

A CORNISH SHRIMPER CRUISES THE RIVER THAMES

The “*Dana Sirena*”, the ferry from Esbjerg to Harwich, docked at 12.00 on Friday 26th June 2009, and shortly afterwards there emerged from her cavernous car decks a procession of Cornish Shrimpers on trailers towed by a variety of vehicles. The group had spent a lively fortnight cruising the Baltic waters south of the Danish island of Fyn, and were now homeward bound to their moorings round England.

All save one. She was “*Gamba*” whose home port is Buckler’s Hard on the Beaulieu River in Hampshire, but today she was bound for Caversham, near Reading in Berkshire. We had decided to deviate from the direct route to the Beaulieu and extend our cruise on the River Thames.

The Shrimper is a 19ft 3in gaff sloop with a steel centre plate giving her a draft with the plate raised of just 18 inches. She has basic accommodation for two with a single burner gas cooker and a “Porta Potti” for use in emergencies. “*Gamba*” is powered by a 10 hp “Yanmar” GM10 diesel engine. The mast is mounted on deck in a galvanised tabernacle, and can be raised and lowered relatively easily, particularly with two spars which make an “A” frame rigged to two eyes on the side decks.

Her limited accommodation makes her not the most comfortable boat for inland waterway cruising, but my wife and I have spent many nights aboard her in cosy comfort. There are a number of luxurious hotels on the banks of the Thames, and I had expected to spend a night or two in some of them, but our exceptional good luck with the weather during our Thames cruise meant that we chose to sleep on board, and indeed to cook on board when local restaurants were too far away or unreachable.

The driver of the crane at Caversham had been emphatic that he would “knock off” at 5.00 pm on the 26th June, and that he would not be available over the week-end, so it was with a sense of urgency that we made our way in heavy traffic round the M25, but several phone calls to assure him that we were not far seemed to put him at ease. It was 1645 when we finally arrived at “Better Boating” yard.

No time was wasted in lifting “*Gamba*” into the water, but we encountered an unexpected refusal to our request to sleep on board at the yard. This posed quite a headache. A boat in the water and a car and trailer on the land all had to be parked for the night, but he finally relented to our request to moor “*Gamba*” overnight and to leave the trailer under the crane, provided that it was removed at 0800 next morning! My goddaughter happens to live Shiplake, not far away, and she received a surprise call from two distressed sailors, to which she responded with a warm welcome.

Saturday 27th June

It was a fine misty morning as we set out early from her home to collect the trailer from Caversham. It then had to be delivered to Penton Hook Marina near Staines, where we planned to end our cruise. The Penton Hook Marina staff could not have been more friendly or helpful, unlike their competitor at Caversham, and it was only a few minutes later that we set out back to Reading having locked up the trailer in a secure park, and by 1000 we were back on board, busy loading stores and rigging the mast. Our neighbours at Caversham were a friendly couple on a steel canal cruiser which they had built themselves for their retirement, and they provided us with mugs of tea and much good advice. I have owned “*Gamba*” for 5 years, and have been sailing regularly for nearly 60,

but I was lacking in knowledge and experience of lock techniques, Thames Inspectors and river bank mooring arrangements. This cruise was going to be a new and different experience.

After a quick lunch we set sail downstream towards Sonning to meet my goddaughter and her family, whom I had promised to take for a ride on the river to thank them for their hospitality. As we approached the agreed rendez-vous on the reach towards Sonning it quickly became apparent that something big was afoot. The annual Reading Regatta was taking place that very day, and the river was busy with eights, fours, pairs and sculls rowed by athletic young men and women. Passing boats were directed to a narrow fairway clear of the racing water, and from this we had a grandstand view of the rowing.

