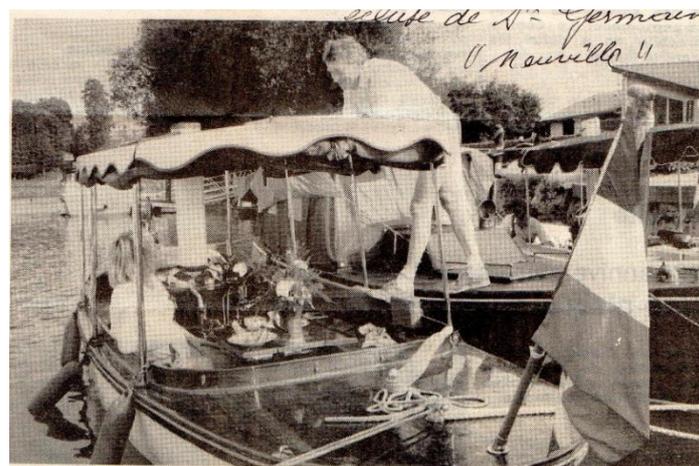


As **Chantilly**'s adventures in our hands terminated with her sale this year 2015 (to France of course!) I have elected to compile our Funnel reports of her travels, hopefully as encouragement for those contemplating similar cruises or simply to while away the odd coffee break.

The articles are presented in chronological order, and some waterways were visited more than once, but as each cruise presented different aspects of the navigation, they are all included.



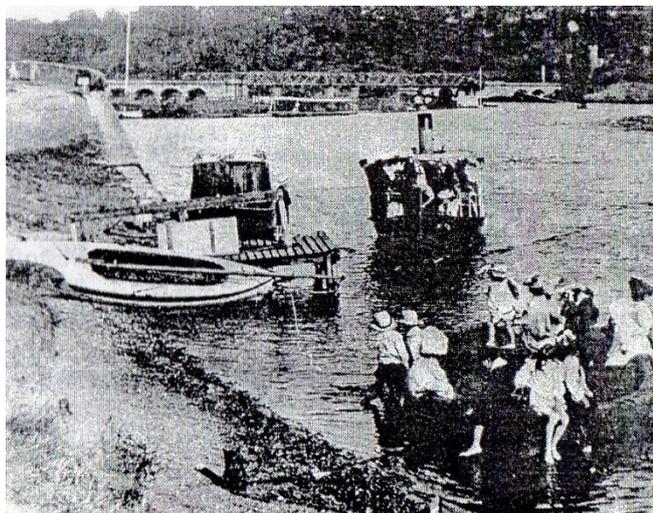
Chantilly with John and Françoise Tilley on the river Mayenne.



I WASN'T BORN A STEAM BOATER-I VOLUNTEERED!

Some years before its centenary in 1986, Trent Valley Sailing Club mooted suitably colourful ways to celebrate it.

I was much taken with one of the club's old photos, reputed to be circa 1886, of a mucky, tubby steamer with a decided list coming into the landing at Trent lock bristling ladies with parasols and naughty boys with their legs over the side, prepared to disembark. So with some experience of '0' gauge steam in my teens, I volunteered to replicate this aspect of the 19th century boating life, and provide a steamboat.



TVSC Club House Boat Trent Lock c1900

The first stage was easy; I obtained a Stuart Turner catalogue, chose a set of engine castings, and innocently made it. It happened to be a SWAN, the biggest I could just struggle to make on my much misused 1936 3 3/8" ZYTO lathe previously used for sharpening pencils and other domestic purposes.

Then I needed a boiler. I had in mind, a substantial drum, suspended over a fire. During the early work, I met up with a notorious steamboater of that time, Tony Gregory. We had regular meetings, to sample his home made wine, (drunk straight from the demi john), and discuss my project. He offered much kind advice, and produced a sheet of boiler designs from which I chose a Porcupine design, as used in American fire pumps, this being suitable for production from standard steam pipe and fittings, and hence arousing no adverse interest from officialdom. I was persuaded; however, to submit my drawings to Cornhill, for approval and after countless ridiculous correspondences, they returned my drawings stamped "APPROVED", and all for £50 including the actual boiler inspection.

This I made from a section of 6" pipe with flanged ends, and 80 1/2" BSP quills screwed in the walls. (They were however, welded over the joint as well). The firebox, I cast in refractory and the pressure vessel was suspended over it in a fairly standard casing.

Now the really easy bit: - find a tubby old boat somewhat like the photo. The plant, I guessed would power a 16-18 foot hull, which I fondly imagined would abound in corners of any old boatyard. Wrong! By 1985 all the wooden boats of my youth had either deteriorated beyond reclaim, or had been irreversibly converted into chicken coups.

So then began a summer of 'old boat spotting'. Associates (I won't call them friends any more) would report a sighting as they travelled, like: "I saw just the boat you need, by the canal in Sheffield". A dash up the M1 to Victoria Quays produced yes, a fine hull, but only 10 or 12 feet-I did noticed in this exercise that folk invariably over state boat length by up a factor of 10- so no hull.

By this point in the exercise, I had met the SBA, at Richard Bartrop's 1985 rally on the Erewash (I also had my very first trip on a steamboat-**Petagin**). I invited the event to TVSC for Sunday tea, which initiated many years of Trent Events. I had also visited Rupert Latham at Hoveton and viewed his Frolic 18 hull. It appeared much too fine and delicate for my purposes of bouncing off lock gates, but I by then, was running close to the 1/5/86 deadline, so, winter 85/86 saw the construction of **Centurion** (an obvious name).



Then I realised that a 'Porcupine' boiler was far too big for the hull, so I completed a Newton Coil ex David King, and being aware that despite its mighty mouse performance it didn't stand a snowflake in a firebox's chance of steaming a SWAN, I turned it into a compound by sleeving one cylinder down to 1 ½. Next came on analysis of propeller sizes from the "Index" for boats of similar size and power, settling on a 14" x 18", and making a 'pattern' for a casting from welded aluminium, and then realising with 1 ½ HP at best, it would be quite strong enough-and so on to May 1st (my traditional ending of winter working and beginning of summer utilisation) when **Centurion** first steamed on the Ashby canal and performed exactly as a Frolic 18 should.

Then began the promised series of exposures on the Trent including being Officer of the days launch for the dawn race at the Summer Ball. Then we had our first SBA event at How Hill which we hugely enjoyed, and I joined in all the seasons events. But I had never intended to be a steamboater for more than that the centenary year.

So I duly advertised Centurion in Funnel. But no one bought her. So 87 saw me, not unhappily still an active steamboater. Again we joined avidly in the SBA events, even on Lake Lucerne International event. So when John Woodruffe came along later that year, I wheelbarrowed his money to the bank with a heavy heart-but by that time Dauntless was in view, but that's another tale or two..

Centurion is still in fine fettle in the hands of Nev Boulton and Ralph Pullen. She has swapped the Newton Coil for a Blackstaffe, and the rejected boiler was the seed for **Boy Blue**.

Me? Well I admit to having a growing affection for you slightly nutty lot, and your antics, so I'll give it a try for another year... or two.

So after the winter of 88/89 "**Chantilly**" emerged-a" Frolic 21" hull, a 21 ft glass fibre hull moulded from an original steamboat, and 2 or 3 hundred were produced previously for electric propulsion on the Thames and Lakes. The builder, a steam man, produced a few steam versions, which finished with traditional mahogany interior and decks, made a very attractive, strong, trailable steamboat that anyone with reasonable skills could complete.

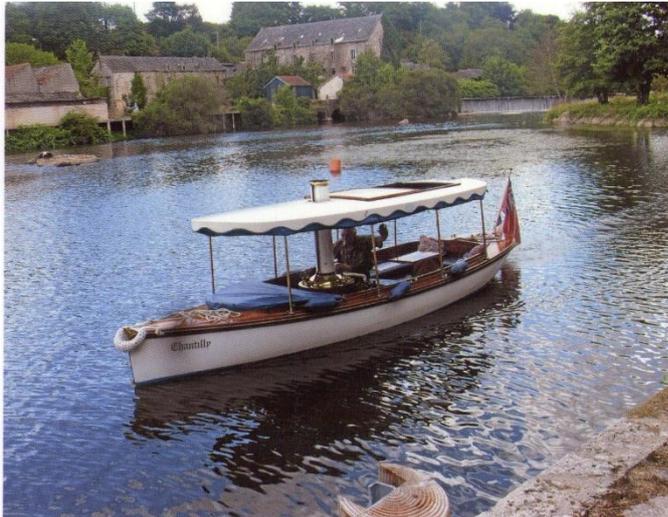


CHANTILLY (the first of several 'Tilly's) had a canopy and side curtains and with the table lowered and infill piece fitted, allowed all the cushions to form a king-size (but a bit short) bed in the aft cockpit.

With careful use of storage, which included 8 bags of coal (200kg, even that needed eking out with bank wood), a Brompton folding bike and all other necessary gear we could undertake up to 3 week cruises.

Life aboard is "cosy" and with such facilities as the steam heated "Windermere" kettle, ash pan "oven", firebox grill, quite self contained.

Having an interesting, trailable craft is an incentive to seek out novel and exciting navigations, our first French cruise being the acclaimed Nivernais canal, originally a log fume to get the Nivernais oak to Paris to heat the houses of the bourgeois Never a heavily used canal-they had varying lock gauges, long left for pleasure boat use. This was the first of 25 cruises in France, covering most of the waterways suitable for a 21 ft launch, some several times-and just one with 200m long locks and 3000 ton barges that was definitely not suitable!



Chantilly on the Mayenne

The river navigations are state run, and require no licensing. The canals are also the responsibility of the departments, and just occasionally a " vignette " is required for a modest sum. Town moorings and facilities are provided by the town on the premise that "if you want visitors, make them welcome"

We did miss one summer cruise in France, and trailed **Chantilly** to Holland, a boater's Mecca where cars give way to boats and even motorways have lift bridges!

In all, **Chantilly** has covered over 15,000 miles in probably 1000 days and converted around 15 tons of coal into ash and black smuts.

The water, we only borrowed!



Françoise tells:-How I met steamboating.

I was one day, peacefully on the river Mayenne, by the lock at Neuville, my home, in my fishing barque; when round the bend came a steam boat. As I exchange smiles with the eccentric English man, it contained, we fell immediately in love, and shortly after, we were married to the strains of the Marseillaise...

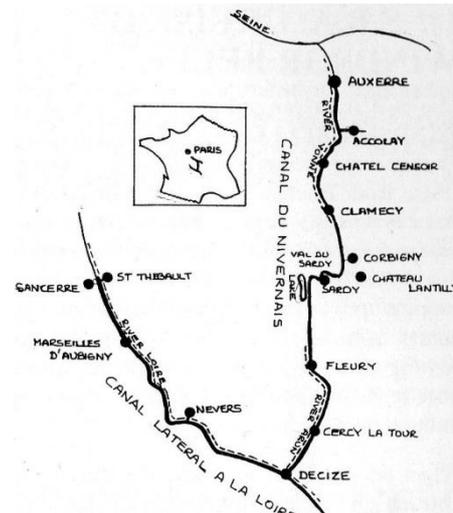


Or, so reported local paper “Ouest France” during the steam boat event of 1992. Like all fairy stories, it’s a little short of reality, but none the less, I did meet my first steam boat, **Chantilly** near my home, on John’s Birthday: on 23rd of August and it did completely change my life for more than 22 years!

Being steeped in **Chantilly** and the SBA events gives me great pleasure, a feeling of real communion with the world of steam, nature and water. It is wonderful to be a steamboater having dirty hands and trousers...it is wonderful to share so much time with you all. Thanks for welcoming me as one of your own.

Between you and me, I found you, other steamboaters a little less eccentric than John...

CHANTILLY GOES HOME.



A book acquired over Christmas entitled ‘Victorian Pleasure Boating’ did not, as I imagined, contain pictures and accounts of decorously clad gentlefolk splashing around the Thames, but accounts of daring do exploits of intrepid boaters travelling the untamed rivers and waterways of France in skiffs, canoes and other skimpy craft. This rekindled a lifelong desire to travel the magic routes of the waterways of France that can lead from the Channel through to the Mediterranean which had so far been hampered by lack of a suitable vessel (being quite disdainful of the non traditional cruisers offered by the hire companies).

Our 21’ Frolic was due for completion in May, so on the grounds that if one has an interesting boat, one is entitled to travel to interesting places in it, a two week trip on the French Waterways was planned for June.



Brief research into magazines and Hugh McKnight’s *Cruising French Waterways*’ book and much thought and debate was given to selecting a suitable cruising area for a 21’ steam boat. Some of the waterways, we discovered still carry commercial traffic in the way of 300 tonne barges and pictures of small boats on these canals show them cocooned with old motorcar tyres as defence against these gargantuan monsters. We discovered however, that the Canal du Nivernais which is, the most arduous of four parallel waterways over the Massif Central, linking the Seine with the Rhône, is no longer open to commercial traffic and is reserved for pleasure boats-which may specifically NOT sport tyres on their gunwales! This choice was applauded by devotees we spoke to, and the canal described as “like travelling by boat through the Derbyshire Dales”. The downside of this choice was the fact that the Nivernais climbs some 600 ft to the summit level and then descends to the Loire through a total of 110 locks in just 108 miles, which tends to be anathema to the stoker, having just raised a good fire and find another lock around the corner! However, all of these locks have operators-“Eclusiers”-and the waterways were reputed to be un-crowded, so they were not considered a serious hazard. Through a British hire base I made contact with, the ‘Captain’ of the Port de Plaisance at Auxerre, the northern terminus of the Nivernais, who showed great interest in this adventure and

proffered all the help we needed-he had a good slipway, we could park the car and trailer-he even found a nearby coal merchant!-and it was all free. Yes, the French often make no charge to any user of their waterways, pleasure boats, hire boats-not even foreigners! There also appeared to be a complete absence of any formality, or licensing requirement for bringing a boat into France and on to the French Waterways. However I took my SSR Certificate with a copy of the boiler certificate tucked in just for luck.



By this time 'The Steam Boat' was nearing completion, the 'Kingdon' coal fired boiler and the 'Taylor' design 2 ¼ x 3 5/8" x 2 ½ compound were installed and the most difficult aspect of building a boat had now to be faced-naming it! I shamelessly admit that the family name and a 'French Connection' resulted in **Chantilly** being chosen, which combined with regular garlic eating would, we felt, help gain acceptance by the natives and compensate for our terrible French.

It was our plan to sleep on board (later modified to one night on board, one night in a hotel), so, a lowering table and folding cockpit infill section and careful re-arrangement of the cushions was made to form a somewhat shorter but definitely wider than average bed. Extra storage was provided in the form of fitted bags under the cockpit seats and generous access into the fore and aft bulkheads added to the stowage space.

Chantilly made her debut at the Llangollen event in early June and bar a modest snagging list, proved satisfactory. I was, on this trip, able to assess coal consumption which worked out at around 30lb per 6 to 8 hour steaming day. The maximum I could reasonably carry, allowing for space on board and towing weight, was 350lb-nearly enough for a two week cruise, so I was not unduly concerned about finding coal (or its French equivalent) en route.

Auxerre is about 100m south of Paris and as we wished to arrive in time to launch and prepare for an early start the following day, the 7.30 am Dover/Calais ferry was booked. **Chantilly**'s canopy lowers to cover the coaming for trailing, so we are able to tow at a reasonable speed.

Saturday June 17th saw us creep out at 2am and arrive, still smiling, in spite of a 2 hour queue on the dreaded Périphérique, in Auxerre at 5pm. We were met by quite a crowd of interested boaters of all nationalities, some of whom spent the summer in their boats on the beautiful Yonne. Word of our coming had preceded us and I then realised just how rare steam boats are in France. We were plied with questions and wine and made promises of trips the next morning when in steam. This we did on Sunday morning and left Auxerre a little before noon in hot sunshine, to cheers from our new found friends, only to quietly return from the first lock just upstream 15 minutes later, having discovered that locks are closed from 12 noon (or thereabouts) until 1pm and nothing, but nothing may disturb the Eclusier's lunch break.



