

Nelson Rally to Paris 2009

by Sonia James

Sunday 21 June (the longest day) - Bembridge to Le Havre - 82 miles - 7 hours

We left the Nelson Boat Owners Rally at Bembridge at 11:45, to the sound of horn blasts; everyone cheering and waving. It was a melancholy moment though, as we were leaving behind two of our intended fleet; Boscowen and Capability. Then we were off to follow Seiren, Soundtrack and Out of the Blue around the cardinals off Bembridge Ledge. After about 4 miles, we followed a course of 150 degrees for 81 miles! The weather was fair, sea state slight and wind SW F3.

We think the skipper of the lead boat (Tristan?? Brenner) on Seiren was somewhat homesick, as we steered a little off course at times towards his beloved Netherlands. We later discovered this was his first Channel crossing, which he undertook as part of his Duke of Edinburgh Award, with no assistance from a chart plotter!

An hour into our journey, we received the wonderful news that Windrift of Wight was already moored up in Le Havre and enjoying the fine weather (having departed from Yarmouth at 03:30). We arrived in Le Havre at 17:45 having enjoyed a fantastic sea crossing and the shipping lanes had been pretty quiet too.

Filling up with fuel at LH was interesting; self-service using a credit card, which only permitted a 133 Euro spend at a time! By the time the Nelson fleet had completed refuelling, not only had several hours passed by, but the tanks were probably empty! Replenishing our water supply was also somewhat of a challenge, as the hoses were not long enough to reach any of our fleet. And so to bed, after a few glasses of wine and a fantastic shepherd's pie, cooked by our on board chef, S hirley "Arisse".

Monday 22nd June - Le Havre to Rouen - 113 km - 8 hours



Up at 06:30 to depart at 07:30 to catch the flood tide up the River Seine to Rouen. To avoid the shallows, we travelled in an arc from LH to reach the Chenal de Rouen. Wind NW2 and a beautiful morning, we passed by the famous and very pretty little port of Honfleur, until we entered the Chenal, when thick fog surrounded us. Our radar had stopped working the day before, and at times we struggled to see Out of the Blue, whose radar also didn't work, who was immediately in front of us.

The sound of the fog horn of a very large commercial barge, which eventually emerged from the fog quite close to our starboard side, was frightening. At the time we were travelling in the small boats channel, out of the shipping lane, just on the inside of the marked buoys♦ this means you are actually travelling upstream on the wrong side of the river (as directed by the Navicarte).



Just as we saw the famous Tancarville bridge, standing out 50M high in swirls of mist (one of the largest bridges in Europe), we crossed over to the starboard side of the river. The mist began to lift to reveal a bright blue sky, as we meandered along the lazy curves of the Seine, passing by the little towns and medieval hamlets of Quillebeuf (which boasts a house belonging to Henry the 4th), Villequier and Caudebec, up to the town of La Bouille (where the spring bore tide is recorded each year). There were almost no mud banks, even at low tide when we entered the river; indeed it was not obvious that it was tidal at all, except for the strong flood tide that carried us all the way to the first lock above Rouen. Also absent from the 85 mile tidal section, were any leisure boating facilities (and these were not much better on the non-tidal section either!).



The maximum speed limit up to this point is 28kmph, reducing to 14kmph from La Bouille to Jeanne d'Arc bridge at Rouen. People on the banks; farmers, walkers and local residents were waving to us as we made our journey through this unexpectedly pretty landscape. As you get closer to Rouen the landscape changes to high chalky cliffs with wooded summits. Part way through our journey, the crew of Deeply Dippy decided to take down their SSB aerial. At one point, we contemplated calling up OOTB to seek permission to board their vessel to receive the furthest point of the SSB aerial! Alongside at various points on the bank, we noticed huge docking stations for the commercial barges, two of which were very badly damaged. It was not long before the banter between the crew of Seiren and DD commenced and the deliberations as to how this damage might have occurred; something to do with the capability, or otherwise, of the DD helmsman at the time was in serious question!



