind direction except easterly, when it is funnelled down the narrow Afon Mawddach valley. The visitor's moorings allocated by the Harbour Master were found to lie in the main flood tide, which by now was running at a good four knots. They were also very close to two very rusty and solid looking fishing boats. The effects of opposing wind and tide made slow speed manoeuvring difficult and after an abortive attempt, in which *Winkle* nearly came to grief, we concluded that the moorings would be impossible to pick up without risk of damage. After considering various options, including drying out on the beach, each boat picked up a vacant yacht mooring in a slightly less tidal but still exposed part of the harbour. The cockpit canopy provided some relief from wind and rain and provided somewhere to dry out the soggy oilies, so after raiding the provisions locker for supper we turned in, thankful that all four Shrimpers had reached comparative shelter.

Overnight the wind moderated slightly, but it was still blowing quite hard when, about 0230, I awoke to the realisation that the boat had stopped moving. Earlier in the evening I had

lowered the keel in an attempt to reduce rolling from the wind and tide and omitted to raise it when turning in. Fearing that the keel might have become snagged on the bottom, I crawled out of a nice warm bunk into the cockpit to find the keel hoist rope slack on the boards. Still puzzled as to the cause, I looked out from under the canopy and saw, in the moonlight, (yes, it had stopped raining!) that *Winkle* was high and dry in the centre of the harbour perched on a strip of sand surrounded by water. The water eventually returned about 0530, so by the time Jackie awoke just after seven we were well afloat. She had been in the lower (starboard) bunk and slept through it all.

Friday June 17, 2007: Barmouth to Aberystwyth (19 miles)

Barmouth is a very pretty little harbour and, had we more time at our disposal, would certainly have been worthy of a longer stay. On this occasion only Tim and Allison went ashore as their "dinghy", an inflatable canoe, was much better suited at negotiating the fast tide sweeping out through the moorings. Despite our fears that the weather might decided to throw something else at us, the forecast seemed encouraging (F3 to 4 easterly, possible rain or showers later), so after an hour spent drying out in the sunshine during which Mike fitted a new shackle to his mainsheet, the fleet was ready to sail by 1100.



Unfortunately, the previous day had taken its toll. *Winkle's* VHF radio, an old but, until then, reliable had-held set, decided not to work. Having been exposed to water for much of the previous day it was assumed that damp had got inside, but all attempts to dry it out, both whilst at Barmouth and later at Aberystwyth, proved unsuccessful. This was not surprising as we later found that an internal plug on the circuit board had become dislodged, perhaps as a result of being thrown around the cockpit during the passage from Pwllheli. Luckily, we could still communicate by mobile phone.

More serious, as it later turned out, was that Roy Harper lost his trousers. For most of the morning his oilskin trousers had been hanging in the rigging to dry, but whilst Roy was below they became detached and disappeared overboard. Sadly, no-one saw them go and, with a strong ebb and offshore wind, were probably well out to sea by the time the loss was discovered.

Leaving Barmouth the crews were treated to a wonderful panorama. Dead astern was Cader Idris, whilst further north could be seen the Snowdon range, including Snowdon itself with customary cloud cap and the coastline of the Llyn Peninsula right out to Bardsey Island.





Pushed along by a moderate easterly breeze the fleet soon crossed Sarn-y-Bwch about 1½ miles inshore of the fairway buoy then altered course to SSE for Aberystwyth. At 1430 the sky to the east darkened and we were treated to a spectacular firework display as forked lightning flashed over the Dovey estuary and surrounding hills. Shortly afterwards the wind backed to northwest and died away, soon to be followed by drizzle that steadily increased to rain. With Aberystwyth in sight the fleet decided that sailing in the rain had lost its novelty, so engines were started and we motored the last four miles to the river entrance. Here we faced one final difficulty. In calm weather Aberystwyth harbour is normally accessible on most states of the tide, but our arrival at 1630 coincided with dead low water springs and breaking surf between the breakwaters indicated that the channel might not contain too much water. Despite the echo sounder reading zero, with *Tompot* leading the way we all made it safely inside, although *Pyg Ddu* was slightly delayed by a brief excursion onto the mud whilst turning at the North Breakwater. Once alongside, Roy wasted no time in heading for the shower to warm up and change his, by now, extremely soggy cord trousers. The others were not far behind.

With *Winkle's* cockpit canopy again proving its worth and protecting us from the elements we started to dry the boat out in preparation for our last night aboard, but the offer of a bed ashore proved too much of a temptation. Having enjoyed a last supper aboard, Roy's wife, Eleanor, picked us up shortly before 2130 for the journey back to Newport.

Saturday, June 16, 2007: Haul out at Aberystwyth

After a dry and warm (and motionless) night ashore, 0800 saw us and Mike Greenwood on the road with trailers in tow heading north for Aberystwyth. By 1030 *Winkle* and *Pyg Ddu* had been recovered and by 1330 both boats were on the road once again, heading south.

So ended our second excursion to West Wales. Despite the extremes of weather it was an experience neither of us would have missed and, as a consequence, we now have an even greater respect for the capabilities of our boat. Despite this new found confidence, I would still not recommend taking a Shrimper to sea in 27 knots of wind.

On returning home we discovered that the extreme weather that had taken us by surprise on Thursday afternoon was due to a small but intense depression centred over Manchester, which resulted excessive rain and caused some severe localised flooding. Luckily, we only caught the edge of it, but we were left wondering whether the Shrimpers would have fared quite so well had it been a little larger or centred a few miles further west.

The atrocious weather experienced during the end of June and early July kept *Winkle* on her trailer for over three weeks and she was eventually re-launched just in time to take part in the Solent Shrimper Group Cruise Week in July. Roy had a similar experience and was forced to leave *Lady Eleanor* at Aberystwyth for rather longer than the intended few days before the weather moderated enough for him to bring her home to Newport.

Keith and Jackie Thatcher
September 2007