In spite of a delayed start we covered good ground and I discovered that our pace, which seemed to apply to most of our trip, was about half an hour per lock, almost irrespective of distance between. The locks we discovered are not so much ‘manned’ as ‘womanned’-98% of the lock-keepers are women, from young (extremely pretty) students to (quite pretty) grannies. Although no charge is made for use of locks, it is considered good form to give a small present to the lock-keeper. Some 150 locks on the route meant the gift should be token rather than valuable, so I had laden the boat with 2 bulk packs of English Polo Mints, to give to their kids. So few had any that in the end we were giving handfuls of the things to any passing child!

The first section of the Nivernais is the River Yonne, canalised. The navigation darts from cut to river and back and there are many beautiful farms and ponds. Even later, when the canal begins to climb in earnest, it follows the Yonne Valley, with the diminishing river often in sight. At Sardy the canal then climbs even more steeply to the summit at Baye through the Val de Sardy, quite steep sided with villages and hamlets on the hillsides. As we travelled we discovered more details of the history of the waterway-it was built, not as a thro’ route, but to bring wood from the Morvan forest to Paris to heat the homes of the ‘Bourgeois’. Started in 1780 work stopped during the Revolution and the canal was completed in 1853-a relatively new canal. There are some variations in the gauges of the upper locks, so it was never a serious commercial route and is still in excellent repair, as are the locks and lock houses generally. Signs of original construction work still exist in the form of local quarries, one with the remnants of a narrow gauge railway.

At the head of the Sardy Valley the canal dives through three short tunnels set in lush green cuttings, it emerges into the bright expanse of the Etang de Baye, a huge feeder reservoir separated from the canal only by a narrow causeway, and given over to sailing and fishing. From Baye down to the Loire the pace appears more leisurely; the much flatter and wider Arun Valley is followed with bigger strides between locks, almost an anticlimax after the crescendo of the climb to the summit. The leisureliness of the descent is emphasised by dropping down through the placid emptying locks, entering in brightness and quickly emerging from the gloom after descending. But when climbing, one enters a damp foreboding cavern, waiting blindly for the slow filling, to rise blinking into the sunlight, only to be off again before taking in the new vista and attractive flower display to be found on many lock sides.



At Decize we followed the waterways map carefully to avoid the Arun and old Loire channels-on to the Loire for a short distance and into the basin linking with the Canal Latéral à la Loire. We took the opportunity to steam up the un-navigable river, with its bathing beaches, fishing holes, and waterside pounds, until the speed of the current and protruding trees warned me of shallows and having already met a water viper on the Nivernais, the fear of alligators! The Loire canal is commercial and well kept with a draught of 8 ft...but although a number of the barges were to be seen loading at various wharves, we did not in 3 days travel past on in work. The locks are well spaced so travel is quite swift with the Loire in its wide flat valley running just two locks below visible at every turn as a wide, sandy, partially dry watercourse. Towns and villages are few on this fast canal and one must take a short arm linking with the river to reach old towns like Nevers, established on the river long before the canal passed their way.



Crossing the Loire Aqueduct

We passed through Morseilles d'Aubigny, the 'Braunston' of the Latéral, built on an embankment around the canal and still with its dry docks occupied with barge repairs and conversions. Here we expected to find a slipway to end our voyage, but no slipways exist on this canal we were told. We were directed on a further day to St Thebault which has a waterways maintenance base with a crane and sits just below the delightful hilltop wine town of Sancerre, so it was no penance to extend our journey. At the yard we met Marcel who was delighted to have such important work for his huge new crane and took great interest in our welfare, including our need to travel some 60 miles across country to retrieve the car and trailer from Auxerre. Although close by, the railway took a long and tortuous route and hitch-hiking is not a local pastime, so we swallowed hard and had a taxi. On our return later that day **Chantilly** was gently and expertly lowered on the trailer, snugged down and we then spent a memorable last night exploring and feasting in Sancerre, a town I will one day revisit.

My lasting impressions of this fascinating journey are:-The quietness and emptiness of the French waterways.



The luxury of 'manned' locks, their pretty gardens and unhurried pleasantness of the lady Eclusiers.

Well maintained navigation, with excellent paved tow paths, generally wide enough to drive on and some excellent bank-side shower and toilet facilities, far outshining those found in towns.

The variety and fineness of mid-French architecture, left totally original in some cases.

Unsophisticated villages and medieval towns-one could almost be in a century past.

Variety of food and wine, and excellent value.

The trip must be rated a success: we reached our destination and beyond in adequate time. We had no noticeable mishaps of seamanship or engineering; we got very brown and fairly fat. About 350lb of coal was consumed in 12 days steaming of, say, 8 hours-a little under 4 lbs/hour.

The Kingdon boiler and little Taylor compound required very little management, leaving me free to idle away my time sunning on the aft deck, taking the scenery and passing the odd pleasantries with the rare passersby.

CHANTILLY ON THE CHARENTE

Although **Chantilly** has steamed a number of the better known waterways in France, there is still a lifetimes cruising left around the edges.

The pin this year stuck in la Charente, navigable from Angoulême inland to Rochefort in the estuary-and then into the Bay of Biscay.

As a plus the River Boutonne was stated to be navigable from the estuary for 30 km inland. This gave a projected cruise of about 200 km and 40 locks- comfortable for the 8 steaming days available.

We reached Angoulême 20 hours from home, overnighing on board **Chantilly** in one of the comfortable 'aires' found on the autoroutes. Slight set back one, was that, although advertised in the carte fluvial as having a slipway, and full services, Angoulêmes didn't agree and offered only a meagre slipway, rocky banks and a weedy river. Advised to try downstream at Chateauneuf, we found a splendid starting point with lock side facilities, including a restaurant private car park and a railway station opposite.



Angoulême.

The line, which followed the river for its length, was to be a boon for ultimate car recovery, but a bit of interruption to nocturnal repose.

Our first steam was upstream towards Angoulême, to cover the bit missed. The Charente, as many French waterways, is only really used by English operated hire fleets, so 4 boats a day was crowded! It has a noticeable current, and for the upper half more than noticeable weeds. Our previous training for weed avoidance on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal was not wasted! The water is astonishingly clear; and the weeds can be seen growing from the bottom in 10 or more feet of water, so careful navigation, and coasting with engine in mid gear thro' the un-navigable patches reduced attacking the prop with the boat hook, to a minimum. This clear water gave a magical view of underwater life and no doubt gave the many fish a choice as to which worm to nibble.



On the surface, we had a plethora of game birds, and coipu. These friendly fellows were happy to bask in the shallows with the ducks and took no heed of us. Kingfishers a plenty, sadly absent from our waterways this year, were so populous that they often hunted in pairs. Add to this the many often crumbling, mills and chateaux, gave an aura of wild, uncharted waters. The locks are occurring every 5 or 10 km and are large 30 m x 7 m with usually 1m drop, and all bar one are hand operated, self service although occasionally, one would meet a lock manned by enterprising youths to whom one tossed serious money in exchanged for respite from the 150 turns of each of the 4 paddles. We found the usual surfeit of gourmet cuisine, and some delightfully fruity Charentais wine, which despite the untold cubic ‘metres’ distilled into Cognac, still flows a plenty. Our journey downstream, at a very easy pace with the favourable current, took us to St Simon, now a quiet hamlet but until the early 1900’s, a major boat building centre of the 100 ton square rigged sailing barges, the Gabare.



Sadly for the town, when boat building died, with the onset of steel barges, the termites imported with the African timber, didn’t, and many of the buildings are now suffering serious roof droop from the still thriving beasts.

On next to Jarnac, a major hire base where we discovered slight set back two- the Boutonne was navigable, but only by canoe, and the lower tidal reaches to Rochefort were most unattractive to small boats, as one needed to travel the 30 km on a falling tide and wait in the mud till high tide, before the sea lock would open into the harbour. This effectively eliminated 3 days of our intended route. This fact turned out to be a boon, allowing us to explore the freshwater Charente in more detail, and spend time with a number of the many steam boat afficiados we met.



Jarnac.

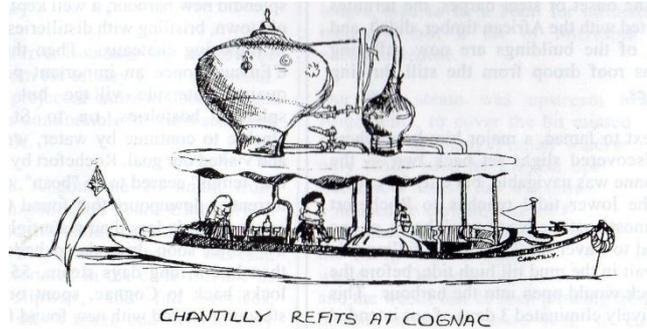
Like Antoine, who spent a morning showing us his fascinating family Cognac distillery, and then joining us in Jarnac for a steam and bank side produce sampling, and meeting his best friend Pierre who was building a model of a steam boat- and Jean-Claude near Cognac who has made, in 20,000 hours over 14 years, a collection of the most intricate working steam models, marine plants, loco's, road vehicles, including Cugnot's carriage (1769), stationary engines and a few revolutionary devices of his own design- all to scale and from old plans making everything in house, including the steering chain links for a $\frac{3}{4}$ " scale traction engine.



Then there was Philippe in St Savinien at the end of our navigation, who with his Swedish wife Eva, runs a Swedish restaurant, and imports old 'Peterson' wooden motor boats from Sweden and, restores them.

All of them, fired by thumbing thro' our copy of the Index, and a data sheet on **Chantilly** prepared before in French, are now hell bent on constructing a steam boat.

The cruise continued on thro' Taillebourg, where the chateau overlooking the river was used for B&B by such notables as Richard the Lion Heart...on to Cognac, with its splendid new harbour, a well kept interesting old town, bristling with distilleries all housed in imposing chateaux. Then through Port d'Envaux, once an important port, now a quaint waterside village but still with splendid hostelries, on to St Savinien.



Unable to continue by water, we entrained and visited our goal, Rochefort by rail. Here, the ‘temps’ ceased to be ‘beau’, and we had torrential downpours that found **Chantilly**’s canopy a little less than watertight (but a 60 KW boiler soon dries damp bedding). We then had a long days steam, 55 km and 2 locks back to Cognac, spent our last day steaming around with new found friends and, witnessed the hilarious local sport of water jousting, where the technique seems to be to upset and deflect the oarsmen before the jousters meet. Amongst the many attractions of Cognac was a most effective slipway, and a TGV station from where I was whisked, a breakneck speed back to Chateauneuf to collect car and trailer

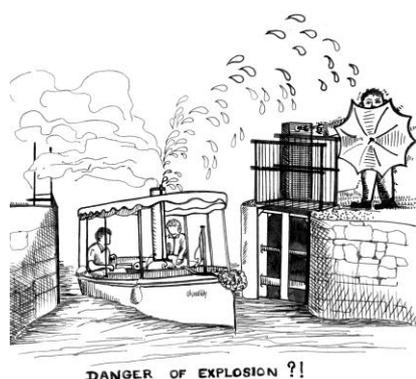


Then end of our steaming, but not quite the end of our adventures, as at our overnight stop off at Chateau-sur-Loire, ‘F’ espied an ad for 3 old Vélo Solex mopeds ‘like Grandad had’, so after a phone call, we deviated early Sunday morning 50 km to Ponce where we met the family and accompanied by Dad in his night attire, we whistle along the county lanes testing their 20 cc capabilities to the full, did a deal for a 30 year old model in splendid original condition, popped it under Chantilly’s canopy, and returned with a really useful souvenir. A leisurely trip on an unspoilt waterway. 170 km and 30 locks of steaming- and we brought back some of the 150 kg of coal we started with; which sadly meant less need for the usual wine ‘ballast’ on the return trip!

Canal du Midi

After waiting some half hour the top gates of the three lock flight at Marseillette opened and out 'popped', under apparently random pilotage, a handful of hire cruisers.

Having drawn the fire in anticipation of imminent action, we were hailed by the lock-keeper who asked us to wait a while longer as a 'Péniche' - which has priority-was approaching shortly. "Whilst wishing to oblige" quote Françoise in impeccable French, "we have unfortunately too much steam and there is some danger of explosion" upon which the safety valve blew, and the highly impressed, and now motivated lock-keeper raised his broly in defence of such eventuality, and immediately locked us through in record time. After hundreds of years of waterway lore, the 'péniche' had been ousted as primeur by a steamboat!



Quick to capitalise on this advantage, we re-established our 'priorité' at succeeding locks by judicious use of the blower, to encourage the safety valve to emphasise the urgency of our transit.

We were at the beginning of **Chantilly**'s adventure '93 on the Canal du Midi. This canal, rightfully described as 'Le Canal des Deux Mers', links the Atlantic at Bordeaux to the Mediterranean at Sète and was built in the 1600's by one Paul Riquet, a self-taught engineer whose most unlikely beginnings were as a tax collector! (Has BW now gone the other way?) He crowned his most remarkable achievement by 'expiring' some few months before it was opened and hence remembered more for his initial success than some of the subsequent operating difficulties. It is probably the most interesting and varied of the French waterways and has the added attraction of touching the Mediterranean with the (presumed) attendant splendid weather.

The difficulties are that it is a long way from Blighty, needing two full days' travel each way; as a water feeder for the Provence vineyards and agriculture, it is sometimes allowed to run dry in summer, and it can be very hot and rather expensive down there.

As we had some time available in early spring, it seemed to overcome some of the possible difficulties and offered an exciting start to the steaming season.

Our starting place was chosen as Carcassonne which, apart from having a beautiful ancient city, is about half way along the 'Midi' proper and would give us a comfortable two weeks' cruising to reach the ultimate terminus at Beaucaire on the Rhône. Contact was made with the Captain du port who on earlier telephone calls was unsure whether he had a suitable slipway or not. Arriving late evening we discovered that slipway they had not, but did sport a muddy groove in the canal bank!. Unwilling to

drive further, and against local advice, I did indeed launch from this spot-mainly because once committed down the slope no way could I drive out again with **Chantilly** still on the trailer!



A TRICKY LAUNCHING

Impressed by this display of English foolhardiness, the captain gave every further assistance, including stowing the car and trailer in his yard for a couple of weeks.

Although it was spring, the weather was not all that one might expect of the south of France-in fact it rained 'chats et chiens' for about a week, causing considerable flooding of the locality. Apart from turgidly, the canal proper was not affected, but we heard that where the canal crossed the River Hérault at Agde, the canal was closed. Just before AgdeThe tiny 'Libron' also crosses the canal: normally a ditch it becomes a raging torrent in spate and a Napoleonic 'flood lock' is brought into play to allow it to cross the canal at its higher level. To our dismay this was closed as we approached Agde and I feared unreasonable delays, but a conversation with the 'army' of lock-keepers that had been sent to operate this amazing device gave us hope-again ahead of an impending peniche-of being 'locked through'. It was a unique opportunity to witness and assist with its very rare operation.



Just before the locks the Libron bifurcates into two streams and rejoins just after. When needs press, the stream is allowed to pass across the canal through channels formed by sets of sliding gates, suspended on rails above, forming two sealed channels with a space of some 200m of canal between.

To pass through when in operation, first one of the two streams is dammed off with sluice gates, the sliding gates opened, with 'inch bars' on the rails above, boats pass into the lock space and the gates are inched shut behind. The same is repeated with the front channel to allow the boats out.



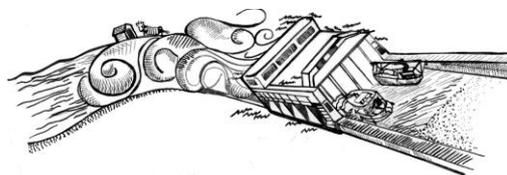
The amount of clanking, grunting and expletives employed in this event have to be seen and translated to be believed!



This ‘wonder’ was matched for eye popping only by the inclined plane at Beziers. A staircase of nine locks has, not unlike Foxton near home, an inclined plane or water chute alongside. Unlike the Foxton plane, this has a smooth-sided channel running from the lower point to the top level, with a great ‘machine’ which runs up it on rubber tyres, straddling the channel. Boats pass under the machine at the lower end, it lowers a great paddle into the channel behind the boats and then grinds its way uphill, pushing a wedge of water (1000 tons I calculate) ahead, discharging water, boats and, I suspect, a few fish, into the top level. Sadly, like Foxton, it wasn’t working so we had to take the ‘conventional’ locks down.



The only reported account of its operation is an occasion when it was descending with three or four boats, the brakes failed, the emergency brake failed, the operator, deigning not to be associated with the impending disaster, leapt off.