Lofty industrial silos, potash and cement works, power stations, and RoRo cargo vessels, now consumed both banks of the river on the outskirts of Rouen. Although the river is still used as a commercial waterway for sea-going ships and inland waterway barges, the latter often running as tandem pairs, the traffic is not enough to cause the leisure boater any anxiety. As we entered the city of Rouen at about 14:00 hours, we passed under all the bridges comfortably with our air draught at 6.9M. We had to continue to travel upstream and past the Ile Lacroix, turning around the other end of the island to face the oncoming tide, to reach our mooring at Halte Plaisance de Rouen, as we were still on the flood tide (as directed by the Navicarte). The sun was still very strong when we arrived at around 18:00, and so we erected our sun shade on the aft deck with limited success the first time round, but after some alcoholic refreshment, eureka! The facilities here were basic but at least there were two showers, even if it did take me a while to realise that you have to close the door to the cubicle before the light switches on! Our illustrious Capitaine Gamsa joined us for an evening beer and recounted some of his many extraordinary stories, after which we walked the short distance into Rouen, passing the cathedral, through medieval streets amidst half-timbered houses, under the Gros Horloge clocktower, arriving at a small square, just off the Old Market Square (where Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake), to enjoy an evening meal in an old tavern, tasting each others' chosen dishes. I chose the local 5 A-star sausage Andouillette, which consisted of very, very coarse meat and was extremely rich. Strangely enough, not many wanted to share this!

Tuesday 23rd June - Rouen to Vernon - 92 km and 2 locks - 8 hours



We had been advised by Admiral Gamsa (note the promotion), to be ready to leave at 09:00. Our chef Shirley cooked up a fantastic English breakfast. We were almost shipshape and bristol fashion, when our Admiral explained that Capitaine Francis (the Rouen Harbour Master) had advised we leave with the noon tide! However, our time was not ill spent, as our Admiral called all the skippers together to brief us extremely well on things to look out for (including Monument Lidl in Vernon, which happens to be the local supermarket, just in case Steve was in any doubt, as advised by Brett!) We left at 12:30, travelling downstream first, around the Ile Lacroix to face the oncoming tide. The speed limit here from Jeanne d'Arc bridge through to PK233 is

12kmph, increasing to 18kmph almost all the way to Paris. Shortly after leaving the mooring, we passed the Ile de la Crapaudiere, observed by the crew of DD and relayed to the Nelson fleet, much to their amusement! En route to our first lock at Amfreville, we overtook a huge floating hotel vessel, Renoir, only to be instructed by the lockmaster on arrival that we would have to wait for Renoir to go into the lock before us. The locks are filthy and our ropes and new fluffy fender sox were covered in green and brown sludge in a matter of seconds. This came as a crushing blow to the crew of DD. Prior to the trip, the old fender sox had been removed to be washed. The male owner of DD, wishing to help his wife, decided to place the wet sox on the Aga to dry, not realising (as his wife did) that they would scorch. Scorch they did, to a beautifully bright orange in places and dull brown in others! Not wishing to place these on his boat, said male owner of DD went off to purchase new ones, but the manufacturers had gone bust, and consequently there was a shortage of fender sox in the UK. So after many weeks of research, he found someone who made fluffy one to measure, and they arrived just in time. The DD crew set about fitting the new sox, on the journey across to Bembridge, which involved huge effort, because the sox were rather a tight fit! So they looked good for the crossing to Le Havre and up the Seine until we arrived at our very first lock! Once out of the lock, we once again overtook the Renoir and waved goodbye. Some of the homes along the river were absolutely stunning, and one part of this riverside reminded me of Henley on Thames, with its grand houses and rolling lawns, in fact, almost an English scene. Seiren called up DD to tell him to look out for his pad and boathouse! This huge house was perched up on the cliff and the elegant boathouse beneath at the bottom of a beautifully manicured lawn; the stuff dreams are made of!



