

Dunkirk Trip: 25 May to 2 June 2010
Drifting and Dreaming and Gipsy Rondo, Small Boat Club

With crews comprising Gregg and Ray on Drifting and Dreaming; Linda, Simon, Dominic, Russell and Hilary on Gipsy Rondo.

Tuesday: left Stevens Eyot about 10.45. Seen off by Rear Commodore taking photographs and providing bubbly. We cleared Teddington Lock after a minor delay and headed for Richmond barrier which opened after a short wait. We were heading for the sea. We had a good trip down into Central London and through the Thames Barrier. Below the Barrier we started to face wind over tide with white horses. The “chop” steadily increased – what had we let ourselves in for? The previous week when we did a trial run it had been “pussycat weather” aside from the rain. Gregg had a few fuel problems and had to pull over to clear the “jets”. We were very glad to see some familiar landmarks as we approached Queenborough – but as usual fate saved the best ‘til last. Gipsy’s engines started to fail giving us less manoeuvrability and more bouncing around. We were very relieved to reach Queenborough and have friendly hands help us moor up. Gregg managed to get onto the pontoon and met Grant Kinnaird and friends aboard Little Ships “Mimosa” and “L’Orage”; Gipsy joined some boats from Penton Hook Club on the concrete barge. Pretty tired.

Wednesday: a dull, windy morning – not sure that we will be going anywhere today. The only movement was the tug doing the rounds to collect money for the moorings. Time to sort out any damage and work out what needs to be tied down for the sea conditions – yesterday the cutlery drawer ended up on the floor. Simon disappeared down the bilge to try and sort out the engine problems. Helpful advice and practical assistance tackled the diagnosed “contaminated fuel” problem. We pumped up the inflatable and miraculously the outboard started. Simon set off to see Gregg and Ray moored on the pontoon. Discussions were already going on about whether we could make Ramsgate and it was decided that we would leave about 3.30 pm when the wind was predicted to have dropped a little. We set off with Mimosa, L’Orage and Drifting and Dreaming. There was a bit of a swell but not too bad until we cleared Margate Sands and met the waves from the North Sea. The conditions became rather challenging and eventually one of Gipsy’s engines “died”. We continued on one engine, just about keeping the other boats in sight. We finally reached a very crowded Ramsgate Harbour around 9.00pm. After some major challenges trying to manoeuvre in very confined spaces, Harbour Control allowed Gipsy to lie alongside a survey vessel. What a relief. We saw the firework display; Dominic arrived and Gregg found a fish and chip shop that didn’t close until 11.00pm!



Leaving Queenborough Wednesday afternoon



Heading toward Margate Sands, following Drifting and Dreaming.

Thursday: up at 6.30am to see the 40+ Little Ships leave Ramsgate Harbour. Quite an amazing sight despite the rain. At least the conditions were calm. You could see all the little blobs scattered across the horizon as they disappeared from sight.



Ramsgate Harbour Thursday morning as the Little Ships were preparing to leave



Heading out to sea.



Dots on the sea as they disappeared

We moved to fuel up then more work on the engine. Dom set off for parts and returned with a lifeboat man cum mechanic (Mark) and between them they managed to get the engines working. As the conditions were good we decided to go for it and left Ramsgate around 2.30pm to cross the Channel. The crossing was very calm but eventful as Gipsy ran on one engine and then the other as the "mucky" fuel did its worst and clogged the filters. But we made Dunkirk eventually with a glorious sunset at our stern. Gregg managed to open up Drifting and Dreaming so he reached Dunkirk well ahead having seen what she was capable of. We were too late to go through the sea lock as it was after 8.00 pm French time (Gregg made it) so we tied up against another English boat for the night in the outside marina area. A quick stroll into Dunkirk saw us in a Japanese restaurant, one of the few that was still open!



Crossing the Channel – very little shipping



Simon and Dominic confer on the route.



What a beautiful sunset



Safe in Dunkirk Harbour

Friday: A lovely sunny day. Up to catch the sea lock (allegedly at 8.30am French time). But it seemed to be a very moveable feast and we finally made it through to meet Gregg around 11.00am. So a late breakfast was the order of the day. Gregg had befriended Alain who lived in the marina on a 60' sailing boat. Alain had provided two mooring spots and a dongle for the loo/showers. So we avoided rafting out against a wall – all that had seemed to be on offer otherwise. Simon and Dom decided more work on Gipsy's fuel lines was in order and set off for the chandlery, returning with pipe, clips and filters. Good job they know how things works. We were in the marina with the Little Ships and had a fantastic view of them moored up against the wall. Everything from small open boats to pleasure steamers, many of the names familiar to us from the Thames. Then time for a wander to explore Dunkirk. There is an interesting fish market, busy shopping area and a wide selection of restaurants. We took Alain's recommendation and joined many other boaters tucking into local fish dishes. Russell and Hilary arrived to join us after managing to get a lift with a Frenchman enabling them to take the ferry to Dunkirk (no foot passengers).