The device reached 25km/hr; the innocent boater thought it a wonderfully speedy alternative to locks until it hit the bottom pound. The boats did not suffer much, but the surrounding area did with the ensuing huge wave!

After a couple of pleasant days spent holed up in Agde, we eventually were allowed to cross the still angry Hérault and entered the Étang de Thau, a sea lake 15 miles x 3 miles wide, crammed with oyster baskets and fishermen in 200hp punts. Although not above a force 4, the trip was quite adventurous enough in a 21 ft river boat and it took days to remove the salt stains from the brass work.



Mèze before the



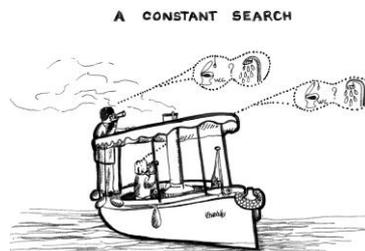
Étang de Thau

Stopping at a couple of lakeside fishing villages, we reached Sète- the official terminus of the Canal du Midi. From there we entered the Canal de Sète et Rhône, not without an enforced overnight stop alongside the rather inhospitable railway wharf due to the wind upping to a 6 and the waves being considerably higher than our spirits in the early evening.

This last leg enters the Camargue, and although whilst true legend white horses and flamingos abound, the only black bull I saw was on my plate in a local Auberge!

The canal passes within half a mile of the Mediterranean coast and a number of fishing towns in this area have their own cut from the harbour to the canal.

One such town, Palavas-Les-Flots, advertised at its entrance a sadly all too rare a commodity on this waterways-showers!



On all of our previous French waterways cruises we had found excellent waterside facilities by way of showers and toilets at many locks- but not so, on the Midi. Although we did manage to somehow meet our daily needs, it did require some ingenuity, and required that one showered and toileted at any hour of day or night, when the opportunity arose.



We found ourselves lathering up in such places as a football stadium, un-let hire boats, ‘Douches à la **Chantilly**’, and occasionally, to our delight, in a marina.

So this opportunity had to be taken. When we entered the town’s new marina, we were immediately ‘adopted’ by the Captain of the port, François, who gave us the prime berth-right outside the loo’s and offered us the freedom of the port. Within minutes, a small crowd of his boaty friends had gathered around, including a local reporter for the ‘Midi Libre’ who was also a member of the local old boats club.

After giving a few trips around the harbour, and steaming briefly out into the Med, we were invited as guests of honour to a specially convened dinner by the old boats club, ‘Les Vieux Grémants’.



On the Med!

A convivial evening of good food, plentiful wine and probably misunderstood anecdotes followed, by which time the Commodore declared that they would be delighted to entertain any SBA or TVSC members similarly-but please would we not all come at once!

Steaming continued well into the night with **Chantilly** taking the last of the party back to the marina at around 1am.

Next morning, before breakfast was finished, visitors arrived once more, this time bringing gifts of wine, food, books, etc. More trips followed and we eventually left many new friends, a little sadly, amidst multiple whistle blasts and promises to return.

It seemed like only a few shovels of coal before our journeying was completed at Beaucaire, then en train to Carcassonne to fetch the car and trailer for our return home.

Our trip took us some 300 km with about 50 locks, we consumed 200 kg of coal (after coaling difficulties on our previous trips we took it all with us!) which computed to around 20 kg for each steaming day of 10-12 hours. We had no real mechanical problems, and to illustrate that we missed nothing, we arrived back home with only 5 kg of coal and five francs!

BACK TO FRANCE: NAVIG'AIX' 95

This event, as was boldly advertised in FUNNEL, was an international meeting of old or interesting power boats, which had clear requirements of venerability for the motor boats, but welcomed any steamboat made of anything!

So, with such a warm invitation, we took **Chantilly**, joining **Iola** built by the late Richard Hayne, very attractive fitted out open F21, as the 'G.B' contingent and met up with **Oxbird** from Bordeaux Maritime Museum, **Lord Byron** F21 from Lake Geneva, **Sarina** also from Geneva, a simple, practical, and obviously satisfying paddler, built around a lake Geneva fishing skiff, another very pretty boat **Scylla of Messina** and **Asphodel**, the only resident Lac du Bourget steamer, the biggest boat, proud and purposeful, belonging to the late André Coudurier, the event organiser. An international gathering, but all 'ex pat' English boats! I should also mention albeit briefly, the 20 or so splendid old wooden power boats brought from all over Europe, who added at least noise and spray to this colourful gathering!



The first phase of this meeting was based on the port of Aix-les-Bains and was arranged also as a visitor attraction, for which the town provided generous sponsorship by way of hotel accommodation, meals, coal, and endless speeches, and receptions which was a great excuse to sample the excellent Savoyard wine.

Day one was 'Viewing of boats on trailers' and launching, a crowded public spectacle and a good excuse to go walking the beautiful Jura foothills surrounding the town, to avoid it.



Day two had boating activities on the Lake, the first a manoeuvrability test around buoys, I missed whilst fighting steam raising gremlins. The second 'regularity trials' I also missed by steaming, with Richard and Robert, to a distant lakeside restaurant for lunch. **Iola** however did eventually enter the event, apparently aimed at maintaining a regular speed around a buoyed course, and concluded the

activities by picking up a buoy line in her prop in a big way and being towed to the hoist to be fetched out and disentangled!

The third day took us in convoy to the head of the Lake, where the Canal de Savières links it to the Rhône, pausing as we passed the strikingly majestic Abbey de Hautecombe. We moored in the delightful canal side village of Chanaz where a picnic for all 100 or so boaters and hangers-on was arranged outside a genuine working water mill, which was fully restored a year or so ago and was producing oil from walnuts and hazelnuts. We were invited simply because Edouard the mill owner liked things old and mechanical.

That evening brought, with speeches welcomes and drinks, prize giving! Everyone was a winner of something, but particularly of note was **Lord Byron** as the most manoeuvrable boat of the event, and **Iola** as having the “best engine” with a superb Mallinson Twin.



The second phase of the event, and perhaps more to my taste, was a three day cruise on the Rhône, taking in a mysterious ‘boat lift’ over barrages.

On Monday, we were due to steam up the Lake again, in a party of six boats, to join the Rhône at Chanaz, but sadly a hooley blew up over night, and the Lake was impassable for small steamboats.

After 20 or so early morning committee meetings, we all set off across the Lake in **Lakshme** an old Lake Geneva motor boat, which at 11m was fast and weatherly. Then to be taken by car to a little mountain town Culoz that was honouring one of its past residents the brothers: Henri (1848-1915) and Léon Serpollet (1859-1907) with an exhibition of notes and photographs of his wondrous turn of century inventions with steam powered cars, bicycles and other devices. This also occasioned speeches, welcomes and drinks.

As the weather had not abated, I elected to return to Aix, fetch out **Chantilly**, re-launch on the Rhône and join up with the rest of the party in Lakshme at our evening stop.

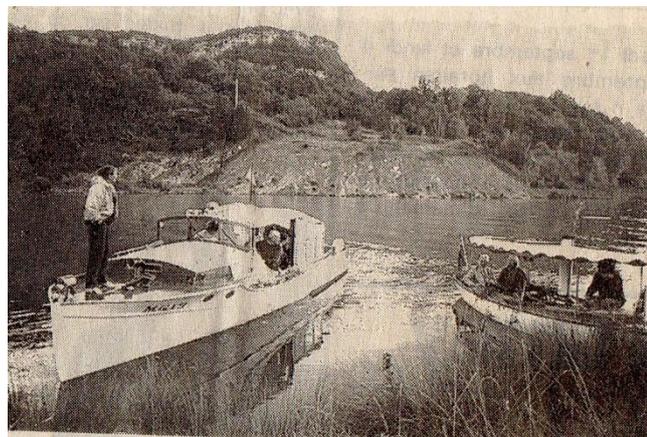
The Rhône at this point runs at the foot of the Jura Mountain range and varies from wide, shallow and fast flowing thro’ rolling green valleys to over 40m deep in majestic gorges. Apart from a few fishing punts, there are virtually no boats, and very few landings.

At a number of places, the river has been left to follow its course, and huge navigable canals feed hydro-electric stations, giving a 30-50 foot barrage. No locks exist, but navigation past these dams is possible by use of a ‘portique’. This is a three wheeled self powered machine which rumbles down a wide slipway to pick up the boats-up to 5 tins-in slings, winch itself back up the slipway, casts off then trundle down the road at walking pace, past the power station to re-launch in the outfall.



‘portique’

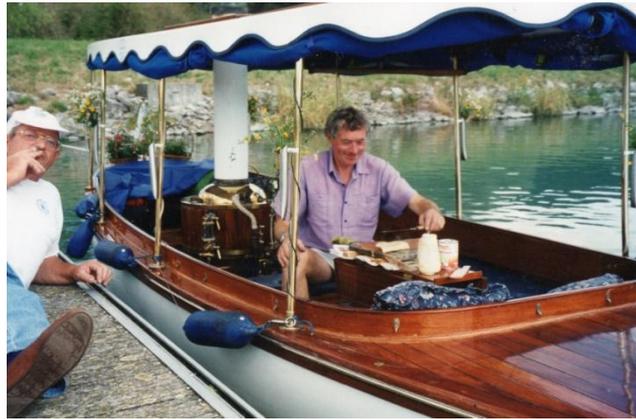
One purpose of our organised passage on the river was to hopefully overwhelm the navigation and establish a case for installing locks to re-open the river to navigation but with a flotilla now only numbering two boats, the portique seemed to cope admirably. Nevertheless, like conquistadors we were greeted by hoards at the few towns en route, and subject to more speeches, welcomes and drinks. Where no town existed, the locals set up a mobile reception centre, and dispensed welcomes and drinks from the river side on folding tables-fortunately no speeches this time!



On the Rhône!

After 3 days of travel on this wild, remote and beautiful river known in places as the ‘Blue Valley’, we 10 or so adventurers formed quite a strong band, and many was the merry picnic lunch (no speeches, much wine) and late night revelry at the Auberge du Gland. This inn, apart from being the site of my initiation into the delights of frog legs, the only item on the menu, a ploy, I’m certain, by André to challenge the English ‘sang froid’- I beat him at his game however, by being the first, for seconds! The Auberge has a mountain stream running in the garden and the innkeeper has installed a couple of turbines in his garden shed, and produces 1000KW (yes KW, not watts, I saw the

instruments) for sale to the national grid. He also drinks like a fish and drives like a Frenchman not a happy combination when chauffeuring us back to our boat late at night!



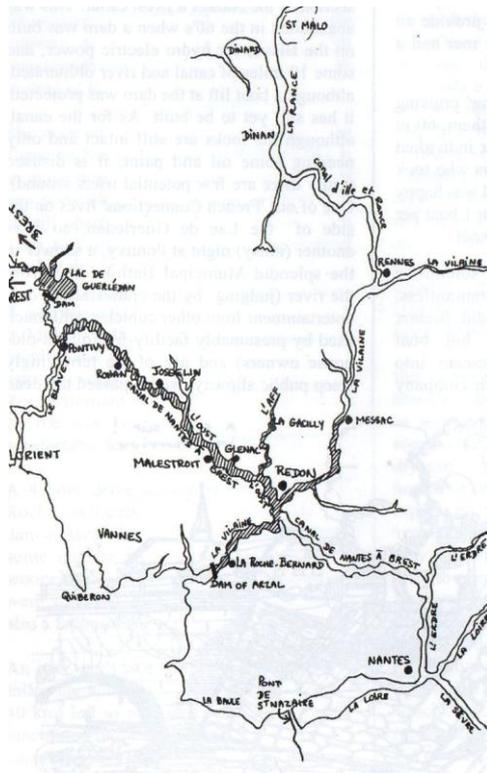
Crêpes Chantilly!

We parted from the group at Chanaz, as they had to leave, and we spent a couple of days exploring the Lake and its environs. The only place in the vicinity where the ‘bière pression’ was served, was the Abbey de Hautecombe, the provisions however were to be found on the opposite shore, 3 miles to buy bread and back for another beer filled in a pleasant half day’s steaming!

A splendid event, in gorgeous surroundings, made inevitably all more fascinating by being adopted by colourful locals.

We made the journey in one long day, and travel apart, had to spend very little. Our thanks to our friend André Coudurier, an unflappable, generous “Bon Vivant”, who managed such a cosmopolitan bunch to the total enjoyment of all.

WELL DONE NAPOLEON!



Although **Chantilly** has cruised many French waterways there is still an awful lot to go, so, for this year's adventure, we chose the Brittany canal system. The attractions were not too far from ferry ports (Caen, Cherbourg, St Malo, Roscoff) adequate cruising for 1 or 2 weeks, magnificent countryside and Françoise has a few friends to drop in for a Chouchen or two!

The main waterway is self descriptive-The Canal de Nantes à Brest, built by Napoléon to move troops and supplies between these two ports when blockaded by the English. It is still open from Nantes to Pontivy, with arms to Lorient, Dinan and a number of smaller river navigations.

A true adventure would be a passage from St Malo to Lorient, but calculations based on 6km/hr and 4 locks per hour gave a cruising time in excess of 80 hours, so we chose La Roche Bernard to Pontivy, with excursions on the way, with about 60 hours-more comfortable for 8 days or so steaming.



A 4 hour drive from Caen took us to La Roche, on the river Vilaine, which, since the dam at Arzal, is now fresh water and running some quarter mile wide through a high wooded valley. Launching and mooring were splendid, as is the crazy old town, also a favourite landing for oceanic yachters.

An easy day's steaming up the river (with a following wind, using only 10 kg of coal for 40 km) left us at Redon, a major waterway junction and a onetime sea port. In the port we came across **Attis**, a 1944 American built stubby steam tug brought over for the Normandy landing, then had a decreasingly active role in the Brittany ports until found, refurbished, and cherished as a floating monument by its present devoted owner-so says the plaque on her bridge.



Attis

Then, further up the river to Messac where one of the 3 or 4 hire bases operates-it is sad to note that although Napoléon was obviously a canal nut, few of his descendants are-we met no indigenous pleasure boats, only hire boats, often crewed by Brits or Germans, so there are probably no more than a couple of hundred inland craft on the 300 + miles of Breton waterways! A longer hop, still on lock free rivers, back through Redon on to La Gacilly, a fairy tale town on the narrow, winding river l'Aff running through equally Walt Disney country, with kingfishers vying to lead us to a quaint mooring and welcoming townsfolk.

But to more mundane affairs..., although we brought 150 kg of coal, it was barely enough, so we sought suitable wood-but not the soggy stuff floating by which takes days to dry and clogs one's boat. As we passed the hamlet of Glenac, a pile of old (?) pallets was espied on the bank, so we closed in to 'requisition' the choicer bits. This brought not only a heavily weeded prop, but a strong cry from the far bank, which translated as "if it is fuel you want, try the coal merchant round the corner!" So we did, and his rattly old Peugeot delivered me and 50kg reconstituted anthracite (which proved to be most fire resistant) in old fertilizer bags which covered the boat and contents in white (presumably insidious) powder for days, but did give the required fuel reserve.



@ Josselin.

Then on the Canal proper! Still climbing with the River Oust, up into Brittany, with 19 to 20 locks each day, all operated, mostly by resident women ‘éclusières’ but some by students.(All having short hair, one had to study their anatomy before bidding ‘bonjour Monsieur’ or ‘Madame’!)The locks were all powered and operated by small remote controllers carried by the lock keeper; what a brilliant idea!



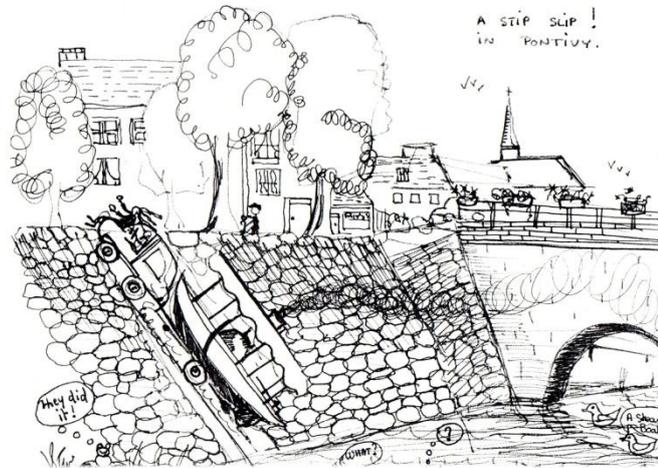
Our moorings were in the old riverside towns like Malestroit and Josselin, quaintly medieval but a little touristy, and a lot noisy at nights. The living throughout the trip was splendid and cheap; £25 would provide an excellent ‘Menu’, often fruits de mer and a bottle of wine, for two.