Later we moored to the river bank just downstream of the start, and from there we could watch the rowing and make tea without interfering with the regatta. When my goddaughter, her husband and children eventually left us we decided to stay put and spent the night there. Mooring to the Thames river bank away from private properties is generally free, but can be a bit isolated. We found this an attraction, and when the organizers of the Regatta had packed up their gear and boats the river was quiet, with only two other boats in sight moored in our stretch of the river. Fortunately we had taken the advice of our friendly neighbours and purchased two steel stakes to which mooring lines could be made fast once they had been hammered into the river bank. Mooring rings and bollards are few and far between.

The mosquito population of the river bank is numerous, and we had to learn to share the river with them. However we found that by lighting the oil lamp in "*Gamba's*" cabin, topped up with diesel fuel, this created a cosy fug which kept most of them at bay.

Sunday 28th June

Early morning mist gave our isolated mooring a romantic air, and this gave way to bright sunshine, but no wind, later in the day. At 0845 we cast off and motored, with the mast down, to Caversham Lock, our first. However the ordeal was much worse in anticipation than it proved in practice, and the lock keepers were friendly and helpful, as indeed we found them to be without exception throughout our Thames cruise. Once clear of the lock we passed under the two road bridges at Reading and then into more open country, where we shared the river with many oarsmen and women training on the wide stretch of the river.

By 1130 we had reached Mapledurham Lock, where a friendly lock keeper and a good loo both proved welcome. Once clear of the lock, we moored on the North bank just upstream of Mapledurham House, home of Soames Forsyte in the saga written by John Galsworthy, but actually owned for many generations of the Blount family. After a leisurely lunch we lifted the mast and motored to Pangbourne, where space was found for Gamba alongside Pangbourne Meadow, just downstream of the lock.

Riverside moorings such as these are generally free, but limited to two nights. As we planned to leave Gamba for 3-4 days and return to Richmond for domestic duties, we had to find something more long-term. After a search on foot of the Pangbourne river banks, which revealed no available visitors moorings, we phoned the Pangbourne lock

keeper who put us in touch with his colleague at Goring. Yes, he had a lay-bay berth, and yes, it was free for the next four nights. What a relief!

Supper that night was taken at “The Swan” just upstream of Pangbourne lock. Not the posh establishment of that name (which is at Goring) but a homely pub mentioned in “Three Men in a Boat”. As we sipped our coffee in the cockpit after dinner the Pangbourne lock keeper to whom we had spoken on the phone stopped for a chat on his way home along the towpath. A sailing boat with her mast up is not difficult to spot among the many motor cruisers, and attracts many friendly comments.

Monday 29th June

One of the disadvantages of inland water cruising in a Shrimper is the delicate question of toilet facilities. Our “Porta-Potti” is an adequate last resort, but shore facilities are more desirable, and by the end of our Thames cruise we became experts in this field, though not in the literal sense. The burghers of Pangborne have provided good public facilities at Pangbourne meadow, which, according to the notice on the door, open at 8.00 am. It requires little imagination to visualise the two of us standing expectantly outside the said door as the clock struck 8 (one wakes early on a Shrimper) and the dismay when nobody showed up to open up. By 9.00 things were getting desperate, and still no sign of opening time. We therefore dropped the mast and proceeded through Pangbourne lock in search of better things to come (or an isolated reach where we could moor and use the Porta Potti). Fortunately relief was at hand in the shape of the landlord of the “Swan” pub where we had dined the previous night. With no hesitation he let us moor and use the pub’s facilities.

The reach between Pangbourne and Goring is green and pleasant, and our passage likewise, but as we emerged from Goring lock, a rude shock awaited. I put the engine to slow ahead but there was no response whatever. Two terrible thoughts flashed through my mind – had the propeller fallen off, and what would have happened if we had lost power as we manoeuvred into the lock rather than when we manoeuvred out of it? Both proved hypothetical. The lock keeper and his assistant quickly took our lines and hauled *Gamba* out of the lock chamber and onto a nearby lay-by mooring, which proved to be the one they had reserved for us. That was a stroke of good fortune.