We passed through Les Andelys which is very picturesque, with its quaint medieval buildings. The ruined castle, overlooking Petit Andely, made it famous. It was built by Richard the Lionheart in 1196 in one year. Richard, who was also the Duke of Normandy, built the castle so that he could fight the King of France. Arriving at our second lock (at Notre-Dame- de-la Garenne) was a bit worrying for two reasons; the first was because it was nearly 7pm (when the locks close until 7am the following day). However, our Admiral's charm won over the lockkeeper and the gates were opened. We all set about using our hoop-la skills to secure our ropes on the few number of bollards in the walls of the lock, which were some 15ft above our heads, causing great hilarity among the crews, but nervous twitches in the helmsmen. All tied up safely, the real reason for the lock remaining open then became apparent, Renoir was approaching behind us!

We all moved up inside the lock as fast as we could; our rope skills suddenly becoming rather vital. Our hearts were in our mouths as we watched Renoir steadily manoeuvre in, inch by inch, dangerously close behind us. We stopped breathing and closed our eyes, when the water gushed in at the front of the lock pushing us backwards towards Renoir's looming bow. Relieved and hungry, we started to prepare our sausage casserole in red wine avec herbes de Provence on the last part of our journey towards our mooring at Vernon, and it was virtually ready upon our arrival at around 20:30. We all tied up along the pretty little stone quay, and we were all just beginning to relax when, in the evening dusk we spotted a large vessel

moving towards us. Yes, you've guessed it; Renoir had turned up and wanted to tie up on the piles which stood adjacent to the quayside!! There was complete pandemonium as we all cast off to get out of the way pdq!

On the other side of the river there were a few small pontoons, but the water was very shallow. Windrift managed to make her way in, but Out of the Blue and Soundtrack were forced to turn back, due to their draughts. Meanwhile, our Admiral was communicating on the VHF with the Capitaine of Renoir and his fleet. There was just about enough room for DD to tie up alongside the quay in front of Renoir, and OOTB rafted alongside DD. I am sure that it will come as no surprise to you that our Admiral was invited by the Capitaine, to raft alongside the Renoir, and within some 30 minutes he had been invited aboard Renoir to view her engine room! Of course our Admiral accepted the offer graciously and moored alongside with great aplomb. Soundtrack rafted alongside Seiren. We spent what was left of the evening drinking wine and Schippers bitter, and tucking into Helen's wonderful stilton, whilst gazing on the image of two petit Nelsons rafted alongside a very large Renoir.

Wednesday 24 June - Vernon to Port Saint Louis - 69 km and 1 lock - 5 hours



The next morning was somewhat confusing, as the girls had expressed their wish to visit the Monet gardens at Giverny.

We all made it eventually; some by foot, and others by taxi. All agreed that it was well worth the time; the lily pond and arched bridge, made famous by one of Monet's glorious paintings, were simply beautiful.



The gardens were full of the scent of old roses and honeysuckle. The herbaceous borders were stacked full of wonderful flowers; some traditional and some modern varieties. The kitchen in the house was well worth a visit - beautiful blue and white Provencal farmhouse tiles on virtually all the walls and a huge range. Vernon itself has a number of period half-timbered houses and a 12th century church. It also offers a number of small supermarkets and excellent boulangeries in the town centre. We were due to leave Vernon at 13:00,

but in what had become the Nelson fleet style, we eventually left at 14:15! We all set off looking forward to being in a marina for the next night. Sleeping alongside the quay at Vernon had been disturbed by the spasmodic slaps of the wash caused by passing barges. The usual banter between DD and Seiren soon resumed and kept us all highly amused. It was a pleasant afternoon cruise, although the lock at Mericourt proved difficult, because the lock itself was deep, the bollards were very high, there were very few of them, and some were missing their heads. We arrived at PSL at around 19:00. The marina is surrounded by a huge gravel pit, but opposite on the far side of the river is a wooded hill, dotted with pretty houses. The pontoons are a bit rickety and some of the pontoon cleats were wobbly. A charge of 1.50 Euros is made for each person wanting to use the one shower. Steve reported a cigarette end in a spider's web hanging from the ceiling in the shower, and only four people could shower one after the other before the next four had to wait to allow sufficient time for the hot water to heat up. However, the marina was protected from the wash of passing barges and a cool breeze was ever present, which was soothing after the day's temperature of 30oC. We settled down to enjoy our gammon steaks with pineapple on deck in the evening sun.