After Rohan we left the ‘popular’ cruising area and met the locks. Lots of them, 60 in 15km. No power with these, nor individual lock keepers, but flight operators who took us through 4, 6 or 11 locks each. I was happy to join in the activity, but at about one boat per week, they were hardly overworked!

We overnighted on the 5 km summit, a remote area which, being restaurant-less, provoked us to create a splendid firebox repast (the penalty, a very hot boat overnight!)We started the descent into Pontivy and the River Blavet, in company with an Oyster Boat! This strange craft, a shallow steel pontoon with decrepit outboard is used to access oyster beds on the low tide estuaries around Brittany and was in passage from St Malo to Lorient, as a series of weekend treats for the operator’s family. Not only did we have the pleasure of sharing locks for the day, but food, drink and boating experiences.

We parted company at lock keeper changeover, in Pontivy, whilst we explored the first pound of the now defunct upper section of the Nantes à Brest Canal. This was abandoned in the 30’ when a dam was built on the Blavet for hydro electric power, and some 10 miles of canal and river

obliterated. Although a boat lift at the dam was projected, it has still yet to be built. As for the canal, although the locks are still intact and only needing some oil and paint, it is disused (sadly there are few potential users around). One of our 'French Connections' lives on the side of the Lac de Guerlédan, so after another (noisy) night at Pontivy, a shower in the splendid Municipal Bath-House across the river (judging by the enthusiastic vocal entertainment from other cubicles, still much used by presumably facility-free quaint-old-house owners) and use of the terrifyingly steep public slipway, we by-passed the dead bit, re-launched on an equally terrifying sandy beach on the final leg of our trip.



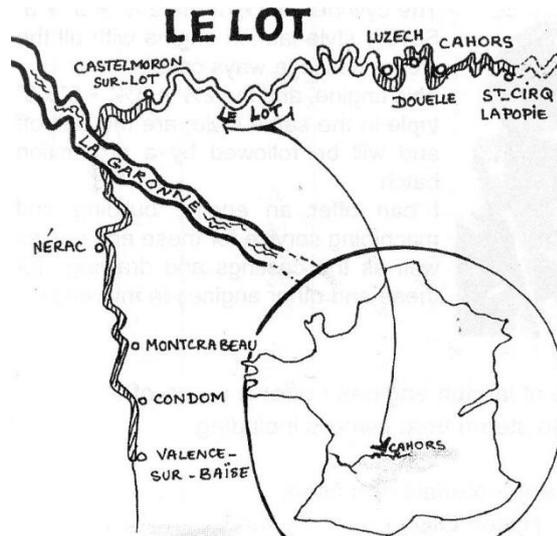
Pontivy's slip.

The lake, about ½ mile wide and 10 m long runs through another steeply wooded valley, with craggy rock cliffs which, having a dam some 50 m high must be shrouding a spectacularly deep valley up which the canal used to climb. We steamed the length and breadth of this well developed leisure area, where the local schools spend every afternoon sailing, cycling, pony-trekking, and many locals spend every moment fishing some splendid big fellows.

At the upper end we found a shallow lock (normally used by a trip boat and fishermen) which sadly and inexplicably, although new, had its paddle gear removed, and my attempts at operating it with any number of fire irons, stilsons and mooring pins failing, we had to abandon ship, and walk the old navigation which had a second lock in full working order, giving access to a few more km of the original canal.

The lake, and entertainment by the family Lebreton at their idyllic waterside restaurant, made a fitting end to a memorable cruise. In 10 days steaming, we covered about 250 km, met 100 locks and used about 180 kg of coal. The only steaming problems we met were the inevitable vacuum pump valve and slowly fouling fire tubes.

STEAMING A LOT



The River Lot navigation, reopened in 1990, has been considered for a cruise in previous years, but, although set in some dramatic country, close to the Dordogne, it is rather a short weeks cruise. However, as we learned that this year, a further section had been reopened, leading onto the Garonne, and then the Baise, this offered not only a worthwhile cruise, but exploration of a 'new' navigation.

So a plan was laid. I had expected that the newly opened stretch would link with the 1990 navigation, but no, some disused 50 km separates them. I say disused lightly, but, one of the main disturbances to this navigation, and a number of others in France, is the establishment of big weirs for hydroelectric schemes, thence altering water level and either draining or flooding sections of navigation.

I thought it quite feasible to cover both sections in 9 or 10 days steaming, and we elected to start with newer bit first (in case they changed their minds and closed it!) So we headed to a brand new hire base marina complex at Castelmoron, following the advice of Jean-Paul, our French SBA member, and made use of the excellent slip and friendly reception.

The first lock downstream was a little daunting with a 27 ft fall (it sounds more impressive than 8 m) as it lets down past a hydroelectric dam, which had been the major stop to navigation. The lock keeper insisted on lining, and to my alarm, tied **Chantilly** off to a bollard. After a tense exchange, stretching my vocabulary of 'franglais' expletives, it was explained that the bollard actually descended, hydraulically, with the water. It did, but I still kept the firewood axe to hand!



This was the only manned lock, the rest were operated by wiping an electronic card in a green box, which sends the lock thro' its cycle, up or down in a very short order.

I discovered the lock mechanisms all had the same programme irrespective of drop, so the deeper locks filled in a most impressive manner!

With only 3 locks downstream, the junction with the Garonne at Nicole was soon met, having first passed thro' medieval Clairac and a number of attractive riverside hamlets. Here we called up the 'Ponts et Chaussées' from a lock side phone, announced ones wish to traverse the mighty Garonne and waited.

Because of low water level, and fast current, boats had to be piloted and towed on the 4 km stretch from the Lot to the Baise.

We took on board the Chef de Navigation who surveyed our pitiful power plant and whistles up a dory with 2 x 50 HP outboards, who took us alongside, then, with **Chantilly** at her full 3 HP charged up the river with our combined 103 HP at, I swear 15 mph, counter below the water level and still only just making against the current for about an hour before being left, moored waiting by the Baise lock. To our surprise and delight, when the lock opened, out steamed **Brunette**, on her way back up to her mooring at Castelmoron. As the dory was waiting to escort her downstream (presumably at 30 mph!) we had time only for a brief exchange with the owner Jean-Paul.

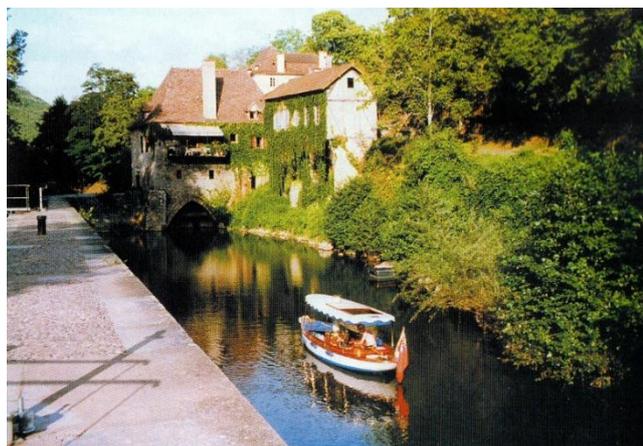


The Baise, a somewhat smaller, tranquil river is equipped with the same automatic locks, and some attractive and hospitable towns. Amongst them is the ville of Condom, which taking full advantage of its name, has established a 'Musée du préservatif'. Not a very good museum I found, as it didn't exhibit a single pot of jam! There are several impressive fortified and 'bastides' villages on the limestone escarpment cut by the river, including the present head of navigation at Valence. Ignoring the Stop sign, **Chantilly** continued up the river, for about 3 km, till barred by fallen trees from further exploration.

We then doubled back to Nerac, an old transshipment port, considered with an old packhorse bridge and numerous half-timbered waterside buildings to be the jewel of the Baise. Here we had spotted a possible slipway on the way downstream, and after taxiing back for car and trailer, fetched out and headed for Cahors, in the centre of the older navigable Lot, for part II of our cruise.

This is a much wilder section of the river. Shallow and rather rocky in summer, a raging torrent (as seen by some impressive high water lines) in winter, all of which made for something of a surprise to see any hire boats still afloat!

Cahors has a lengthy waterfront surrounded by the Lot on 3 sides as it meanders in a horseshoe around the town, passing under a magnificent medieval fortified bridge that dominates the river, and doubtless intimidated any would be invaders. This is also serious wine making country, so pausing a while to imbibe and test out its eateries as we passed Cahors in each direction, was no penance.



The locks on this section are tortuous-only 14 of them, but each a memorable experience, so Françoise tells me, as the rather tricky navigation obliged me to remain on board. They have contrived to interlock paddle and gate operating mechanism, such that it was not possible to move one, without the other being fully operated-all by hand. The effect of this was to sometimes find a boat moored for hours (days?) waiting for another craft to appear to shepherd them thro' a lock, and then, be your shadow for the next few. The upstream current head of navigation is dominated by: St Cirq Lapopie, a stunningly set village rising steeply up the sides of the gorge with magic views over the river from the church set atop a rock pinnacle.



It is then an easier run downstream with a knot or so of current, and the more placid locking down.

Stopping for a more leisurely exploration of the old town of Cahors, we eventually arrived at Luzech, the present downstream terminus.

The river again horseshoes around the town, to such an extent that it took ancient boaters a whole day to get the 300 yards across town so a canal with two locks was cut down the main street. Now sadly filled in with just the literal name 'Rue du Canal', to evidence a one time lively river port.

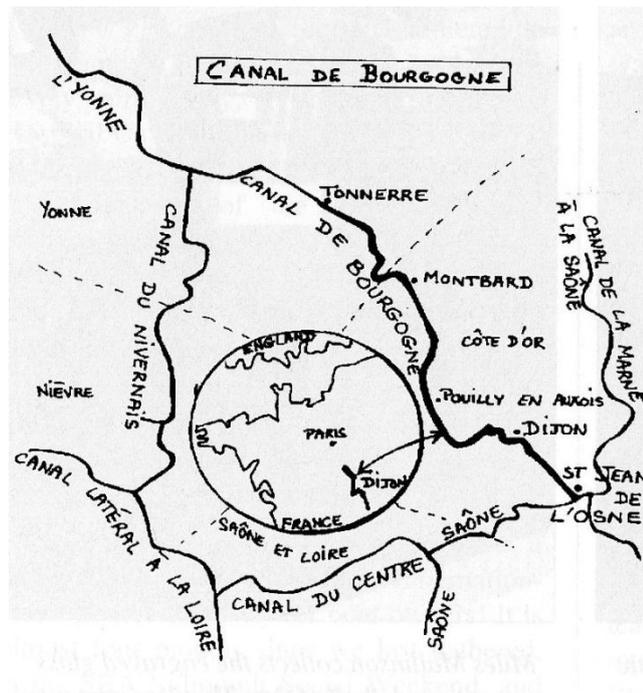
On our return to the last nights mooring at Douelle, we passed close by a 'cave' selling 'Cahors finest wines' so were able to ship our ballast, replacing coal burned on the journey, direct from quayside.

This navigation section of the Lot is 67 km with 14 locks (x2); the original navigation was 297 km, so, even with the newly opened 50 km at the mouth, still leaves an awful 'lot' for the restoration society.

The Lot, Garonne, Baise cruise at a total of 120 km and 23 locks, all automatic each way, would make a very comfortable one week introduction cruise for anyone contemplating exploration of the French waterways, although a little training to handle the tempting local wine.

And, it is all, still, free boating!

THE CANAL DE BOURGOGNE



Chantilly has now had nine “holidays” in France; and, having done the most colourful waterways, we are left with filling in some of the gaps. The Canal de Bourgogne parallels the Nivernais as a central North South route, and still has some sizeable péniches, in the guise of hotel ships. It is 242 km from its beginning at the River Yonne to its junction with the Saône at St Jean de Losne, with a staggering 189 locks.



The Saône, up to this point is a very sizeable waterway linking with the Rhône and with a 200 m long lock just downstream at Chalon, can handle some 1000 ton barges, but here they must stop. St Jean has therefore developed as a transshipment port for the canal network, and has a large basin, partly occupied by H2O, an Anglo-German boatyard which offered us parking for car and trailer, a nearby river slipway, (adequate but weedy) and a chandlery to provide a canal guides, advice and the items we had forgotten (like a toilet bucket, the facilities are rather sparse).



Dijon.

The first day steaming, up to Dijon is a remarkably straight cut, locking up every 2 km or so. Beyond is more rolling, colourful Burgundy countryside, with locks increasing in frequency until the summit. We then faced a 3 km tunnel, and a zealous tunnel keeper who inspected us for lifejackets, fire extinguisher (2), boat hook (2) and a life ring. Finding us only marginally inadequate, they loaned us various bits and we were then given a pass and joined 3 other boats waiting for the time slot. I arranged to be last in to allow the smelly noisy diesels to get well thro', but found the lead boat nervously bumping along the sides at a tadpoles pace and we bunched up. Previously unspotted, behind us, charged a leviathan tunnel trip boat, and harassed us with 'sons and lumières' from 6 feet behind, for the stressful hour spent in the bowels of Burgundy.



Once on the other sides of the world, where surprisingly the natives looked the same and spoke with the same foreign tongue, was the delightful town of Pouilly en Auxois and an expanse of locks dropping down, for seemingly ever. A deep breath, head for the first lock, and just keep going. We locked thus between 20 and 30 each day. The locks themselves are some 30m by 5m and 1.8 m deep. They have twin bottom gate paddles and curious 'rotary valve' side paddles, for filling and emptying, at the upper level. The gates have no balance beam, but a simple and effective toggle action lever that gives maximum effort for starting the gate at fully open and fully closed. Locking up was rather fierce, but our station, holding onto the ladder nearest the bottom gate, gave comfortable passage. Locking down we floated inertly in the chamber, and it would have been speedier, except the rules demanded that locks be left empty, with bottom gates open. As there was virtually no other traffic on the canal, 3 or 4 boats a day, we invariably met an empty lock, had first to convince the lock keeper

that our whistle was really from a boat in his lock, not a steam loco on a nearby railway, wait for it to fill, then lock through.

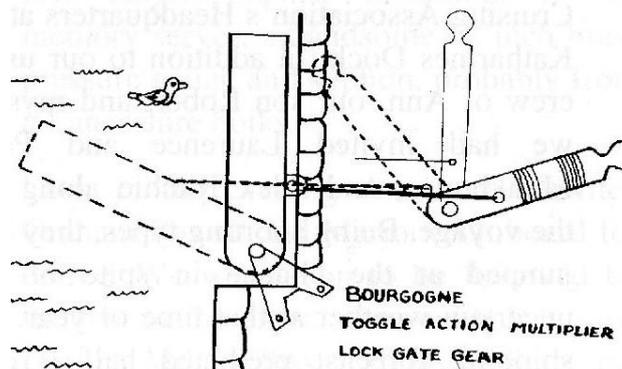


A group of 12 locks were 'self service', with copious instructions (in French for us) hand operated; using side paddles only with sensors that beeped at you if you erred. In keeping with French waterways lore, the middle lock of this flight had a keeper, just to ensure that you stopped locking for the sacrosanct lunch hour.



Auxerre.

This constant locking, with what is sadly a dying segment of the French rural life, the *éclusier*, (or *éclusière*) provided a fascinating study of their temperament.



We navigated 180 locks. In the flights one itinerant éclusier would accompany us thro a section of between 5 or 20 locks, but we still met some 130 of them.

Around half of the lock houses were sadly abandoned, (opportunity for Anglo Francophilian acquisition?) And here a student would lodge either in their car or in a wooden 'kennel' provided by VNF (French BW). Around half of these were girls, who mostly brought their boyfriends and found them infinitely more fascinating than boats, and needed a measurable time to compose themselves before carrying out their duties.

