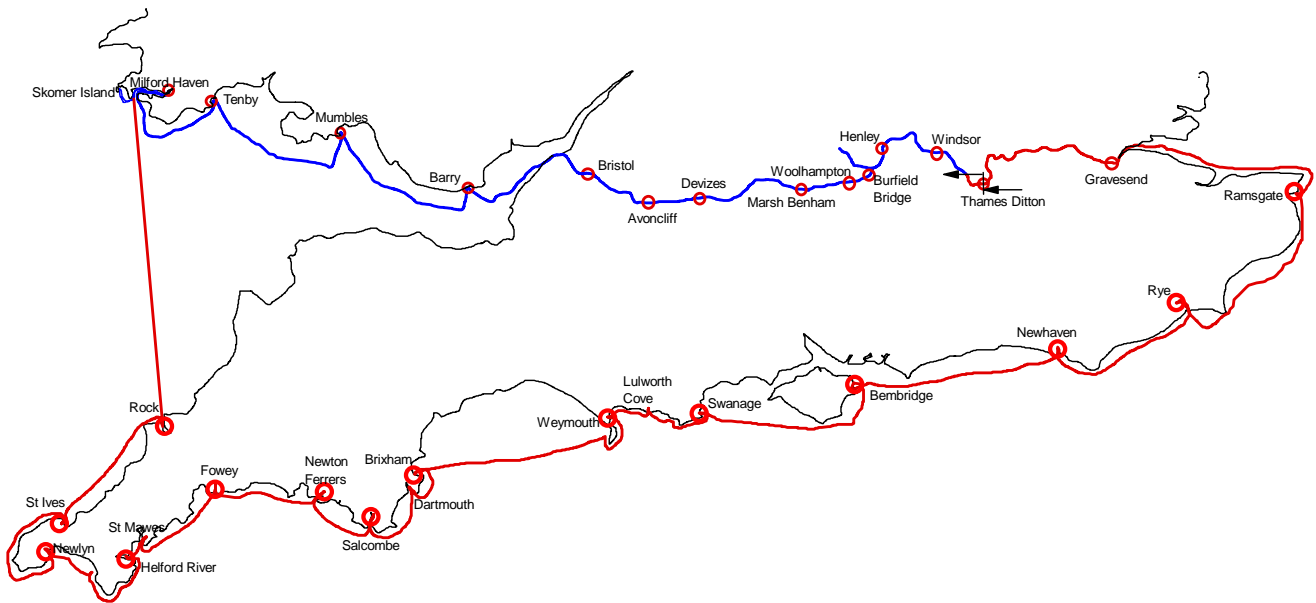


South Circular voyage of Bumble Chugger (124) - 2004 by Robin and Gillie Whittle

The south circular voyage in Bumble Chugger was planned to start and finish at Thames Ditton on the Thames. The first part of the plan was to motor, with the rig down, up the Thames to Reading and then take the Kennet and Avon canal down to Bristol. The second part was to sail from Bristol down the Avon Gorge to the Bristol Channel and then along the south coast of Wales to Milford Haven, where we would meet twenty other Shrimpers for the National Week. This would be the third part. The fourth and final part was to sail from Milford Haven down to Padstow and then on round Land's End, along the south coast to Dover and then up the Thames back to Thames Ditton.



Part 4: Milford Haven to the Thames

Friday, 9 July. The decision to set out on our voyage from Milford Haven to Padstow was made on Thursday as the latest weather information showed an improvement for that evening, which would continue for a few days. We made an up-to-date sail plan, assuming we could get away early on Friday. A big plus to our deferred plans was that we could join in on the barbecue lunch being arranged in Sandy Haven. We would sail from the barbecue to Dale and spend the night there ready to leave early the next morning.

In fact it wasn't until the evening of Thursday that the wind started to drop and allow us to continue with the new plan. Luckily the barbecue had been sited in a sheltered spot and was a great success.