Half an hour of investigation in the engine compartment revealed that the bolt linking the control cable to the gear box had simply fallen out. It was now lost in the engine bilge. Clearly the mechanic who had installed a new engine in *Gamba* six months earlier had not tightened the lock nut securely. I had no spare bolt on board, but the helpful lock keeper gave us directions to a local ironmonger who was able to supply a replacement – not stainless, but quite adequate for the rest of our cruise. What a relief!

From Goring we took the train back to Reading, collected our car and drove to Richmond for 2 days of washing and catching up on paperwork, neglected while we were in Denmark.

Wednesday 1st July

Two days later, suitably refreshed, we found ourselves on the train to Goring, where *Gamba*, and the friendly lock keeper, awaited us. It took little time to load our gear and get under way, and after passing Cleeve Lock we found ourselves on one of the loveliest

reaches we have sailed on. The Thames at this point breaks through what is known as the Goring Gap in the Chiltern Hills. Not a spectacular gorge as the name might imply, but rolling hilly farmland.

On the south bank we found a friendly boatyard called Sheridan UK Marine where an athletic young man called Matthew managed to reach the bolt which I had installed on the gear box linkage, and tighten it to ensure that it did not come adrift during the remainder of our cruise. This required him to insert one arm, compete with ring spanner, through the small circular hatch in the cockpit floor, and the other down through the engine compartment. My arms would have simply failed to make contact at the far end, but fortunately Matthew's did, and the work was completed in no time at all.

Reassured by his workmanship we resumed our passage upstream until we came to the railway bridge at Moulsoford, downstream of Walingford. After consulting the map of the Thames, the calendar, our social diaries and my wife, the decision was taken to save the Upper Thames for another year and to turn downstream.

In the early evening we found a deserted stretch of river bank with glorious views of the Goring Gap on both sides of the river, and moored for the night. This reach boasts two hotels with reputations for luxury living and eating, but the spot we found convinced us to forego their delights and enjoy home cooking on a Camping Gaz cooker. We had no regrets.

Thursday 2nd July

The morning dawned lovelier if anything than the night before, with a light haze on the river meadows and the Chiltern Hills to the North of us and the Berkshire Downs to the south. Breakfast in the cockpit of a Shrimper in these conditions is an experience never to be forgotten.

Sailing downstream past stretches visited in the opposite direction was interesting in itself. The views were different and the stream helped us along, requiring fewer revs, and correspondingly less noise, from our diesel engine. The locks at Cleeve and Goring were passed uneventfully apart from a cheery wave from our Goring friends, who seemed genuinely pleased to hear that the throttle control linkage was sorted.

After Whitchurch and Pangbourne we moored again at Pangbourne Meadow under sunshine so hot that we were obliged to retreat to the shade of a spreading oak tree and nap for half an hour. Such is the stress of Thames Cruising.

Dinner was taken at the Swan Inn again, and the evening was completed with coffee in the cockpit listening to the bells of Pangbourne Church as the ringers held their evening practice. Could anything be more quintessentially English?

Friday 2nd July

A peaceful night at Pangbourne Meadow was followed by the first cloudy morning of our Thames Cruise. The burghers had not improved their ways, however, since our previous visit, and the public toilets were still securely locked at 9.00 am when we cast off and motored downstream to Mapledurham. The field on the north bank where we had

previously moored was now full of marquees, and clearly a grand fete was in course of preparation. We did not feel welcome, and passed through the lock without more ado.

Once clear of the lock we put the mast up with a view to a possible sail, but the wind was fickle in force and direction, so we carried on motoring. Gradually the buildings of Reading came into view, and at 11.40 the mast was lowered (under way) for the transit of the two road bridges. Caversham Lock, our first when bound upstream, now held no terrors, and was passed quickly.

During the previous day I had phoned Thames and Kennet Marina, just opposite the confluence of the two rivers, and booked a visitors berth in view of the forecast of deteriorating weather. They were happy to look after *Gamba*, and we needed more clean clothes, so shortly before 1300 we snuggled her up on a finger pontoon and took a taxi to Reading Station. Two hours later we were back at our home in Richmond.