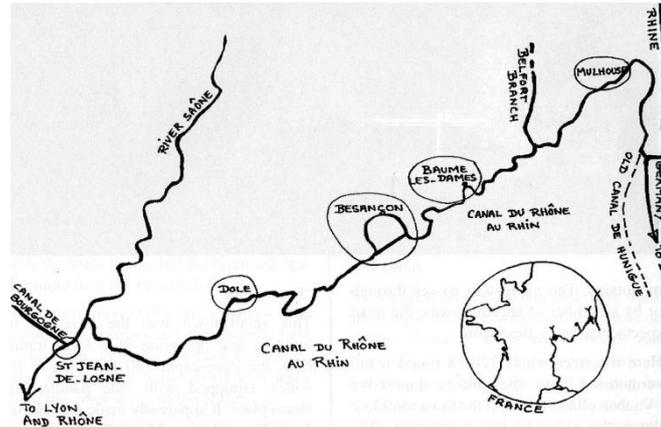


So around half of the locks still have mostly quaint inhabited lock houses and apart from 2 or 3 truly belligerent éclusiers, who despite only locking one or two boats a day, insisted on taking their lunch hour on flexitime, often stranding us in some lonely place, and a group who thro' some fault of birth, or intensive training found the pitch of my whistle to be totally inaudible. These would disembark, climb ashore and start to operate the lock. The remaining category, genuinely born to trade éclusier (some families had been at the same lock for generations) who could smell a boat coming and were there to meet you, exchange pleasantries (I assume, as it is all a bit foreign to me) sell you fruits, veg, wine, their daughter, and show a lively interest in our strange craft, left the overwhelming impression of a welcoming waterway.

We reached, having viewed or explored a number of ancient towns and very rural hamlets. Tonnerre, where after quick whisk at 200 kph on TGV, I regained car and trailer, drove to the slipway, which although adequate had an extremely restricted access, and fetched out.

A very pleasant passage, but with all the locks and rural location, giving limited facilities, not for beginners.

INTERNATIONAL STEAMBOATING on the Rhin au Rhône



This canal, built late 18th century is a truly international waterway, linking Marseilles via the Rhine and Saône, at St Jean de Losne to Mulhouse on the Rhine, accessing Basle or Rotterdam; 250 km and 150 locks, including the Belfort arm. As we aimed to be at the Swiss border for the “Doubs Vapeur” event, it seemed to be our obvious passage trip in **Chantilly** for 2001.

After launching on the now rather grotty public slipway on the Saône, we paddled round in 30* sun to a mooring at our old friends H2O's Boatyard, in the vast transshipment basin at St Jean de Losne. A couple of km steaming up the Saône took us through the entry lock, 5mx38m, which takes 300 Ton péniches. At this point, we were given a magic “zapper”, which at a range of 300m, would activate the automatic locks, setting them in our favour as we approached—mostly!

We did in fact only have two problems, the first I believe caused by our low silhouette which didn't activate the lock entry sensor, the other was just an electronic headache, which on a phone call, produced a clever lady in a “deux chevaux”, in no more than five minutes, who wrestled with the controls, and set us on our way in another five.

The ascent of the canal, to the summit, dodges in and out of the river Doubs, often in spectacular gorges around the Juras Mountains. The navigation passes through or by a number of ancient towns, the most spectacular being Besançon.



Spotted by a Wilderness boat.

Here the river winds 270 degrees a round hill surmounted by the most impressive “Vauban Citadelle”, with the town tumbling down the sides to the river edge. The navigation was ‘eased’ by cutting a short tunnel (375m) through the hill under the Citadel, to link out the meandering river. This gave work experience for a number of persons, using only hand tools. Other towns we called at: Dole, Montbéliard and Sochaux—home to a most eye worthy Peugeot Motor Museum housing more than 200 vehicles bearing the famous emblem of the lion, were most visitable, but Besançon has the most spectacular setting.

A note in our river guide caused us to call in “Baume-Les-Dames” where we discovered a monument to the Marquis Claude-François-Dorotheé Jouffroy d’Abbans, claimed to be the French inventor of the steam boat, in 1776 with his “Pyroscaphe”.



This small town was the base for the building and operation of the local trading boat, the Pyroscaphe (40 feet long, 6 feet wide), equipped with side paddles and steam plant. It apparently made regular runs from Besançon to Montbéliard a trip of some 40 km.

The only concession the town appeared to make to its glorious past apart from this rather crumbly monument, was the name the nearby bar “Le Steamer”!

We later corresponded with the Mayor, who sent us, two well produced magazines commemorating Claude Jouffroy d’Abbans 250th, giving a wealth of information on his various achievements, but sadly in French .

This canal forms part of a long European link, on which one can travel as far east as Istanbul. We met a few water born nomads who were spending much of their life on ‘passage’ around Europe and the Mediterranean in varying levels of austerity in a weather beaten yacht, or spacious opulence by way of a refitted péniche or Dutch barge.

Locking down towards the Rhine (interestingly we went up about 100 but down only 35) we had our own travelling lock keeper for up to 8 locks, accompanying us on his Vélosolex. As traffic was sparse, 2 or 3 boats a day, it was imperative to make a ‘date’ with the next day’s lock keeper and book a time slot before stopping for the night. This system worked well, they all had radios and were most helpful, advising on services, on or off the waterway.

By now, we were in Alsace, which really is a different county to France, in architecture, place names and even language. (It all sounds the same to me, but the Germans spit rather more than the French do!)

At Mulhouse, notionally our journeys end, the canal runs straight and purposefully past the old town into the commercial docks, where we met up with 3000 Ton barges coming the other way, off the Rhine.



'Grazing'!

Our major objective upon reaching Mulhouse, was to visit the famed National Motor Museum, formed from a collection of 200 Bugattis (yes, they were a French car maker) acquired by the brothers Schlumpf, who bankrupted their engineering business in the process. They then had them confiscated for tax arrears, conveniently providing splendid premises and the core of the most remarkable collection of expensive 'internal explosion!' machines. The museum also has the good taste to also exhibit 5 steam cars-albeit 4 of them Serpollet!

By dint of the 'organised' locking down, we had 2 days to spare, and I thought it might be fun to steam into Switzerland, so we continued along the canal, now wide and deep, to its junction with the Rhine canal, which then terminates at Basle.

Discussion at the massive entry lock which holds two -3000 Ton boats rather dissuaded further progress, as it would appear that these monsters, at full power against the current, created wash that would be best not to encounter. Also the speed of the current under bridges at Basle exceeded our maximum speed of 10 km/hour by around 50%!

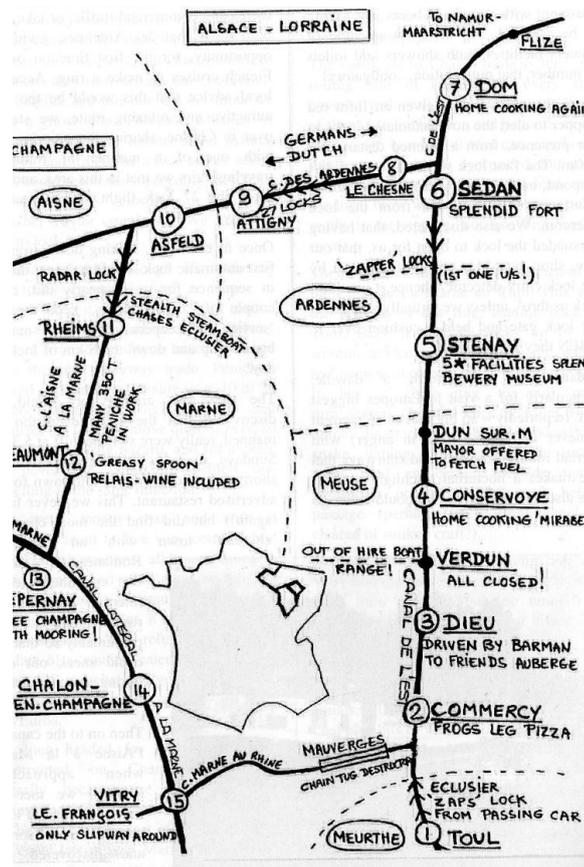
We contented ourselves by a short trip up the old canal de Hunigue, which used to lead to Basle, and carries part of the Rhine flow as a canal feeder , followed by a hurtle back downstream!

Then followed a pleasant train journey back to St Jean de Losne to collect car and trailer, fetch out at Mulhouse and then only a couple of hours journey to re-launch and finish our adventure at the Lac du Brênet at the Doubs Steam Boat Event.



We steamed around 300 km and quite unlike other trips, returned with coal! This was due to the discovery of a new wonder fuel-charcoal! This is easily available in barbecue bags and I found that an 8 kg bag would go as far as 25 kg of anthracite. One of its advantages and economy is its quick lighting, which allows for the fire to run low in locks, and then, with a couple of shovels quickly regain pressure-and it's a renewable fuel!

FIVE CANALS, FIVE DEPARTMENTS...CANAL DE L'EST



Our steamboat cruises in France have to date been in the Southern, warmer more exotic areas, so following an enthusiastic recommendation from an American seasoned boater met last year, we opted for the Canal de l'Est northern branch. This begins at Toul, near Nancy, which conveniently is home to a hire base, with slipway (which being English owned, we had sadly, for the first time in France, to pay for its use!)

The canal which really starts at the head of the Saône navigation at Core, runs a very long way up to Belgium, and joins with the big boys into Holland at Maastricht. This seemed to offer all the cruising we could accomplish in the two weeks available; and as the locks at 33 m x 5m are only a little larger than our broads locks, the commercial traffic was not too intimidating. The 'péniches' manage to carry 300 ft plus, not so much by length, but 2 m draught, and the waterways are maintained to that depth (which also suits smaller sea yachts on passage to the Med). Rather interestingly, because this canal is part of an international link, and it was near the end of the season, most boats travelling with us were Dutch wandering home for the winter, and those passing us (often with wash tumbling over the fields!) were Germans rushing home before being frozen in!

Leaving Toul, the locks were mechanised, but operated by a travelling lock keeper with 'zapper', who was able to drive by in his car, leaning out of the window and operating the lock without stopping! Our overnight stop was in Commercy, just beyond the junction with the canal de la Marne au Rhin, where we found truly international cuisine that evening in the form of a frog legs pizza!



Toul lock

We then entered a section with traditional resident “éclusiers”, which makes a far more friendly and personal contact with the waterways, even if they do-unlike automatic locks-expect a lunch break!

At Dieu, that evening we found (not to be the only time) that the canal guide had misled us into expecting a restaurant- it was only a bar. However recognising our dismay (reinforced by rumbling tummies) the “Patron”, did no less than sweep us into his car, and took us to an Auberge in a neighbouring village, settling with the owner that we would be whisked back to our boat when fed, but stopped short of actually paying for our meals!



Huge locks

We were by now, well into WW1 ‘heavy’ battle area, the Meuse being a natural barrier to the Kaiser’s ambitions. Verdun offered much in the way of impressive memorials, and various remnants of fortifications were to be seen lining the river. It was, as we travelled down, hard to visualise how crossing an innocent looking 50 m stream could have been the object of such death and destruction.

The mood lightened when we reached Stenay, famous for its working brewery museum, with dozens of beers just asking to be sampled, and most splendid boater’s facilities, with showers and toilets in number!



Stenay.

From Stenay, we were given an Infra red zapper to alert the now automated locks to our presence, from a claimed distance of 300 m. The first lock we tried it on, didn't respond, and we had to call the mobile assistance éclusier squad from the lock intercom. We also discovered, that having persuaded the lock to open for us, that our low, short boat was not easily spotted by the lock entry detector- hence it wouldn't lock us thro', unless we virtually stopped at the lock gate and held a cushion over it. THEN they worked well!

Sedan was well worth a dawdle, particularly for a visit to Europe's biggest fort, (reportedly-so big that a deterrent it never had to be used in anger) with myriad rooms, corridors and stairways that one can make a nocturnal torchlight visit. It was also decision point. We could either go on North, up the Canal de l'Est, to meet increasing commercial traffic, or take a left onto the Canal des Ardennes, giving the opportunity, for the first time on our 13 French cruises to make a ring. Accepting local advice that this would be the more attractive and relaxing route, we stopped over in Chesne, sharing the mooring field with one of a number of traditional fairs we met in the area, and then faced the 27 lock flight, before reaching Attigny.



Once in the flight, locking down from the first automatic lock should have set the rest in sequence for us. It nearly did, but a couple of 'rogue' locks, kept the two 'service' lock keepers on their VNF mopeds buzzing up and down the 8 km of locks all day!

The next morning, aiming for Asfeld, we discovered that the locks even tho' un-manned, really were switched off at 5.30 on Sundays, so we were obliged to moor up short of Asfeld and leg it into town for the advertised restaurant. This we never found (again!) but did find the most charming 'chateau'

town with an intriguing Romanesque church that contained 'secret' internal passages all round the walls, presumably so that one could sneak out of a boring sermon without enraging the Padre!

Then on to the Canal de l'Aisne à la Marne, when approaching Rheims, we met the first of a series of locks with radar sensors-and discovered that **Chantilly** is a Stealth steamboat! No amount of hovering in front of it, waving saucepans or even shouting would convince the detector that we were a ship. So we went for the motorised éclusiers, they were always most courteous and helpful, and this one did not think we were a ghost ship. He whistled us thro' the 7 locks to Rheims under manual control, and it became a race to see which of us could reach the succeeding lock first- him on his Vélosolex, or **Chantilly** with her Taylor compound. We just beat him to lock 7!

Reims, delightful though its cathedral and many charms are, did no favour to boaters when it sited its one toilet marina under a motorway and next to a railway bridge! Around the city is much evidence of a thriving waterway trade. Péniches, around 350 ton were passing us at 10 or 20 a day, mostly carrying grain out and fertiliser in. They do move quite slowly, so present no passing hazard, and fortunately we never did come up behind one travelling in the same direction.



Reims.

The crew, mostly man and wife (I presume!) seem to live very comfortably, with large quarters aft, sometimes a forward cabin and often a car on top, but always a pleasant, if bemused wave at our passing. At Beaumont, it rained rather and we were glad to take refuge in and share the fare of a 'routier' eatery, a drivers den where you ate what were served (always good) and invariably wine thrown in-all for a few Euros.

We then headed for Epernay, a town constructed on Champagne bottles! (Literally because the caves run for kilometres under the streets). To reach it, we headed a little west at the junction of the Canal Latéral à la Marne, locked onto the river then went back up, to find congenial moorings at the town rowing club, where our overnight fee included- a glass of champagne!



Epernay.

The canal, on to Chalon, took us thro' the rolling hills of Champagne, every spot covered with wall to wall vines- millions of them-to the horizon and beyond, it is not hard to see how the district can supply the whole world with its overpriced, but quite palatable produce. (I did try to drink only the local brew whilst in Champagne, but it really is for sipping, not quaffing with a meal).



Chalon.

Then we were in Vitry, at the junction of the Canal de la Marne au Rhin. This was the last leg of our ring, leading back to Toul. BUT it was 80 locks up to the summit, a 5 km tunnel at Mauverge, which had been spoken of with awe on our route. It has a chain tug to pull craft thro' (engines banned since the Mont Blanc tunnel disaster) which has a tendency to snake, wiping its tow along the tunnel walls, and an earlier lock side notice advised a possible 4 day wait before passage (perhaps whilst the tunnel is cleared of sunken craft?)



Our allocated time was running out, and Vitry had the only slipway in the area, so a swift train ride to Toul (no tunnel!) to recover car and trailer, and our cruise was over.

It was the longest trip we have yet made-14 days in steam, 550 km, 170 locks, 5 canals, 5 departments, two regions, 200 kg of coal plus bits of wood and some charcoal. I reckoned at around 300 rpm the doughty Taylor compound made some 1 ¼ million revolutions (I got quite dizzy counting them). Well done **Chantilly!**

Not recommended for beginners!

FULL CIRCLE

CHANTILLY completes a ring in France.



Chantilly (b 1989) was facing her 14th cruise on French waterways and having now covered many of the popular and obvious routes, it didn't seem a bad idea to repeat her first cruise on the Canal du Nivernais but with rather more holiday time available, carry on and complete the shortest ring in France- a 3 week cruise.