It was still dark when the alarm went off soon after 3 am on Friday. We were away by 4 and it was quite exciting creeping out with just a light wind, counting the flashes from the cardinals and the green and red buoys to guide us out into the main channel. The refineries and quays looked ethereal lit up with a myriad of lights. As we sailed clear of the land the dawn slowly crept up and the wind increased to a 3/4 from the NW. We settled on to the planned course of 181°M and recorded our position every hour. We got to a point where there was no land in sight and then slowly Lundy crept into view on the port bow. It remained in sight for much of the day. The wind remained steady backing slightly to the west and although moving at over 5 knots, we got very bored with such a slow change to the scenery. There were sudden moments of excitement when twice a group of eight or ten dolphins appeared and for several minutes played close to the boat, shooting and arching out of the water across our bows. It was a great relief to us when at last the cliffs of Cornwall slowly started to take shape, first Hartland Point and then the coast down to Tintagel Head and then Trevoise Head beyond the entrance to the River Camel. Our arrival coincided with low water and all the pilots stated that getting in over the bar at this state of the tide might be difficult. It was now nearly 5pm so we had

been sailing for thirteen hours and weren't feeling fully alert. But then a most wonderful sight greeted us - a little brown Shrimper sail emerged from between the headlands. We realised that it must be Salthorse with Martin and Sarah Pumphrey aboard coming out specially to meet us. We soon made contact over the radio and learnt how they had heard from the Shrimpers at Milford Haven that we had set off. It was so good to see them and we appreciated it more than we could express. In fact there turned out to be plenty of room over the bar and we had a pleasant sail up the river to Rock. They had just finished one of the Rock Week races and as we entered the estuary we were joined by Black Dog, another famous Shrimper, returning to the anchorage. As we made our way to the moorings in calmer waters Salthorse came alongside and Sarah passed us a very generous tot of rum. There were more Shrimpers moored at Rock than we had seen anywhere before and many of them were high and dry on the sandbanks. Martin insisted that we take his mooring just off the Sailing Club and suggested that we might like the use of his 'Essex' dinghy which he had left there. After we had secured Bumble to the mooring they tied up alongside and came aboard for a cup of tea. They left us with some charts and tide tables to help for the next part of our voyage. As they left they suggested that we visit the Sailing Club later on as it always provided fish and chips on a Friday evening. We sent text messages to Bryn and Roy at Milford Haven to say that we had arrived safely after our longest sail of 77 miles (an average speed of 5.7 knots), tidied up a bit and then rowed ashore to the Sailing Club. The news of our arrival had gone before us and we were given a great welcome.



Saturday, 10 July. We planned to set off soon after lunch so that that we could sail down to St Ives with the tide. We needed petrol and various food provisions. Martin and Sarah had kindly given us the keys to their van which they used for their smoked fish business so we had a lot of fun driving this into the local village. We arrived back on board in time for an early lunch and then set sail just as the Shrimper Fleet was returning from the two races that morning. Martin and Sarah were pleased with their 2nd and 5th results and we waved our thanks and goodbyes.



The wind was from NW backing to W, 4/5 and we were able to sail straight out past Trevoise Head and inside the Bull Rock. The view of the cliffs was quite stunning and we were very glad to be there in reasonably good weather. However the seas looked grey and uninviting and soon we found that we were on a fine fetch with quite large waves providing us with a continual shower. We were within sight of the coast and we kept busy trying to recognise the cliffs and hamlets that we passed. We were anxious to give the Stones a wide berth and kept out to the north and west until well beyond them



before turning in towards St Ives. We arrived at low water and the harbour had dried out leaving all the boats lying around in a haphazard state. We dropped anchor just outside with a clear view into the town. The sun had come out and the noise of holiday makers drifted across the water with a brass band playing in the back ground. We settled down for the evening and checked our voice and text messages. We had several, one of which was from Barry saying that we had been awarded the Plymouth Plate for our efforts. The final Shrimper supper had gone well and there had been applause when it was announced that we had arrived at Padstow.