Tuesday 7th July

There is no doubt that a hot bath makes boating seem much more attractive in retrospect. Our cruise on the Thames was rendered much more enjoyable by our ability to come ashore and use the frequent train service between Reading and Richmond to seek the pleasures of the shore. While many of the mooring places on the Thames have toilet facilities, few of them, apart from the large marinas, have showers, and even with the regular use of Wet Wipes, the crew of a Shrimper need a good wash from time to time.

We were laden with fresh food and clean clothes as we got off the train at Earley, and met the taxi which had been booked to take us to the Thames and Kennet Marina. Dark clouds and menacing skies did not encourage a prompt departure, but we finally decided that it was not going to get any better, and clad in oilskins we got under way and about 1200.

1235 saw us through the Sonning Lock, and we put the mast up for the long leafy reach to Shiplake/Wargrave. Lunch was taken at an isolated spot on the Oxfordshire bank and by 1350 we were approaching Shiplake Lock. Here the river banks are more manicured and the houses more patently affluent.

At 1500 we arrived at the St George and Dragon pub at Wargrave and moored for the night. The staff were tickled by our story of having spent the first night of our honeymoon there in 1966. The pub has changed since then, and is now a smart eating place but with no accommodation. We spent a lazy afternoon wandering round Wargrave and enjoyed a leisurely dinner in the restaurant.

Wednesday 8th July

The rain continued throughout the night, but the day dawned brighter with only occasional drizzle. Still no decent wind for sailing.

Not without a touch of nostalgia we cast off our moorings at the St George and Dragon, with thanks to the management and staff, and made our way downstream and through Marsh Lock.

Below this lock the river becomes much busier, as the town of Henley comes into view. The famous regatta had just finished, but the booms that mark the course were still in place, and the fleet of boats of all shapes and sizes which had assembled to watch the regatta was still in evidence. There was absolutely nowhere for a visiting Shrimper to moor to the river bank.

With new-found skill we lowered *Gamba's* mast as we approached Henley Bridge, which requires great care to navigate the central arch safely, and then hauled it up again on the Regatta side. It seemed a shame to sail past without stopping, but we decided to leave Henley for another, less crowded, day.

Between Henley and Marlow are Hambleton, Henley and Temple locks and some very desirable residences with neatly mown lawns running down to the river, so our shopping expedition was delayed until we were able to moor at the public moorings just above Marlow Bridge operated by Wycombe District Council. Marlow is an attractive town with good shops and facilities, of which good use was made.

After tea we slipped through Marlow Lock and down the long reach to Bourne End, where we found a good mooring at Spade Oak Meadow, just above the town, to which we walked for a light supper.

Thursday 9th July

There are no toilet facilities at Spade Oak Meadow, but after walking to Bourne End marina the manager gave us permission to use the marina's facilities and we also discussed leaving *Gamba* there for a few days. Below the railway bridge at Bourne End the river widens as it runs down to Cookham, former home of the artist Stanley Spencer, whose house is now a Museum and gallery of his work. Here we were joined by our son Nicholas, a welcome extra crew, and together we sailed through the long narrow channel to Cookham Lock. Below this lock is a long tree-lined reach with the stately home called Cliveden looking down benignly from the high ground.

It was cool and peaceful as we motored to the edge of Maidenhead before turning back to Cookham. After clearing Cookham lock a gentle breeze came up, so up went the mast and soon after, the sails. The river is quite wide at this point, and we enjoyed a pleasant tack back to Bourne End.

We decided to leave *Gamba* at Bourne End Marina for a few days, and the management were most helpful in providing a mooring. A brisk walk using the pedestrian footway secured to the railway bridge got us back to where Nicholas had left his car, and from there it was an easy drive to Richmond.

