

La Mouette's Normandy Cruise, July 2014.

A voice was saying "It's time to get up. The time is 4 o'clock." If you have an old Nokia phone you will know the voice! Obedient as ever, Pete and I got up and put the kettle on. Outside it was just getting light on a very still morning so, after a cup of tea, we let go from our overnight berth on the club pontoon and set off down river. A strong tide pushed us through Hurst Narrows to the Needles where, once clear of the swirly whirlies over the Bridge Bank, we picked up a breeze from the east and stopped the outboard.



Sunrise at the Needles

The east wind freshened a little and we bowled along at five knots all the way to Alderney where we secured to a mooring amongst the other visiting yachts and took the Main Brace water taxi ashore. Looking back at the boats rolling about on the swell we were pleased to be heading for Pete's house and comfortable beds on dry land.

After a day of gardening and shopping we sailed from Alderney at the civilised hour of 10 am. A favourable breeze took us out of the harbour and up the North side of the Island towards our destination of Omonville-la-Rogue which lies just to the East of Cape de la Hague. The wind soon dropped but the tide coming up through the Alderney race had us swishing along at over seven knots and looked like taking us on to Cherbourg! Luckily the breeze held up enough for us to get into Omonville and pick up a mooring.



Omonville

Omonville harbour is like a small version of Alderney with a stone breakwater on the West side and open to the North East but with no water taxi. So, after our customary siesta, the dinghy was dug out of the biscuit crumbs under the cockpit grating and prepared for the row ashore. It was a beautiful afternoon to be making our first landing in France so, after locating a couple of promising cafés, we set off to explore the coastal path and ruined fort which over looked the harbour. We found to my surprise that the paths were much steeper than they looked from La Mouette's cockpit! Of course it was nothing to Pete, a veteran of the Appalachian Trail, but I was relieved when our route brought us back, through the pretty village of shuttered stone cottages, to the harbour and cafés.

Barfleur, our next port of call, dries out completely at low water which is fine for bilge keelers and motor boats on moorings. Other craft, mainly fishing boats, can lie against the quay and we took our place at the end of the line, looped a rope around the mast and repaired ashore to watch from a neighbouring café. We spent a fair bit of the night aground but by 0730 next morning we were afloat and ready to go on to St-Vaast-la-Hougue.

At sea it was wet and windy so we took in two reefs and plugged on through the rain squalls against a weak tide. We reached St-Vaast soon after low water but we were able to get into the shelter of the breakwater before taking sails down and motoring in towards the dock gate. It was very shallow but we took



Amphibious Ferry, St Vaast.

comfort from a ferry ahead which we followed in until it turned sharply to starboard, rose out of the water and drove up the slipway! Even La Mouette can't do that so we grabbed hold of a ladder by the dock gate and started our lunch. We hadn't finished the first boiled egg sandwich before we were hailed by a fishing boat wanting to get alongside our ladder. We pushed off and let him in and then tied up along side him and were rewarded with a present of three large spider crabs which we accepted with gratitude in our best French. Before much longer the gate opened and we entered the wet and dreary marina still wondering how to cook three crabs each of which was larger than our largest saucepan. Eventually we liberated them in the hope that they would start a colony in the harbour. Having solved the crab problem but not our supper we splashed ashore in our oilskins to a harbour side restaurant where we enjoyed a very pleasant meal. Unlike Barfleur which hasn't changed since my last visit fifty years ago St-Vaast has been turned into a huge marina by enclosing the harbour and fitting gate which are open during the top half of each tide. Fishing boats still use the quay which, as before, they can only access at high water and on the seaward side are rows and rows of marina pontoons where boat are always afloat.

There didn't seem much to stay for so next morning we set off early on a grey and windy day to make our way down the coast towards Carentan. Our route took us inside the Iles Saint-Marcouf, the first French territory to be taken by the Americans on D Day and now a bird sanctuary, and along Utah Beach. We were soon off Carentan where the buoys marking the two mile channel across the sand were only just afloat so we worked our way slowly in under jib until, watched by inquisitive seals, we anchored in one meter to wait for the tide. After lunch and a brief rest we motored to the channel entrance where a strong tide between the retaining walls helped us along against the wind. Our chart of the river we were now in was rather sketchy and we were taken by surprise by a large black lock gate which appeared ahead as we rounded a bend. This was the entrance to the canal which was originally built during the Napoleonic Wars as part of a scheme to link the two sides of the Cotentin Peninsular and thus by-pass the British blockade of Normandy ports.