The starting point would again be Auxerre, with slipway and all needed facilities, including a most attractive town with tempting restaurants, but this time partly to change the experience and also to go with the flow, in the reverse direction. This would take us downstream on the river Yonne, then the Seine, canals du Loing, de Briare, Latéral à la Loire, and le Nivernais, back to Auxerre.

When checking with the 'capitaine du port' on the state of the waterway, I was asked, for the first time in France, if I would like a "vignette" (licence) I was assured that although the rules said if you were either more than 5 m long OR more than 9 HP it was required, but no one was too bothered. Dividing the 43 Euros it cost for a month by the 13 free years we had enjoyed, I thought a small donation was in order, so we were fully licenced- as suggested no one bothered to ask for it in the 3 week cruise!.

Our start in early August, was in the French heat wave at 40°+. Dressed appropriately (largely undressed) it was bearable with a following wind, but the inevitable head wind gave the boiler first go at the breeze and us second! To add to the experience, as I could only carry 200kg of coal for 20 days steaming, I was regularly exercising, sawing bank wood.

The river stretches were swift and locking down, even in 100 m and occasionally 200 m long locks undemanding. Most of the locks had sloping sides, often with a little floating pontoon on rails for small boats to moor to and ensure they were still in the wet bit when the lock was empty!



In order to gauge our progress, and complete our ring in the allocated time, fuel and money, I added up kilometres on each navigation totalising 650 and as we seemed to average 8 Kph (5 mph) or about 4 locks an hour, the 250 locks equalled another 500 k, which gave a total 'kilocks' of 1050. Dividing the 18 steaming of, days available meant that we needed to average some 60 kilocks each day.

We were not far short of this on our first day's steam, arriving at Joigny, anticipating the advertised shower, found it didn't exist, but a coiled water hose did, and in that heat provided a splendid low cost, bank side shower. Then in the relative cool of the evening, we were entertained by a traditional street group whilst downing a cold beer in the café du centre.

Two more days, and we left the Seine to take its 3000 ton barges to Paris and turned left into the Canal du Loing, which follows the course, and is watered by the river Loing. The locks here, had a mixture of gate paddles, some wound up to open, some down (often on the same gate!) but the most effective were lever operated, by swinging a gate top lever, from one horizontal to the other—all, no doubt, to dissuade self locking!.



We reached Montargis just before lunch stop (12-1) and found an automatic lock, but could find no form of detector. We walked to the next lock and the mystery was uncovered when the lock keeper showed us (obviously with pride ‘cos it was his lunch break) the VDU he could watch us from via swivelling cameras, and operate the lock remotely.

It was here that we also experienced one of a number of kindness which seemed to characterised this cruise – often we chatted to interested people whilst locking, and invariably they asked what fuel we used, on this occasion, we noticed the same guy at the next lock, who presented us with a bag of anthracite from his car boot -he had managed to find a local coal merchant (in France?- of course John!) from the yellow pages, and driven over and bought a bag to supplement our inadequate supplies.-“more welcome than champagne!” I assured our new friend. We were also given intelligence on an ‘extreme’ lockkeeper further down the cut – he couldn’t be missed anyway- there was a fairground organ playing at full belt in the lock –house!. A look over our steamboat gave us ‘carte blanche’ to visit his rambling garages and workshops- one led into another getting deeper in gloom and junk but did contain 4 or 5, 1920s Citroen and Renault limos, restored to a standard that belied his workshop equipment – much self built, including a moped turned band-saw!



The navigation then became the Canal de Briare, where at Rogny we met the remarkable remains of a 7 locks staircase, built 1642, and in a state that would be eagerly seized upon by a Brit preservation group for full restoration!. This canal was built early, to link the Loire with the Seine and get produce to Paris – particularly wood, from the Morvan forests. Initially this was by log rafting (I did see old photographs of this still being practised in the 1800’s) then by boats built in the forest – it was cheaper to sell the boat for wood in Paris, than attempt to get it back to recycle it!. (Although obviously the beginnings of the disposable society, they hadn’t reached the ‘flat pack’ age!). Other sections of the original Henri IV waterway were extant – preserved by the very simple expedient of cutting a small drainage ditch in the bed leaving a wonderful grassy track.

Then onto Briare, with its 660 m aqueduct over the sprawling bed of the Loire.



This structure was engineered by Eiffel in the late 1800s and replaces 4 locks down onto, then 4 back up from the Loire. This crossing was extremely hazardous, only being possible when the river level was high enough and the stream strong, and a reputed 40 souls perished attempting this feat each year; their memorial being an emotive ballad ‘La Loire’. Despite this loss of life I am in no doubt that the aqueduct was financed more for commercial gain than altruistic principles!.

We dallied rather with photo shoots, and arrived at the port of Chatillon well after the showers had shut, but we met with another kindness, a French couple had locked with us most of the day, realised we would be late arriving and snaffled the shower key for us!

We were now nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ way round our ring, and had only used $\frac{1}{3}$ of our coal – this was due to the abundance of bank wood. The French draught (serious enough to kill trees, but fortunately not serious enough to close the navigation) which when aided with barbecue charcoal (obtainable everywhere) burned up quickly and did, for the more heavily locked sections give better steaming than anthracite.



A few more days of 60 – 80 kilocks and we were at Decize, with a ‘safe’ crossing of the Loire into our final leg, the canal du Nivernais. Now, Chantilly has been on these waters before, but the other direction and I must admit that this and the intervening 14 years loss of brain-cells made it a completely fresh experience.

We were now halfway thro our time and $\frac{2}{3}$ thro’ our itinerary, so shorter legs were sought. On the climb up to the summit at Baye, climbing up the river Aron valley, there were, after our first stop at Cercy la Tour (where I was obliged, by dint of excessive wood burning, to brush the boiler tubes – a messy job when living on board) there were very few suitable halts before the summit, so we had even more time” in hand’ at Baye.

Well sited and interesting moorings, invariably attract bands of colourful resident boaters, and amongst those ensconced at Baye were singer Anne David and journalist Carl Mattauch living on a splendid, but sadly glass sheathed and therefore rotting, converted French air sea rescue launch, we spent an evocative ‘soirée’ on deck serenaded by her guitar and deep voiced soulful songs until the bottles were empty.

At 9 am we had a ‘green’ for the one way passage thro’ the three summit tunnels, separated by deep, dripping cuttings, green and cool even in the 40° drought, then began the winding 28 lock drop down a remote hillside, to civilisation at Chitry. We were escorted, 3 or 4 locks at a time by roaming lockkeepers, unfortunately meeting on two occasions an ‘up’ lockkeeper who had set his 3 or 4 locks in his favour giving us at least an hours wait, and generating heated discussions thro’ Françoise in favour of simply waiting till boats met, and then passing. But ‘éclusiers’ have their own inviable code, and Chirac wasn’t answering his phone – so we waited.

We did get to Chitry with just enough time to borrow a bike, pedal like fury to Corbigny and get the few meagre supplies left before the public holiday of the 15th of August. We were then in the company of a lively international group of boaters, dining at the waterside restaurant, where the food was so ridiculously cheap that we felt obliged to purchase, and then consume, an immodest amount of alcoholic beverage.

The next morning, by virtue of dashing off only just ahead of an apparently derelict peniche, which suddenly throbbed into life, and began a lumbering passage down, cut us off from this amiable band of partying matelots?

By the time we reached Clemecy, we were caught up by a lovely 50s Dutch built steel hulled 'cruiser with Parisians Didier and Stephane on an extended escape cruise. It had a bow thruster so powerful that it heeled the boat and shot a jet of water like a huge jumping fish! They then provided excellent company to the end of our cruise.

The arm linking the river Cure at Vermenton was a colourful overnight mooring; we then steamed up the un-navigable river until halted by weed, and had a breakfast in splendid solitude, fortunately being carried to clearer water by the current before needing to de-weed.



@Clemecy.

We had another 'up river' repaste that evening, when having discovered 'no restaurant' where there should have been, after lock closing time, we took the river up past the lock and found a little isolated mooring near Vincelles. We met, as we were about to walk into town, an interested fellow, who after enthusing over **Chantilly** said he would be delighted to have us use his mooring, and would try to slip off work the next morning to see us in steam. He didn't, but later that day nearing a lock we were hailed by a pickup haring down the tow-path, the driver waving a wine bottle. It was the same man, guessing correctly what would make me pull in and take him for a trip. His 'work' was a vineyard, and they had just bottled last years Chablis and he presented a couple of bottles.

No matter how slowly we then progressed, Auxerre and the end of our cruise approached, having covered the 640 km and 250 locks in 18 days – and thanks to bank wood, two bags of coal left, only 150 kg was used, so the wine 'ballast' we returned this year with was somewhat meagre!.

MAYENNE REVISITED

Due to other boating activities this summer, time for **Chantilly's** (16th!) French holiday was somewhat limited.

It was some eight years past that Françoise revisited her 'Home Water', the Mayenne, and at 98km and 28 locks, would easily fit in the 8 steaming days available, and allow time for the reunions and inevitable parties which would punctuate our voyage.

Although Portsmouth to Caen is the shortest route, it is also the most expensive, so a little research threw up 'Speed Ferries' a recent cat operator, Dover to Boulogne, as the cheapest for car and trailer 'up to 7m'. Checking in at the Dover kiosk, uncovered the fact that the '7m' is over car and trailer! No amount of reasoning, obvious dismay or muttered curses, our over length rig prevented us from being ignominiously sent back out of the port, thro' various 'secret' exits, to go and re book with P&O at their 'normal,' not pre booked rate. I relate the minor contretemps, to hopefully preclude any other 'bargain' hunting steam-boater meeting with similar undeserved rejection!



The town of Mayenne was reached without further diversion (in fact reached very comfortably, having lost use of a company car with its remarkable semi submersible launching capacity, I have acquired what seems to be the SBA standard tractor, a 'Disco', and wondered why I had struggled for all those years). As well as the head of navigation, it is an excellent base, with broad easy slipway, limitless (free) car & trailer parking, and free showers at the tourist office -as long as one is prepared to ablute during their meager operating hours.



The Upper Mayenne navigation, is relatively modern date ,1870's, and is based on evenly spaced pounds. 3 or 4 km with a shallow lock, 1-2 m, horseshoe weir and a mill at each end. The locks are all

still manned, so it is a very gentle and benign waterway (as indeed are most of the lock-keepers, the odd one still seems to suffer from hydrophobia).



Although the mill at Grez-Neuville is still functioning (and nearly empties its pound over the day!) none are in commercial use, most are now exceedingly 'Des Res's', but one or two are still awaiting a rich Brit to sink his fortune and vigor into restoring a bit of French antiquity for posterity.



This river is decidedly empty. Hire bases are diminishing, those left are offering some low rates, so 2 or 3 boats a day may be all the hazards met. The facilities, eateries, shops, are not plentiful, but still better than most UK waterways, and it is all 100% rural France!

Having contact with locals, allowed us a car shuffle which with a number of interesting diversions, to place car & trailer at Grez-Neuville, again with good wide slip, our port of departure. Our last 2 days were reserved for a trip up the Oudon branch, which we discovered only after 12 km up to the 1st lock (no thanks to the lock keeper at the junction who kept this intelligence closely guarded) was closed due to low water level, so a dash back then heading downstream for the night at Montreuil Belfroy gave us adequate compensation by way of meeting up with **Roche Maurice** a steam tug built in Argenteuil in 1888 to work on the Loire at Nantes. 16.50 m long and 4'10 m wide, she was part, until after the war, of a steam flotilla of 'Iroquois' a well known boat in the port of Trentemoult. She was a passenger boat but stopped working in 1958. She was then in the 60s-70s equipped with a 300 HP deisel engine, but had to stop working when the extraction of sand from the Loire stopped.

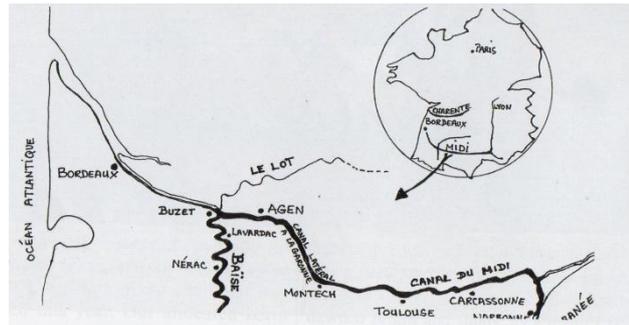


Roche Maurice.

Roche Maurice was rescued by Jean-Paul in 95, he used to pass by with his péniche **Neptune** and decided to save this pretty steam boat, lifted her from the mud where she rested She is now diesel, equipped with an engine from the 60's but retains the funnel, and is tender to a residential péniche the 'Neptune', in company with another steam tug, built in the same dock in Argenteuil in 1888.

Chantilly, having only had its annual 1hr, service performed faultlessly and due to the unhurried pace, only consumed 3 bags of anthracite in 8 days- with the aid of ubiquitous branch wood.

A TALE OF TWO RIVERS



One of the very few French waterways that **Chantilly** hadn't yet blessed with a trail of ash and slight blackening of the locality is the Canal de la Garonne, leading to the Canal du Midi.

A deterrent was the time and distance to trail, but this year a whole month was allocated or French cruising, which would enable us also to revisit the river Charente. We first visited this ancient and unspoilt navigation linking Angoulême to Rochefort on the Atlantic coast, where one can normally clearly see fishes and weeds through its water, in '96 and were keen to revisit acquaintances and hostleries.



Angoulême didn't offer suitable launching facilities, but we found a slip two locks down where we were promptly adopted by the local populace, offering garden hose, a tow to a splendid mooring on a day hire boat base and secure parking for car and trailer. Our first stop downstream through the excellent self operated manual locks with hand wheels instead of windlasses was at St Simon, an old 'Gabare' Charente barge building town still being consumed by the termites imported 100 years ago with the African timber.



St Simon

"Gabares"

On then to Cognac, which town provided much of the early wine trade, shipping rough wine down and exporting the distilled product, stopping nearby to visit Jean-Claude, a self taught model engineer who has spent 25 years devoted to modeling the development of steam power, from Cugnot's tractor,

to marine plant, road engines, some 70 models all in meticulous detail, all self fabricated from original drawings or illustrations. He has now allocated half of his house to house these marvels, all are working, most linked to a compressed air supply, on which even his 3" long marine triple ran silently and smoothly.

Our last leg was to the astonishingly well preserved Roman city of Saintes, just prior to the less attractive tidal section to Rochefort. Then a somewhat slower return to Cognac against the 1 knot current for a quick train journey back up the Charente Valley for car and trailer, then slip out and on to:-

Part II. It was our hope to re-launch and explore the river Lot before joining the Midi at Buzet, but low water had closed the Garonne 'high speed' link to the junction, so we found an almost impossible slipway on the river Baise and spent a leisurely 2 days gently cruising to Buzet on this ancient navigation dotted with most colorful old towns (Including the town of Condom which shamefully trades on its name and has an unspeakable museum!)

At Buzet we locked up onto the Canal from Océan (Atlantic) to the sea (Med) the oldest, probably the longest and the most visited in France. Linking Bordeaux to the Rhone, it covers some 600km and 160 locks, many "staircase" with one summit, well marked as 'Le Partage des Eaux' (the Atlantic/Med watershed) with a memorial to the remarkable Riquet who, obviously bored with his job as tax collector, set about constructing this canal between 1670-90, so convinced of its value that he personally (Ho!) financed the water source canals.



Buzet.

So well constructed that lock chambers still bear a 1680 'ish' engraving. For much of its length were planted plane trees to provide shade for the draught mules. These have a secondary benefit as they root under the towpath and intertwine to provide a perpetual bank edging, self healing and boat friendly. I must also add to the credits the calorific value of their branches is second only to oak! So the evocative navigation led us firstly to Agen, an unremarkable town, save for meeting some interesting boating residents who had brought (highly sought after) converted Dutch iron sailing barges thro the canals (Next project?) Then at Montech, we came across an inclined plane with a pair of huge locomotives that dragged a wedge of water uphill about 1 km in a fair faced concrete channel, bypassing 5 locks. Sadly private boats were banned from using it !