Sunday, 11 July. We had a rather uncomfortable night and were rocked about by the waves coming into the bay. At one point we had heard something metallic fall on to the cabin roof. In the morning we discovered that we had lost the nut holding the bolt attaching the boom to the gooseneck. Rob did a temporary repair with a rubber grommet that fitted tightly on to the bolt.

The weather was cloudy and with a gusty wind, 3/4, from NW. We rang the coastguard at the Cape Cornwall look-out and were told that visibility was very poor there. The Officer on duty suggested that the weather was forecast to improve the next day, so we decided to stay at St Ives for the day and moved Bumble into the harbour as soon as the tide had risen sufficiently. We anchored Bumble and secured a stern rope on to a nearby mooring to hold her pointing in the direction which would ensure the best angle when she settled on the sand at low water. We made ourselves comfortable in the cabin to catch up on the diary and work out a revised passage plan for the next day. Rob set twelve Waypoints to get us round Land's End to Newlyn and worked out the details for various speeds through the water. We listened out on Channel 16 and heard the drama of a fisherman in difficulties off Portreath unfold. His engine had cut out a few miles out and the wind was blowing him onto the Gull Rock.

Calls were being made to send the lifeboat out when the fisherman came on the line again to say he had found a plastic bag wrapped around his propeller. He had managed to partially remove it and get the propeller to turn. He thought he could limp back home into harbour!! That's all we heard.

By late afternoon we were high and dry and we stepped ashore for a wander around the town. We found our way up narrow winding back streets which took us to the top of the cliff overlooking Porthmeor beach. There was still a strong breeze but the sun had come out and we had some beautiful views of the coast and out to sea. Returning to the harbour we stopped at a Pizzarie on the quay side. After a pleasant meal sitting outside we bought ice creams and wandered back to the boat. Gillie nearly lost hers when a seagull swooped down and tried to snatch it!

We had another disturbed night with two interruptions; one as we floated on the tide and the other as we dried out again.



Monday, 12 July brought better weather. It was sunny with a force 2/3 from the NW. We informed the Falmouth Coastguards of our plans and set sail at 11.15 am, as soon as we were afloat in the rising tide. We had the most magnificent sail following the rugged Cornish cliffs, which were looking almost benign in the sun. We saw more dolphins and basking sharks, and then in the far distance we could just make out Longships Lighthouse marking the rocks beyond Land's End and England's most western point. We approached with the wind dropping as we turned southwards. The Armed Knight rock came into sight and we passed close by threading our way through the nearby rocks with the lazy seas milling around. We sailed close to the cliffs of Gwennap Head and inside the Runnel Stone, which took us right round on to an easterly course, the start of the next part of the journey along the South Coast. It felt odd with the sea so calm - quite different from the entire sea journey so far. Soon after this we sailed past the open air theatre at Minack. It looked very striking with its tiers of seats cut out of the rock - an amazing setting high above the sea. As we approached the Tater-du lighthouse Penzance Bay started to open up and eventually we could see St Michael's Mount. We sailed past Mousehole and on into Newlyn Harbour. Although devoted to fishing vessels it keeps a few spaces clear for visitors. We moored up against a grand old wooden yacht, Corissa, and discovered that we had mutual friends with one of the crew members, Nick Hallam (a co-designer with Nigel Irens of some of the modern fast yachts). He was a friend of Alf Perry who had sheltered us in Bristol.



Tuesday, 13 July was cloudy with a light breeze from the SE. While having our breakfast we were visited by the Berth Master. He gave us information about the showers and loos and then offered to drive Rob to a garage to buy petrol, two miles down the road.

We set sail just before 11am on a fine fetch to the Lizard. We sailed right into the shore at Porthleven and tacked down the coast inside all the outfalls almost in touching



distance of the cliffs. We could see the cliff path winding in and out and every now and then people would wave to us. We sailed very close to the rocks off the Lizard Point and inside the Men Hyr Rock, then on to Black Head. We were now heading north on a broad reach and continued inside the Manacles. It was after 6pm before we turned the corner into the Helford River. The weather had cleared up and we decided to anchor in one of the little coves on the south side keeping clear of the busy anchorages. We had a pleasant evening and an early night. We had noticed a significant difference in this day's sailing compared with that along the north coast of Cornwall and in the Bristol Channel. There were many more yachts around us.