Sunday 12th July

After a few gloomy days, Sunday dawned bright, and we were joined by our son Christopher and daughter Alexia for a day on the river. They drove us back to Bourne End where we moored back at our old spot at Spade Oak Meadow to watch the "Ten Raters" and other dinghies racing in the light airs.

We then showed our new crew the green meadows of Cookham and the leafy glades below Cliveden before dropping them at Boulter's Lock at Maidenhead. After that we passed through the Maidenhead road and railway bridges (the latter a spectacularly beautiful pair of brick arches designed by Brunel) and on down to Bray.

Here there are two highly rated restaurants, and we had hopes of dining in one of them. However this was where we learned another lesson of the Thames. It is easy to moor on the towpath side of the river, but not at all easy to get across to the other side if you do not have a dinghy. We asked the keeper at Bray Lock if could walk across the gangway above the weir, but he replied "Only if you have webbed feet." In the end it was home cooking on board, but in a beautiful spot, with much to commend both.

Monday 13th July

Despite the frustration of being deprived of the gastronomic delights on the far bank, Bray Lock was a peaceful mooring, and has excellent toilet facilities. From there we motored to Windsor, passing the turreted splendour of Oakley Court, now a hotel but formerly the studios used for shooting the "Hammer House of Horror" films.

At Windsor we moored in a green park on the south bank which gave us a short walk to town for coffee, shopping, and sightseeing. Then after passing Windsor bridge and Romney lock, there is a long green reach with Windsor Great Park to starboard (strictly no stopping, let alone mooring) and some spectacularly impressive properties to port. We then reached Old Windsor, where the very friendly lock keeper allowed us to leave *Gamba* moored below his lock for a short walk into the village. He told us that the parish church has the grave of "Perdita" aka Mary Robinson, actress and mistress of George II. It was well worth the detour.

From Old Windsor we continued to Runnymede, where a large meadow on the south bank provides plenty of mooring spaces. It is a green and pleasant spot, though there is not much to see to connect it with Magna Carta. The most conspicuous monument was erected by the American Bar Association.

The green meadow is owned by the National Trust, and were disappointed to learn from the warden who called to collect our dues that even NT members have to pay. However we were amply rewarded by his advice that the two matching "Lutyens Lodges" at the upstream end contain a café serving excellent full English breakfasts, and good toilets. The following morning we followed his advice, and were not disappointed by either.

Tuesday 14th July

It was clear that the spell of fine weather which we had enjoyed thus far was coming to an end. Our trailer was waiting for us at Penton Hook Marina, a couple of miles downstream. It was time to bring our cruise to a close. As if to reinforce this point, we encountered two torrential downpours as we motored through Staines. There is no shelter in the cockpit of a Shrimper in such conditions, though a large umbrella was put to good use.

The lock keeper at Penton Hook Lock was typical of his kind, exceptionally friendly and chatty. He told us of his dream to own a Cornish Shrimper one day. Below this lock is the entrance to the Marina, but we decided to motor past it and down to the M4 bridge and back before ending our cruise. This reach is a mixed bag, with allotments and shacks on the south bank and the greenery of Laleham Park on the opposite side.

After turning about above Chertsey Lock and the M4 we found a convenient mooring on the Laleham side where the mast was taken down and stowed for the tow to Lymington. From there it was a 30 minute passage to Penton Hook Marina where we were moored at berth X28 in preparation for a lift out the following morning. The staff of this very large marina could not have been more helpful.

Wednesday 15th July

The crane lifted GAMBA at 1000 and within 30 minutes we were on the road bound for Lymington. After an uneventful journey she was safe in our garden ready to clear out the accumulated food, clothes and other detritus of our five weeks cruising in Denmark and the Thames Valley.

RICHARD SHAW
Gamba 218



Waiting for lock



Gamba at Pangbourne



Riverside above Goring



In Cookham lock



Nico and Avril below Cliveden



Richard below Cliveden



At Windsor