Montech

"Incline"

-- its only purpose was to transport a trip boat each day or pre-booked barges. Followed quickly by Toulouse, a very visitable city with a canal link to a navigable stretch of the Garonne and a very accommodating Port de Plaisance. Shortly after was the 5 km (short) summit, then the more relaxing locking down often 2,3 or 4 "staircase" into Castelnaudary, built around a large lake now the canal basin; and met a smart but solitary representative of the Foreign Legion whose base is here. Carcassonne, well worth a "rest" day visit with its ancient Cité; and intriguing old town adjacent to a well equipped port, being the start point of our earlier cruise on the Midi, completed the journey. As we still had 3 days, and the muddy bank groove slip there hadn't improved with time we set off towards Narbonne- to find a suitable fetch out point.



Carcassonne.

A couple of hire base cranes were either u s, or the driver was on holiday, leaving a choice of a extremely remote slipway on an arm at Port de la Robine, in the care of an ancient curmudgeonly Brit couple who appeared not to want to be disturbed by anything, or pressing on down the linking Canal de la Robine to Narbonne.

This we reached with just 1/2 an hour to spare, on our last boating day before lock closing at 6pm. This proved a fortunate choice, with the railway station, old centre with splendid restaurants and pavement music just a walk away.

A relaxing 3 hour train trip (Note: Brit Senior rail card give a whopping 50% discount on SNCF) back to Agen, taxi (definitely-no discount!) to car & trailer at Lavardac. The western Midi fully met expectation, a cruise of some 518 km and 135 locks! By dint of burning bank wood, using only 1 bag of anthracite in 3 days. Although having a number of hire bases and being popular cruising, we only had lock queues for 1 day - and even then as we were blowing off, we were given precedence!

IN THE FOOT STEPS OF NAPOLÉON

Looking over the map of French waterways for inspiration for our 08 cruise, our eyes were drawn yet again to Brittany.

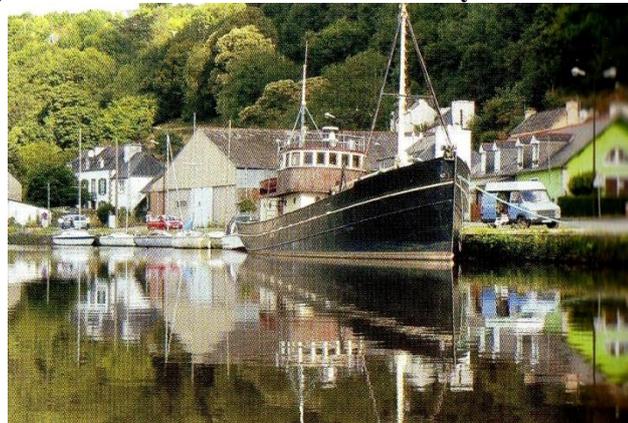
This pleasant (despite the Brits) region can be cross navigated from sea to sea - St Malo to Lorient, and onetime, from Nantes to Brest, with nary a hint of salt- Whimpish small boat sailors can be seen on these waterways avoiding the ravages of the top left corner of France. Indeed this navigation was greatly improved by Napoleon during our blockade to do just that!

Chantilly has been there before, but as noted was unable to complete the cruise from Nantes to Brest as a hydro dam was inconveniently planted, in the 20's on the river Blavet, severing the navigation between Pontivy and Brest, and forming the not unattractive Lac de Guerlédan.

We had previously launched on this lake about the size of Windermere, which offers a couple of days pleasant cruising in itself, and found that the lock out at the head of the lake was intact, but the paddle gear was missing thus preventing further navigation. A walk showed several further locks to be extant. At the Brest end, the navigation is the river Aulne, which never closed (as we discovered on a previous driving trip), but no waterway guide exists to show for how far it is navigable.

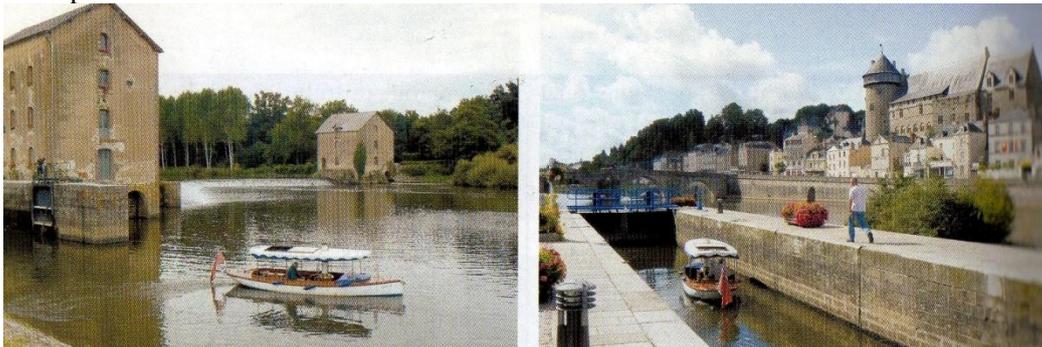
So there was an undeniable case for further exploration!

Chantilly was firstly launched at Port Launay, just above the Aulne tidal lock. (Yes, through navigators had to brave the Baie de Brest) Here, being accessible to sea boats, was a most colourful collection of mostly Brit boats with their equally colourful owners, including a (ex) Lowestoft steam drifter, a smaller sister to **Lydia Eva** launched as: '**Norfolk County**'



Norfolk County.

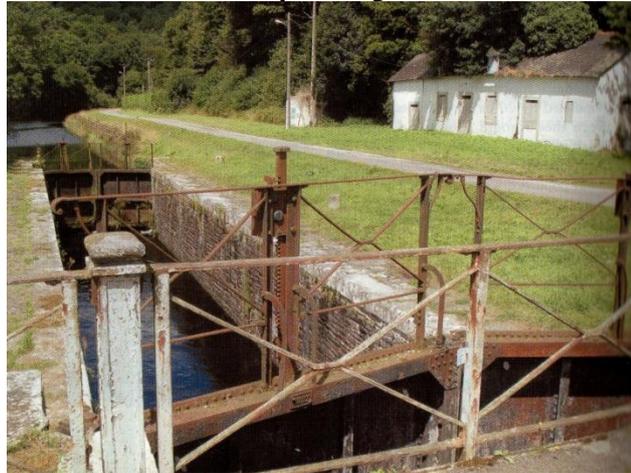
From here we steamed upstream through Châteaulin to meet the first of the 43 self operated locks - most unusual for France. The good news was that my modified UK windlass (bushed down from measurements given over the phone by a helpful lady official) fitted the paddle gear and this saved the 50 Euros deposit to borrow (and possibly loose!) one. The not so good news was to find that no lock landings existed, upstream or downstream. Françoise thus became adept at leaping onto bottom gates and climbing up with windlass in teeth, then giving 200 odd turns to each astonishingly low geared paddle.



Thus we progressed, with occasional logging stops until we met up with a most unusual 'traditional' Loire lighter, populated by 20 or so young actors who were the 'Kabaré Flottant' (The

'Mikron Theatre' of France) they set up on the riverside to amuse and titillate the local populace with their sketches, songs and outrageous activities, after dark with amazing lighting effects - and they had a bar serving chilled draught beer!

Tearing ourselves away the next day, we steamed on a couple more days, till we met the head of navigation at Port de Carhaix. This was defined by finding a lock with no bottom gates!



Adopting plan 'B', out came 'Brompton' (a truly folding British made bike, nearly as useful as a steam boat!), and this trusty machine took me on, the next day to investigate the disused section. I found a further 20 locks, all with sound-some rebuilt, chambers and good, some new, top gates, until the summit, a series of lakes, from where I could see locks descending, again, lacking bottom gates.

Return down river, I elected to cycle ahead locking Françoise down. (She doesn't mind the benign locking down but hates my turbulent locking up) at a cracking pace, firing I confess more diligently than me, with 120 on the clock as she entered the lock, leaving smartly with 150 to try to beat my furious pedaling to the next lock.



We did again meet the 'Kabaré Flottant' further on their travels, we were by now old friends and further patronised their show - and bar!



So 4 days up and 3 down, meeting only one other boat in transit- we were reportedly only the 3rd boat to navigate the Aulne this year - no real incentive to reopen the navigation further then...

After fetching out at Port Launay, 'resting' for a couple of days in Concarneau, we re-launched on Lake de Guerlédan, to discover how near to the summit we could get from the eastern approach. Yes, the exit lock was complete with paddle gear and we progressed through 4 more locks before discovering a mud bar right across the cut, just before the bottom gates of lock 6. I attempted to flush it with a couple of locks full, but then concluded that was probably how it got there!

So leaping onto the next best thing to a steamboat, I 'bromptoned' on to the summit, discovering 8 more working locks and another 20 minus bottom gates but otherwise sound.

Back to the lake for 2 days cruising. There are two resort areas, each with restaurant, campsite and moorings, and several interesting arms to explore and weekend water-skiers apart, almost traffic free.

Just one last section to survey, from the Dam to Pontivy. When built the dam was planned to include a lock flight- but they didn't and no one insisted. Now the most practical navigation link would be a travelling boat lift, as on the Rhone, with an upper and lower slipway, to bypass the dam.

This leaves this section from the lake to Pontivy, the eastern limit of navigation to be surveyed on trusty Brompton.



Brompton!

The 12 km or so of canalised river has 15 locks, all chambers in good condition. Where the level had dropped, some rather terrifying rocks had surfaced, and some huge river flows had resulted in two lock entries silting up.

The conclusion of our little adventure has to be that here is a canal ripe for restoration- a few lock gates, lock landings and some judicial dredging, and you have a 300 km through navigation- but for whom? There are no marinas, one (nearly) defunct hire base and only local fishing punts afloat and an average of 1 visiting boat a month. The attraction to the French is the cycling, canoeing and fishing, and fortunately for us few, that is enough to prevent further closure.

Chantilly was then transported to Françoise's home waters: the river Mayenne, for a last

week's cruising for Françoise to practice her French and me to continue my lessons in 'La Bonne Vie!' We steamed in total 18 days, and thanks to contributions from local woodlands, burned only 150kg of anthracite.



Cruising in France has many attractions. Most navigation requires no license-rarely is one asked more than 20 Euros for a vignette. The funding to keep almost all of the network in excellent order comes from state and department. The facilities: moorings, showers, toilets are provided by the waterside towns on the grounds that if they want visitors they should provide for them. Traffic is light to none existent, the natives, including fishermen are friendly and the weather is splendid.

Give it a try!

RETURN TO MAYENNE.

By unwritten pre nuptial agreement (in return I am excused French lessons!) demands that I should take Françoise back to her home waters, the river Mayenne. This is by no means a penance; the charming river is little used, with many pleasant bank side “features”.

Even with the Sarthe thrown in, it is barely a 2 week cruise, so we usually have an ‘add on’ trip for a week or so to make up a month in France.



This year I was attracted to the only narrow canal in France, the Canal de l’Ourcq with locks at 3m wide. It is actually a water supply for Paris, running from the North East about 100km into the Canal St Denis and St Martin, a Seine bypass system rather like the Regents canal and Thames. There is a useful guide with launching spots, facilities and an information phone No, which rather sadly, informed me a few days before leaving, that there was low water and only 50 cm draught, and Chantilly at 70 cm draught wouldn’t pass the lock sills.

Plan B was to spend some time on the Erdre, not far from Mayenne, in advance of the ABV rally in late August, just because it is a very attractive mixture of lakes and river.



So on July 18th, we set off for France and again on July 20! This was not by reason of sightseeing but a misfortune which I will relate, as ‘it could be you!’

We had a Trailer bearing failure (surprise?) on the M20 near Dover. Total disaster was avoided by the mudguard edge locating in a tyre groove, and holding the wheel in place long enough to make the

hard shoulder. We then rang our previously unused rescue provider, to be told by the operator, 'we only recover caravans and small trailers, not boat trailers' and I was left on the Motorway to make my own recovery arrangements. Four hours later and £560 lighter, we were home. Acrimonious discussions with my Insurance Company, I am happy to name as Equity Red Star, continue! We boaters are rather prone to trailer bearing problems, so do check with your rescue organisation!

2 days and 2 replacement bearings later, we set off again, and uneventfully reached Mayenne, having decided with the delay, to give the Erdre a miss this time.



The river Mayenne uniquely gives name to the Department and its county town, and with excellent quay, slipway, parking, and shower, all free, is a good reason for beginning a cruise at the head of navigation.

The navigation is 134. km with 46 locks-all manned (personed) down to its confluence with the Loire at Angers.

The first 20 or so locks are around 2 m deep, each with an intriguing hydro generator worked by siphon and looks like a giant slug climbing back over the weir. The valley then becomes gentler, with 1m locks around 3 km apart.

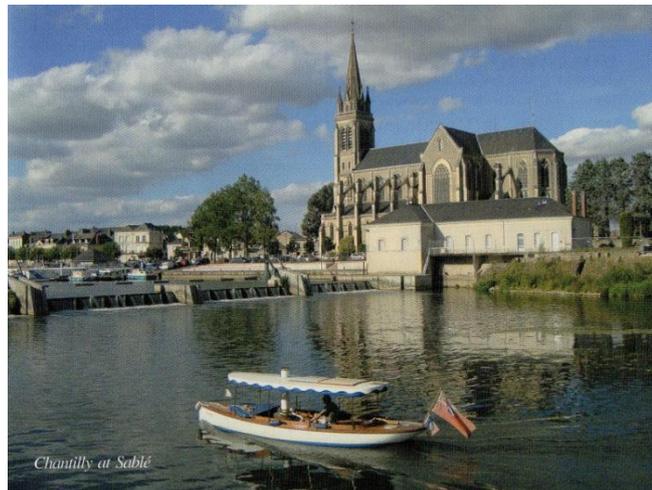
Towards Angers, at Le Lion d'Angers where the river Oudon joins the Mayenne, is the French National stud with an extensive racecourse, Our passage coincided with a race day where from a public mooring we gained free entrance, and by dint of a system based on backing the 2 favourites each way in each race, we finished the day 10 euro up!



Angers.

Our cruise continued towards Angers, with only minor deforestation as we eked out our 200kg of coal, with twice daily logging forays burning around 50/50 wood/Chepstow Welsh and anthracite mix. This way our 200kg, covered 20 steaming days.

Around Angers, the Mayenne joins the river Sarthe, briefly becoming the Maine before they join the Loire. Turning up the Sarthe towards le Mans one is immediately struck by the flatness. Between the locks are also a number of navigation hazards listed as “submerged weirs” and formed an important part of early navigation, and I was moved to learn more of the early navigation in a splendid little museum in the town hall of Sablé.



Around 1870, early commerce on the river was by shallow draft ‘Gabard’ using a huge square sail, or poled on windless days. The river’s main value was a source of power for many mills, not just flour but fabric and the occasional forge.

There were many more, much shallower weirs, as little as 1 ft head, to divide the available power as widely as possible. Boats were a nuisance! A section of the weir was made of narrow removable planks, (as indeed are some parts of the Thames weirs)-when a boat needed passage, this section was dismantled and the boat pulled thro’ the ensuing torrent by a capstan winch in the stern hooked onto a stout post further up the bank. An addition team of capstaners would be seconded for the event. Some entrepreneur did arrange for a bank mounted winch, horse powered for speedier passage, but it was not popular as is cost good beer money!



Presumably downstream was a lot quicker, a white knuckle, white water ride.!

Only in 1870, as commerce increased did Napoleon III and local landowners combine to clean up the operation and build chamber locks and the present layout of lock, mill, weir mill, and the 'péniche' was developed, initially horse drawn, then motor with no recorded steam period, apart from paddle tugs.

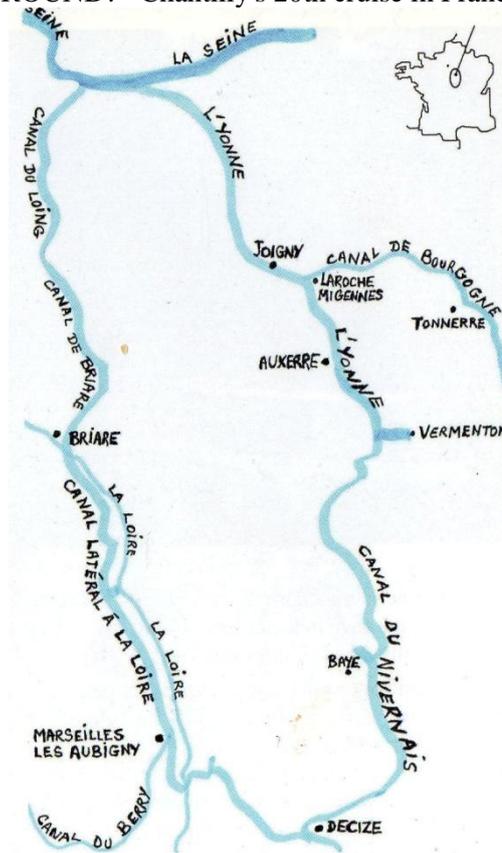
At Le Mans, head of the Sarthe navigation, we found another large and well founded port with all facilities within an easy walk.