We were greeted by a mist the next morning, Wednesday 14 July, and this did not clear until we had motored nearly all the way to Falmouth. We had decided not to explore Falmouth as we would be returning for Shrimper Week there in 2006 so instead we cut across to St Mawes where we had arranged to meet Mark Osborn at his sailing club.



The weather had cleared and as we passed St Anthony's Head we were met by a large fleet of seventy Dragons, a fine sight. St Mawes harbour turned out to be quite small, sheltered by a stone breakwater. We found a place to tie up and climbed the long ladder up to the quay. The sailing club was close by and we had a pleasant chat with Mark over coffee. He came out and took some pictures as we got back on board Bumble. With a light SW breeze we set sail for Fowey. In a similar fashion to rounding Land's End and the Lizard we kept close in to Dodman Point avoiding the outfalls and arrived at Fowey at 4.30pm. We were enchanted by the sight of the pastel coloured houses crowding the hills rising up from the water - a lovely spot. We continued upstream exploring the main channel and were surprised to come upon a commercial pier used for exporting china clay. A tanker was being filled as we sailed by and later we saw it leave the harbour. We returned to the anchorage close to the town and picked up a visitor's mooring. That night we witnessed a spectacular fireworks display.



Thursday, 15 July. It was raining and after a trip ashore to shop and collect a 5 day weather forecast from the Harbour Master, we returned to Bumble. We set sail at 12pm intending to meet Mike and Angela Hopkins in Newton Ferrers that evening. It was a rather damp sail and as we approached Plymouth Sound the fog came down. First we heard the dismal moan from the

Eddystone Lighthouse and then more worryingly, we heard foghorns sounding all around. We realised that we were in the middle of a Royal Navy exercise. Suddenly we became aware of a Destroyer bearing down on us. We were on a collision course and immediately turned round and kept going until we were quite clear of it. Even so it was quite scary. We wondered if its radar had missed us as it did not alter course at all while we were in sight. It was a great relief to reach the Great Maw Stone and turn into Wembury Bay which leads into the entrance of the River Yealm. As the fog lifted we could see the steep banks and beautiful scenery of a winding river which took us up to Newton Ferrers and beyond. We explored both channels and then tried to work out where Mike had expected to meet us. We decided to moor up at a pontoon which connected to the northern shore at the junction of the two channels. We changed into our shore clothes and waited. Luckily Mike and Angela had noticed where we had moored which was on the other side of the river to where they had expected. He had driven round, a rather long way by land, desperately hoping that we would stay put - we did! He then drove us back round to the Swan Inn where we were given a superb meal.



The next day we set sail for Salcombe where we hoped to meet up with a family of Rob's young relations. It was still poor weather with some rain but we had a light SW breeze. It was an easy sail across Bigbury Bay and the view of the cliffs from Bolt Tail to the Bolt Head was very impressive. It was one of our shorter sails and we had all afternoon to explore the inland channels, one of which led up to Kingsbridge. There are a huge number of yachts moored in the anchorages around Salcombe and navigation became quite tricky when a large fleet of Merlins, forty or more, raced by us. There wasn't enough water to reach Kingsbridge and, having admired the view of rolling hills, we turned back to be in time to meet Rob's cousins at Whitesands Quay. We found a mooring and soon the harbour master came alongside for his dues (£7.50). At 5.30pm we took a water taxi (£4 return) to the Quay. We arrived just as the cousins were parking their car and after introductions walked to the Sailing Club for a drink. After arranging to meet again the next morning on the Quay for breakfast we returned to Bumble.



