

Bumblng through Brittany – Gillie and Robin Whittle

We arrived at Le Havre on Tuesday morning, 5 June, and drove down to the Port du Plaisance at Plouer sur Rance, just north of Dinan. There we found a fine slipway, a boatyard where we could leave the trailer, and a very helpful marina office, who let us leave the car in their car park for five weeks free of charge.

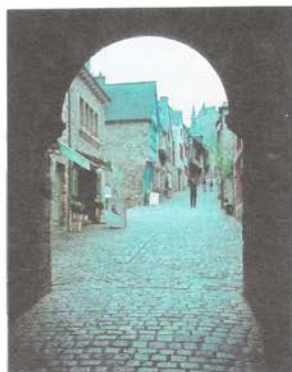
Launching *Bumble Chugger* went smoothly, and in the early afternoon sunshine we chugged out of the marina with our spars and sails stowed neatly ready for our week on the canal d'Ile-et-Rance. A few brown-sailed boats were out on the wide expanse of water, and a line of colourful little Optimists were setting off. We gently moved up into the narrowing river, the sides bordered by tall trees and outcrops of rock.



We passed several small wooden huts on stilts along the water's edge. They had long curved wooden poles attached to the apexes of the huts with nets stretched across, for lowering into the water and fishing.

At Le Chatelier - our first lock - we discovered that it was free to take the canal to La Roche Bernard and that all the locks were manned!

We soon reached the outskirts of Dinan, set between gorge-like hills with a high viaduct crossing to each side, and stopped to explore the town.



Beyond Dinan the banks continued to be colourful with yellow flags, white hemlock and dozens of different wild flowers - foxgloves, wild roses, ox-eye daisies, purple loosestrife, corn flowers, poppies and many more. The trees lining the banks became predominantly Lombardy poplars, with great clumps of mistletoe growing in them. There was a lot of bird song, and several times we saw water rats swimming along the edge. At the next lock a young lad let us through using a high-tech console to operate the paddles and the opening and shutting of the gates, and we hung on to the ropes fixed down the side of the lock. We soon discovered that this was not correct, and we had to throw our bow and stern ropes up to the lock-keeper to be looped over bollards.

We also discovered that high-tech gate openings seemed to be intermittent in installation, and intermittent in reliability, but work seemed ongoing on the system and we were never held up. The locks stop being operated at 1900, so we soon dropped anchor and celebrated our first night aboard with Black Jack and eggs and bacon!

The locks open at 0930 in the morning. A pleasant girl was at the lock on time and followed us on her bike along the tow-path to the next lock. This was the usual practice - two or three locks looked after by one person. As we left each lock, we were asked if we were going to the next lock, and a telephone call would be made if a different lock-keeper was on duty, and they would have the gates open for us and be ready to catch our ropes. We met an assortment of men and women of all ages, all very friendly and helpful: some were conversational, some just getting on with their job: some on bicycles, some on mopeds, some in cars.



And so we slowly made our way southwards, with stops at canal-side villages to visit loos and showers and stock up with stores. The locks became quite deep with about a 9-foot lift each time. We chugged into each damp lock, and as we slowly rose it was fun to see the lock-keepers' gardens slowly come into sight. A lot of trouble had been taken over most of them, and they were bright with flowers of all sorts, some embellished with flowery windmills and wells and bridges. At each lock there was a substantial solid house, only some owned by the lock-keeper but most in good repair.

On the third day we reached the final flight of locks up to the top - 11 of them. The top 7 km stretch of water was wonderful. It was so sunny and peaceful. The trees either side were mostly sweet chestnuts now, and alders grew along the water's edge with kingfishers darting in and out of the branches, and yellow water lilies bordering the canal. Dozens of dragonflies and damselflies swooped over the water and there was a clamour of birdsong all round us. We moved on and came to the first of the downward locks - a very much easier operation gently

Bumbling through Brittany

dropping (though spouts of water from the walls were inclined to wet things in the boat!). The countryside became more open, with fields either side and trees set back a bit from the water. Many fishermen sat along the banks and, together with the walkers along the tow-path, they seemed to enjoy waving at boats!

Near Rennes, the views became rather urban, as did the lock-keepers' gardens. One interesting lock was fully automated, with a plate rising from the floor of the canal to stop the flow, and push button gate opening. We came to the last lock on the Canal d'Ille et Rance, and were deposited into the River Vilaine in the centre of Rennes. After a quick look around the city we carried on through the not-so-pleasant industrial outskirts of Rennes, but were soon out into fields again on quite wide water, with smaller trees bordering it. A much more placid, open feel to the countryside than we had seen before, with cattle grazing, big expanses of wheat and maize, buzzards circling in the air, and herons and egrets on the banks. We saw coypu slithering in and out of some large holes in the bank.



The locks became further spaced apart, and another 50 kms on we became much more aware of civilization, with big plastic hullabalooes on the water and the main railway line running beside us. Our good weather broke on Sunday and we reached Redon in drizzling rain. The Nantes & Brest Canal crosses the Vilaine here. Soon the river doubled in size and several sailing boats coming up the river had their masts up. Rob was impatient to get *Bumble Chugger* rigged, and so we stopped 6km on at Rieux, where there were good pontoons for rigging. Unfortunately the wind was contrary in the morning and we had to motor on to our next stop at Roche Bernard - a very pleasant, picturesque town, heralded by its two impressive bridges.



We had a leisurely start on Tuesday morning and reached the Arzal dam in good time for its opening at 1400. A few more miles and, as the guide book said, we were “discharged into the Atlantic between Pointe du Moustoir and Pointe du Scal”. We had travelled 221 kms and been through 62 locks.

We still had a few days before we were due at the Golfe du Morbihan for the start of Shrimper Week. We arranged to meet up with Martin and Sarah Pumphrey at Penerf and from there set off for Houat. The heavens opened on our way, and we arrived at Port St-Gildas looking like drowned rats.

The rain cleared as we headed westwards and we had a pleasant lunch at Treach Er Beniquet before setting off for Belle Ile. We stayed two nights in Sauzon Harbour, a beautiful place lined with pastel coloured houses. Our good weather ran out as gales moved in from the Bay of Biscay and we had a swooping, rolling crossing back to the mainland in a Force 7, but arrived safely at Port du Crouesty ready for Shrimper Week.



Gillie and Robin Whittle – *Bumble Chugger* (124)