Having plenty of steaming days left, we opted to retrace back to Mayenne, but making alternative halts. By this means we left few worthy Towns Villages and Hamlets unvisited and fewer hostelries un-sampled.



Apart from cleaning boiler tubes each 6 days, more often than I would have chosen whilst living aboard, Chantilly demanded nothing more than fuel, water and the odd drop of oil, and the benign waterways offered no untoward excitement and with advancing age and memory loss, in 2 years time it will all seem fresh and new again!

THE WRONG WAY ROUND! - Chantilly's 20th cruise in France



The cruise this year was intended to complete the Canal de l'Est (Sud). After 19 years of cruising in France, not a lot of unexplored (desirable!) waterways are left- one is the Canal de l'Est (Branch Sud) which we nearly did some years back, but turned left instead of right and ended up cruising the Canal de l'Est (Branch Nord) into Belgium. So plans were laid to launch at Toul and to proceed over the summit and there onto the Haute Saône. Alas, just before departure we learned of a possible stoppage, and moved to plan 'B', which was the Nivernais ring, done six years previous, but this time to be the other way round for a different perspective.

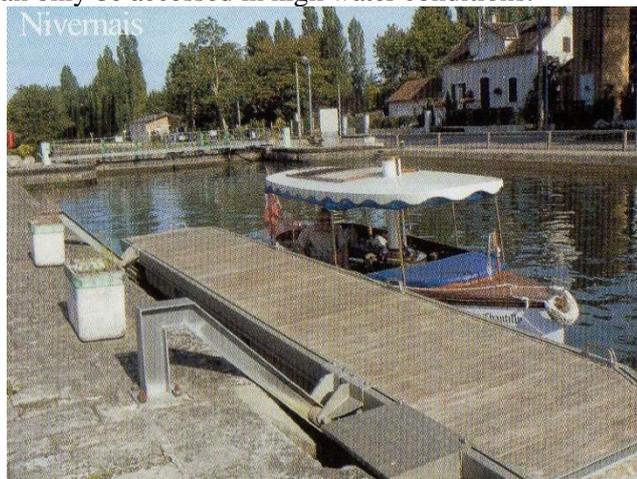


Our launch pad was an excellent slipway at a hire base in Migennes on the junction of the River Yonne and Canal de Bourgogne, which also has a Brit run boatyard housing many intriguing craft, including a splendid 1880's 35" steel harbour launch hull, built by Daimler Benz, to utilize their "new fangled" diesel engines. This, the owner Joe Parfit feels would be far better restored as a steamer and awaits plant and enthusiasm!

The route took us up the Yonne to Auxerre, onto the Canal du Nivernais then the Canal Lateral à la Loire, Canal de Briare, Canal du Loing, a short section of the Seine, then back up the Yonne to Migennes.

Previously we had gone down the river navigations, and soon learned the difference! The Yonne has lock sides sloping at 45%, which descending one can hover, but locking up, only a few had climbing pontoons, the rest, with no ladders to clutch nor bollards to reach were rather bumpy filling.

The Nivernais Canal, long abandoned by commerce now dedicated to leisure due in -part to lack of depth and diminishing lock length towards the summit, was originally a log rafting river, to get wood from the Nivernais forests to Paris to heat the homes of the bourgeois!. It does climb through some very pleasant country and reaches the summit lake at Baye (strangely its level is one lock below the summit pound) by way of alternate tunnels and deep eerily dark and green cuttings. A leisurely descent (aren't they always?) brings one to the Loire at Decizes. It is navigable at this point just to cross over to the canal Lateral which is long and sparsely locked, with a number of access cuts and locks onto the Loire which can only be accessed in high water conditions.

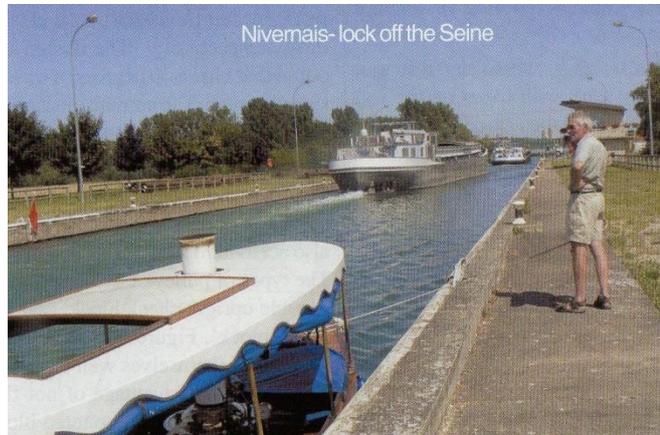


As a cut and not a river navigation, the towns on it were largely developed as wharf age areas and have a wealth of industrial archaeology, included is Marseilles -Les-Aubigny, an old péniche building town, and the junction with the defunct canal du Berry. A few more trees burned (I reckon I was doing about 3 trees/ 100kms - extra Urban!) and we were at Briare, crossing the Loire Valley on the famous aqueduct. Impressive it is, but much more fascinating is the old canal, which locks down onto the Loire, traverses it about 1km upstream then 5 locks back up. The aqueduct was built to bypass this navigational nightmare-some 8000 péniches crossed each year, and only 7990 made it to the other side, with the loss of some 40 souls, but more pertinent at the time boats and cargoes . The route is still passable, with enough water in the Loire, and the northern branch is now a very splendid port de plaisance in the heart of old Briare, well worthy of our 2 days stop over.



Then followed a fairly uneventful passage, on the Canal du Loing up to the colourful old

transshipment town of Moret, at the junction with the Seine. Now the Seine is a serious waterway, with 200 meter locks and 3000ton barges where 21 foot steamboats are looked upon as mere fenders - so a whole bag of coal was allocated to the 15 km section to ensure adequate maneuverability. This worked only up to a point as it became obvious my tubes needed cleaning! We joined the Seine about noon and I was assured that these locks worked 24/7 but as we approached the (only) lock, there was a queue of barges hovering on screw and bow thruster in mid stream all due I learned to the lock closing over lunch time so that a spotty faced student 'temporary' could stop international commerce whilst he sat and ate his butties!



The run to the Yonne was otherwise uneventful, but then we discovered that the lock closed at 6 not 7 and as the river had no accessible bank, we had to overnight attached to a rickety fishing stage - but a good spot to clean the boiler tubes!

We were soon back to Migennes, but as we still had a few days left, some coal and France had the odd surviving tree, we steamed up the Canal de Bourgogne to Tonnerre, to view the huge ancient hospital founded in 1293 by 'Margaret of Burgundy' and the quaint town washhouse: the 'Fosse Dionne'.

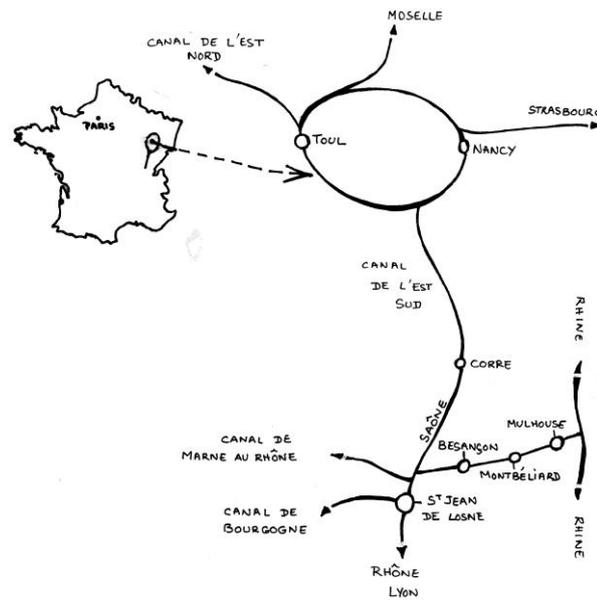


Migennes.

Another successful French cruise, covering some 700 km and 250 locks in 24 days steaming. We used most of the 175 kg of coal carried (that's only 7kg/day, thanks to serious contributions from the department of forests!

No river taxes were asked, and there are plenty of good free town moorings and facilities - which helped to negate the high euro and enjoy a good level of local dining.

FRENCH SORTIE No21



Some time ago, we were advised by an old salt to cruise the canal de l'Est as "the most picturesque waterway in France". So we did in 2002, up thro' Champagne towards the Ardennes. (Funnel No.112 Spring 02)

Although pleasant enough, it wasn't remarkable. Later we learned we should have taken the branch Sud, not the branch Nord, as we had.

So this year, we decided to try again. The North-South divide is centred around Toul and we found a convenient slip with (free!) car & trailer parking, at Nancy with the bonus of showers, toilets and a most visit-able town (-all basic Brit requirements!)

We quickly discovered that the canal South from Nancy had breached due to a landslide, and we were obliged to take the circle (boucle) of the Moselle, to join the canal de l'Est below the stoppage. So 2 days of large locks and apparently even larger 3000 ton barges later, we were on branch Sud. Only a day later, we noticed a large hole appearing in the wall of a lock, and learned later from a passing boater that the canal was firmly closed behind us as that lock wall had collapsed shortly after! So there was no going back to Nancy without a 4 week detour! This then determined us to adopt plan B,-to join the Saône at Corre, then up the canal du Rhin au Rhône as far as time and coal permitted.



It was, however rather heavily trafficked as the canal de l'Est was stopped, by boats heading East-a number of them in a hurry and not to be delayed by a cockle-shell steamboat!

We stopped at St Jean de Losne meeting up with old friends at boatyard H2O (one time French agents for Frolics-but briefly as they sold not one!)

Although we cruised the canal du Rhin au Rhône some 9 years ago, we felt it was a navigation well worth revisiting and set off towards Alsace



The one item we were short of on this cruise was look-keepers! On the canal de l'Est, we were given a remote zapper, which operated the locks to our favour about 100 m away. On the Rhin au Rhône we were given a suitcase full of electronics, which did the same thing, but was sufficiently sophisticated to detect English curses and occasionally refuse to co-operate. This would then required a call to the VNF(Voies Navigables de France) who would shortly appear bouncing over the horizon (not more in a 2CV, but a more modern version of it), and sort us out- always with a smile and muttering 'les Anglais...' (Well, it did give them a job)



We reached Montbéliard, with a comfortable port, and elected not to complete the navigation to Mulhouse, as the existence of a suitable slipway was in doubt.



We then trailed **Chantilly** to the home of French ABV steam boaters Jean-Luc and Liliane with '**Naiade**' in Besançon who kindly accommodated us and corralled her whilst we entrained to visit our freshly hatched grand-son for a few days in Bavaria.

On returning, we found Jean-Luc had spent the time measuring up **Chantilly**'s concentric condenser and was making one for **Naiade**!

We had, in all 18 days steaming, covering 620 km with 198 locks, and consuming 180 kg of coal, several trees, 7 litres of beer 9 bottles of wine, 19 meters of baguette and 5 kg of camembert.

Oh- the canal de l'Est branch Sud ?...nothing to write home about!

Encore la Mayenne

2014-an even number, it must mean our French cruise this year is our bi annual visit to the river Mayenne, Françoise's summer home for many years.



It is no penance-the launching **Chantilly** at the head of navigation in the town of Mayenne (yes, the Department, river and town spun the same name) is excellent as is the (free) car and trailer parking, with a visit able chateau and choice of vitualling stations for good measure The navigation is benign with locks from 3 meter down to ½ meter fall, 1 to 4 kilometre apart. It does lack one rather essential ingredient however-boats! 2 or 3 a week make it to the head, with a few more hire boats lower down, even they are diminishing in numbers, some sold off (although inland boating is not a French weakness, they tend to go coastal for the sterner stuff) some transferred south to the only really busy French waterway, the Canal du Midi.

None the less, the locks are still manned, but with rather variable results. They now have 3 not 2 lock states-red disc, closed, yellow, open, blue, no operator, help yourself. As some 2 or 3 close locks share a keeper, you need to get him (her) in the right place at the right time, so in practice, 1 we locked ourselves thro' fairly often-but what are crew for?



We covered the whole navigation to Anger 130 km, 46 locks in around 5 days, and on the return, diverted up the Oudon to Segré, a green and pleasant tributary even less explored, giving rise to an abundance of wildlife-kingfishers fly in squadrons!



Despite lack of boats, the waterways are well used by walkers, cyclists, canoes and fishermen. This general public support means they are well maintained,-one lock had a damaged paddle and within 2 hours a whole gang with crane, diver, and welding gear was in action and the lock released 2 hours after. The waterside facilities, toilets and showers in lock houses, shops and restaurants still abound, giving a good choice of overnight moorings. There are, in the bigger towns, floating restaurants, which by way of encouragement we invariably patronise-usually coming alongside in **Chantilly**, whistling to make our booking unforgettable.

Half way on our return leg, at Neuville, Françoise's old home, we were reminded that the Mayenne is a river navigation-after some rain upstream, it rose 45 cm overnight and looked like rising further. This gave rise to doubts on our ability to make a timely return with the remaining fuel, so as we were adjacent to a useable slipway, we elected to bus back to car and fetch out here.



Another 300 km under **Chantilly**'s keel, using around 10 kg of best welsh per day supplemented by wood for extra flame.



Here is our stopping place at Saint Valery sur Somme

However this year is the first time in France there were no daily forays for wood as we had brought a copious supply of local seasoned hawthorn- is this a sop to approaching debility?

Our route back to Calais passes by St Vallery sur Somme, home to the Baie de la Somme steam railway and they most hospitably accept us as a honary locomotive to overnight in their engine yard and make use of the facilities-and the occasional footplate ride!

FRANCE WITHOUT TEARS.

In 25 years of French cruising, most of the practicable navigations (we exclude those with large commercial craft!) have been covered, some several times, so with no need for adventure or marathon steaming, we chose this year a comfortable cruise in Brittany.

This region has 2 major navigations, the East-West Canal de Nantes à Brest, and the North-South Rance/Vilaine which cross at Redon. This town has a large port, which until the Hydro Barrage, was at 40 km inland, a sea port. Redon was to be our base from which to explore the surrounding waterways.

Our launching port was Norte Sur Erdre. The head of navigation of a wide 'River Lake', which offered adequate slipway, showers etc and a nice Captain du Port: David who let me leave car and trailer in his garden!

Our first leg was down the river to its junction with the Nantes à Brest, then an easy 3 days to Redon, which again offered all facilities. Sadly, as we entered the port, we passed ATTIS, a WW2 steam tug once on display in the port, now looking very forlorn and apparently awaiting salvage.



Attis.

After a rather noisy night, we were glad to steam West up a delightful arm, the river Aff to La Gacilly, a town that earns its position on the tourists list by hosting a summer long Photo exhibition. The hundreds of pictures, some house size, are in every conceivable nook and cranny and make intriguing days exploration.

Our next leg was up the River Vilaine to Messac. Before the canalisation it was the head of sea navigation, hence an old 'sea' port 70 km inland. From there, it was downstream, a quick 'shop n' shower' in Redon, intending to reach La Roche Bernard near the barrage, but, the threatened thunderstorms arrived, with squalls that produced waves equal in height to Chantilly's freeboard! So we hightailed back to Rieux where a very pleasant mooring provided shelter and facilities, with riverside Roman Fort ruins for entertainment. The next day offered similar weather, so we decided to revisit La Gacilly, and 'do' the Art display anticlockwise therefore discovering many more photos.



Then it was back to base, taking a recently re-opened canal bypassing the river, which almost unused, gave rise to copious wild life, and strangely, a bank reinforced with halved shells of narrow, iron working boats. Passing thro' a flood lock, where the guillotine top gate drops down underwater rather than rising, we were back in the Canal de Nantes à Brest, and then the Erde, to fetch out.



In 14 days steaming, we burned 150 kg of coal, + what was left of the French woodlands, covering some 350 km with only 34 locks: a truly relaxing steam!