Saturday 17 July. After an excellent cooked breakfast at Captain Morgans on the Quay we said our good-byes and went off to do some shopping. We had planned to leave mid-morning and get to the River Dart by lunchtime. The weather having started misty and cloudy began to clear as we set off and by the time we reached Dartmouth the sun had come out. We had a delightful sail up the beautiful

river, past the Naval College, through a wooded patch with expensive houses with their gardens



coming down to the water's edge, and then out into meadow lands. As we were enjoying a picnic lunch Rob noticed that the grommet had come off the gooseneck bolt. He fitted a new nut which he had bought in Fowey. We then turned back and set course, past the Maw Stone and round Berry Head, to get to Brixham for the night. We wouldn't choose to go back to Brixham again although there were good amenities. However it was a good point to set sail from to cross Lyme Bay and we decided to make the leap while the good weather still lasted.



So the next day we set off at 8.30am in a light westerly breeze pointing directly for Portland Bill intending to take the inner passage. The wind picked up as we approached the Bill to 5/6 and although we had timed our arrival just after slack water with a favourable current it still turned out to be a bit



popply as we rounded the lighthouse. We reached Weymouth at 6.30pm and moored up to a 30 ft yacht which had arrived ten minutes earlier. We discovered that they had set sail at 4.30am from

Brixham and had had a rather uncomfortable time coming round outside the Portland Race. Somehow it had taken them four hours longer than us!

After a good night we had breakfast and then went for a walk round the old part of the town and did a little shopping. It was hot and sunny with a light south wind. Our next port of call was Swanage and we had the most fabulous day slowly sailing along the Dorset coast in the hot sun. We were just arriving at Lulworth Cove when a Patrol Vessel powered up to us. "You look as though you are heading east" the megaphone blared at us. Well yes we hoped to get to Swanage that evening. "You cannot sail beyond the Cove until 1700" it declared "as the firing range is open" (dull thuds in the background). OK so we had an afternoon quietly zizzing in the Cove. It worked out well for the tides around St Alban Head, with a brief stop at Chapman's Pool to clear the propeller of a plastic bag, and then in round Anvil Point into Swanage anchorage where we picked up a mooring for the night. There was a north wind but it was so light it did not raise any waves and we had a peaceful night.



Tuesday 20 July brought another brilliant sunny day and a light wind starting NW and eventually backing round to the SE. We decided to miss out the Solent and sailed to the south of the Isle of Wight round St Catherine's Point into Bembridge. We could see Old Harry in the distance as we set off.



It was a disappointing day as the wind died on us half way through the morning and we had to motor most of the way. We had visited Bembridge several times before and had always moored right up at the top of the inlet in a pleasant marina there. This time we discovered that we had to take a berth further down on the west side of the estuary. This was much less pleasant as we had a long walk to the amenities and no direct access to any shops.

The next day we set off at 6am from Bembridge to catch the tide and reach Newhaven by early afternoon. The wind was 2/3 from the SW and this took us close to Selsey Bill through the Looe



marked by the Sheet and Boulder buoys. It was a steady plod and we arrived as a large passenger steamer was leaving. The traffic control signals turned to two greens above and below a white to allow us through to the marina. We had made good progress from Newlyn and had covered over 300 miles in nine days. We had benefited greatly by only sailing with favourable currents. We now hoped to get home by the 25 July, two days earlier than our original plan.



Our voyage on Thursday took us to Rye. We had a very light variable wind and sailed close to the cliffs at Beachy Head. From there we had to motor sail and eventually arrived at Rye entrance. It was an interesting experience to motor up the very narrow channel with flat marshland either side. We stopped at the Harbour Masters office at Rye Harbour to register and pay our dues and then continued two more miles right up to the Strand Quay in the town.



It is only possible to get in two hours either side of high water and the berths dry out to soft mud. We were able to step straight out on to the quay but to take a lot of care with the mooring ropes to ensure that there would be enough slack at low water. We had arranged to meet up with Gillie's brother and his wife who lived near by and had a very good evening at the Playden Oast. On our return to the



quay the water had disappeared; it was 12 feet down to the boat. The ladders were quite slippery to get down but otherwise all was well.