Inside the lock the canal broadened out and ran through a majestic avenue of trees, over a motorway and into Carentan where marina pontoons jut out from the east bank. We found the visitors' berths as instructed by the friendly lock keeper and tied up near a Rival 32 from Redclyffe Yacht Club who greeted us with the code for the showers. It was a

beautiful sheltered berth and the sun had come out so we decided to stay for a couple of nights, look round and do our washing.



Carentan

The weather forecast outside the Bureau du Port gave NW'ly force 4/5 for the next three days and not much sign of change which was fine for our Eastward progress along the coast. We decided to press on in little hops that we could cover during one high tide so we left Carentan at tea time on our third day and were in Grandcamp-Maisy for supper. The entrance to Grandcamp is a short run between breakwaters straight into the basin. Luckily the gate was open as we surfed in with a following wind and dropped the sails inside. Everyone seemed to have gone home but we found a berth and Pete, with his customary skill, went off and got the vital shower code before returning to cook our dinner.

Next day we went by local bus to Point du Hoc the site of a war time coastal battery which was stormed by American Rangers using rocket propelled grapnels to scale the cliffs. Ironically, having succeeded in their mission they found that the six big guns had already been moved inland by the Germans. The site now is a mass of craters and huge concrete structures, many still intact. Back at Grandcamp-Maisy we found a beach side café where we had an excellent supper and watched kite surfers doing acrobatics in the strong wind.

After supper we put in two reefs as a precaution ready for an early start in the morning. The forecast had added "occasionally 6" to the usual NW'ly 4/5 and we were glad of the reefs when we set off for Port-en-Bessin at six next morning. We did the 12 miles in two

hours and shot into the outer harbour to get sail off in the shelter of the breakwater. After a brief wait for the bridge to open we went through to the inner basin and made fast to one of the two visitors berths on a small pontoon at the end of the fish quay, with most of the day still before us.



Port-en-Bessin

We had a little explore round the town, lunch, siesta and then set off by bus for a walk. The bus dropped us off about four miles up the coast at Omaha beach and we walked back along the beach where there were sand yachts tearing about and further on, where it became rocky, scores of people with buckets collecting mussels from the rocks exposed by the low spring tide. After a couple of miles on the beach we struck inland and came across some red and white marks indicating a GR (Grand Route) path which was shown on Pete's map to led eventually to Port-en-Bessin. So we set of and followed the red and white markers through country lanes, farm tracks and footpaths past fields of barley and wheat, past a ruined church with a donkey looking out of the door and across a golf course back to the boat.

The tides were getting later so there was time to nip ashore for fresh croissants before we left next morning. We found very little wind outside so used the outboard to help us along as far as the Mulberry Harbour remains at Arromanches.



Mulberry Harbour

After taking some photos in rather murky conditions, we turned seawards to clear the rocks and wrecks. We sailed on to Courseulles-sur-Mer which has an easy entrance (at high tide) and room inside to sort the sails out before reaching the dock gate. There were far more pleasure craft here than the last two ports we had visited and we tied up in a vacant berth on the yacht club pontoon where a friendly member invited us over to the club for a beer. Before taking up his invitation we looked round Courseulles which, with its long sandy beach (Juno Beach), is a holiday resort rather than fishing port. After supper we went over to the Club for a beer and chat but we were really thinking about the weather. It looked as if there was going to be a better wind for getting home with a forecast of W and SW winds for a day or so before reverting to NW. Keen to take advantage of a favourable wind we left Courseulles when the gates opened at 10 o'clock next morning and found a nice W'ly 3/4 as we made our way through the fleet of boats out fishing, a very popular pass time in Normandy. We had over 100 miles to go to Lymington and set course for Bembridge Ledge Buoy. The wind was pretty kind: it backed a little and freshened so we took in a reef but were able to lay our course for Bembridge. We steered by compass rather than follow the gps and let the tide carry us from side to side of the track. All went well and we got through the east going shipping lane soon after dark but then came the fog banks which we had been warned of in the shipping forecast three hours after we left Courseulles. We passed through the west going shipping lane without seeing much and then we seemed surrounded by lights. At one stage we could see St Catherines Point flashing away twenty miles off while on the other side of us lights were emerging which looked very close. One ship went past, a blaze of lights but no masthead or side lights which must have been hidden in the fog. Things got better with the coming daylight and we sailed on to Seaview where we anchored for a couple of hours to wait for the tide to turn in the Solent.

The cruise ended with a splendid beat down the West Solent with the spring ebb making short work of a head wind. We had covered 290 miles at an average speed of 4 knots on only two gallons of petrol.