Friday morning – waiting for the sea lock



We've made it – and the Little Ships are there before us.

Saturday: the day of the main 70 years commemorations. We watched the Little Ships heading out to sea to form a wide circle around the site of sunken vessels. The conditions were just about okay – a little breezy and increasing. We walked to the beach to see the celebrations with representatives from UK, France, Germany and the Czech Republic. Unfortunately it was all too much for one veteran who collapsed and his friend tripped trying to help. So we had a demonstration of the French emergency healthcare in operation. This rather delayed the proceedings. Prince Michael of Kent, President of the ADLS, attended for UK. A moving contemporary account of the situation in Dunkirk was read by some local drama students. The wind was very cold but we hope we have some good shots to share of the commemoration; the helicopter raising an anchor from the IoM packet that was sunk; the Little Ships circling and the wreath laying. There was a 17-gun salute from HMS Monmouth. After the ceremony we headed back into town for brunch and a warm up. During the afternoon there was a parade through the town with old military vehicles and street naming. The town was now pretty busy and we had a challenge finding somewhere for an evening meal.



Saturday – the commemoration on the beach.



The helicopter dropped the wreath



As the Little Ships circled off the beach



Dunkirk marina with the old Sandette light ship and a three masted trader

Sunday: We hoped to leave. We were up for an early locking and waved “au revoir” to Weybridge Mariners who were heading up the canals toward Holland. We avoided the “Saga Pearl” that had just come into port. Gregg went for fuel

while Gipsy headed out to sea in choppy but manageable conditions. Gregg joined us but wasn't happy with the conditions so we agreed to head back to harbour and wait 'til the wind abated. So we experienced swell on our stern going back into Dunkirk – makes for difficult steering. Simon needed to be back in UK for Monday night so decided to return ahead by train. It turned out to be Mother's Day in France so everywhere was packed lunchtime. But a very late lunch turned into an evening meal.



Sunday morning – leaving Dunkirk as the Saga Pearl was maneuvering.



HMS Lincoln moored up

Monday: a very windy day. Most people decided to stay put. The wind and waves on the stern made it very noisy. It was a day for catching up with domestics but Russell and Hilary managed a visit to the museum that they found very interesting. We planned our return route with some help from friendly Penton Hook Club members and managed to “gate crash” a supper invitation they had from Rochester Cruising Club. Good fun to meet others and we have an invitation to visit later in the year.

Tuesday: We departed at 8.00am (UK time) and followed the buoyed channel along the coast toward Calais before starting to head across after buoy 8. We were lucky that it was pretty calm conditions so a major flotilla took to the seas including most of the Little Ships. Although there was a little more traffic in the separation zones than the previous week, there were no problems. We caught up with the second group of Little Ships including MTB 102 so there were some great photo opportunities. Having passed this group we joined the mêlée waiting for a ferry to depart Ramsgate at 1.30pm. Gregg was already in harbour and had secured some temporary moorings. After a quick lunch we decided to carry on to Queenborough so we could reach Kingston comfortably the next day. Russell and Hilary disembarked to head home by train and the two boats headed out to sea once again. Conditions remained pretty good past Broadstairs, round the North Foreland and past Margate and Reculver. Gregg went ahead and all went well until about 3 miles outside Queenborough when gummed up filters struck again. The wind had increased a bit so we had to anchor with it up our chuff while Dom did running repairs. Gregg came back to act escort but we all doubted whether he could have managed a tow in those conditions. Luckily

the engines started again so we chugged into the moorings. A quick clean up then headed for the pub to get some food.



Tuesday – crossing the Channel and catching up with the Little Ships flotilla

Wednesday: a beautiful calm sunny day. Dom did a quick filter change using the last filter in stock and we set off about 8.00am. Fingers crossed. After a bit Gregg went on ahead as Ray needed to get home. Gregg's issue was whether he would have enough petrol to get home. Gipsy chugged along, clearing the QEII Bridge and Thames Barrier reaching central London about 1.30pm. At least now we were on home territory. Gregg had his own challenge when the petrol ran out. He needed a helping hand to get somewhere safer that he could refuel from his reserve tank. He then took it easy to Putney where Ray's wife assisted ferrying cans to and from a local petrol station. He then headed for home reaching the island about 5.30pm. Gipsy's engines behaved until just before the Grand Union Junction at Brentford when both engines gave up. No more filters. Dom tried everything he could think of but calling for the assistance of "Mummy Bear" for a tow was the only thing left. An hour and a half anchored in the tideway was not fun – chastised by rowers and their coaches etc and almost run down by other boat users because of the lack of water. At last "Mummy Bear" was in view – we could stop worrying. The last challenge was to retrieve the anchor along with a metre of metal rod and other enhancements. The final stretch was beautiful. Almost ideal conditions. Through the barge lock at Teddington and many willing hands helping us tie up on Stevens Eyot around 7.30 pm. We had made it.

PS Beverley says it took a week before Dom stopped smelling of diesel.