Friday 23 July. We had a long wait to high tide (1530). At 1330 the water started to appear and within quarter of an hour we were afloat and making our tentative way through a very muddy channel. We had planned to sail to Ramsgate, a long distance at that time of day, and after reaching the mouth of the river we were quite upset when we were suddenly disturbed by another Patrol Vessel. More megaphones “you cannot proceed further east - the Lydd firing ranges are open” (rat-tatting in the background). We had to make a two mile detour out to sea, even so we, had a clear view of Dungeness Power Station. Although the Patrol Vessel had been very polite they continued to monitor our progress very carefully and gave us another call to say that we must keep further away. Our passage planning hadn’t allowed for this diversion and we now had a stamina trial to get to Ramsgate. The wind was slowly backing as we proceeded and so we were headed all the way and again had to rely on motor sailing to have any chance of arriving before dark. Getting past Dover seemed to take for ever and we had to be very watchful with the perpetual coming and going of passenger steamers. Rob very nearly caused a disaster by not keeping to the middle of the Ramsgate channel and being low tide we suddenly realised that we were about to go aground on one of the sand banks two miles to the south of Ramsgate. We arrived in the dark (our lights worked!) and found our way in to a reasonable spot on the Visitors pontoon. It was 1030pm.

The next day the wind continued to back and we set off with a Northerly right on the nose. As we turned the corner round North Foreland we had been looking forward to a pleasant reach to the Thames. Not a bit of it - the wind backed round to the West and increased steadily in strength. We had a long struggle. We tacked up the South Channel, close in to Margate and then past Reculvers two towers. One tack took us in close to Whitstable and a slow slog past Sheppey Island. We had the tide with us in the afternoon and we reached Gravesend just as it was on the turn. We picked up a mooring just opposite Tilbury ‘B’

Power Station (slightly nostalgic for Rob as he had designed the Jetty and spent two years there as resident engineer). We were just settling down for our supper when we heard a call from a passing yacht. We were given an invitation to go ashore to the Gravesend Sailing club for a drink - an offer we could not refuse! We were so impressed by the friendly atmosphere there and were ferried to and fro by the rescue boat. It was a most unexpected happy interlude.



Sunday 25 July - the final day from Gravesend to Thames Ditton turned out to be quite a marathon on its own. Before setting off Rob spent an hour preparing all the tackle to allow us to lower the mast when we reached the bridges. This meant replacing the bobstay with a block and tackle system to allow the bowsprit to hinge up. By this means we could control the lowering of the mast from the cockpit. Lines had to be attached to both the bowsprit and the mast to hold them central as the mast was lowered.

The wind started quietly from the west but by late morning had built up to force 5 gusting over 6. Our Honda struggled bravely but it became very slow progress up some of the reaches. We sailed for about five miles but that was quite an effort with the gusts coming from different directions. At last we arrived at Docklands and gave Bryn Bird a ring. Alice was in and came out to give us a wave as we motored past. Rob dipped the rig as we got level.



Just after Tower Bridge we found ourselves in a melee of big pleasure boats. They kicked up such a popple it reminded us of Portland Bill. It was a trying test for the mast lowering gear. Luckily the restraining ropes kept the mast straight although there were some tense moments as it hinged up and down on impact with the waves.



Fortunately things got easier after Westminster Bridge and all went well until we arrived at Richmond Footbridge. Here we were surprised to find the sluice gates closed. The Keeper of the side lock



refused our entry saying that the sluices would soon be open. These rely on the tide level and we were lucky enough to witness them being raised. They are about 8ft deep and as they reach the top of their lift they are rotated into a horizontal position, to give more headroom to the river craft passing through! We had one more lock at Teddington and then two more bridges, eventually arriving back at Thames Ditton at 8.15pm. After a drink at the Swan we got a taxi home.

We were very glad to be back after over six and half weeks away having covered twelve hundred miles. A lot of mail had arrived since we had left!