Thursday 25 June - Port Saint Louis to Paris Arsenal - 81 km and 4 locks - 8 hours

The following morning, we were greeted with a wonderful surprise. Our Admiral had cycled many kilometres to a boulangerie for freshly baked croissants and baguettes for all of us. Imagine the surprise of the village boulangerie in the middle of nowhere, when an Englishman, wearing shorts and knee length socks, turns up on a bike and orders 36 croissants and 10 baguettes. Imagine the picture as he rode back, balancing his precious cargo on his handle bars! We were all truly impressed and very grateful.

We set off for Paris at 08:00, and this final leg of our cruise was truly memorable. The 3 locks en route were hard work, especially since there were few bollards, but we were rewarded with a fitting climax to our journey, as we passed under the multitude of variegated bridges, fine buildings and statuary that lined the banks. As we entered Paris, we slowed down to 5 knots so that we could see the sights; the Eiffel Tower, La Place de la Concorde, Le Grand Palais, and the Louvre. The Bir de Hakeem Bridge, which we were all worried about (because our Admiral had noticed a sign on it reading 5.5M on his "reccie" journey by car some months earlier), loomed ahead of us. We had all taken down our aerials to ensure we made it through, and we did with no problems. Our Admiral suddenly realised that the sign was directing you 5.5M to the side bank for some facility or other! As we approached le pont des Invalides, we were obliged to slow down to just 3 knots for the next few bridges. Meanwhile, the pleasure bateaux around us ploughed on. It was absolute mayhem! At one point, there were three tripper bateaux right up behind us and a barge coming the other way. The Nelson fleet pulled over as close to the bank as we dared to let the vessels pass. Holding station, cramped between two bridges, was difficult to say the least! We finally moved on past the Palais de Justice and Notre Dame, under the ancient bridges in the narrow canal around the Ile de la Cite. It was magical! People on the banks were amazed at the sight of five Nelsons, all flying their Union Jacks, one behind the other, meandering our way through this historic and most beautiful part of Paris. The Parisians and tourists alike were waving to us. It was great fun and strangely moving. As we emerged from the canal at around 16:00, the lock to Paris Arsenal came into view on the port side of what was now a very wide river again.



However, the lock could only take four of the fleet, so DD waited outside for the best part of an hour. DD held station in a gap alongside the opposite bank, because mooring was not permitted. The reason for this soon became obvious; it was the turning area for the pleasure vessels to turn back to the Ile de la Cite! On a few occasions, the local river police, just a 100M away, launched their rib, and we seriously thought they would move us on, but instead they gave us a display of macho speed and choreography! Finally, DD entered the lock, and Steve, David, and our Admiral were there to take our ropes. We only just made it in. We had called up the Capitaine and she had told us to wait until the ferry emerged. We then proceeded to cross the wide river, but a Dutch boat nipped in before us. The Capitaine thought this boat was us, and began to close the lock gates. We managed to make contact with the Capitaine again to let her know that we were only just arriving at the gates! Thankfully we made it in, but manoeuvring was very difficult, because the lock was small and the Dutch boat already inside looked very new. We had travelled some 200 nautical miles from Honfleur to Paris, but the sheer size of the Seine had not really registered, until you realise that it is longer than the entire navigable length of the Thames from Lechlade to Sheerness. The early evening was spent catching up on some sleep and most welcome showers after the very hot days. The DDs invited the Admiral and his Lieutenant aboard DD for a sumptuous 3 course meal, cooked by the lovely chef Shirley.

Friday 26 June - Paris Arsenal (the day Michael Jackson died)

The DDs got up late and then enjoyed a full English brunch with the last of the English pantry brought with them. The afternoon was spent shopping at the local supermarket, using the bike handlebars to move the heavy goods! A gentle evening walk up to the Place de Bastille proved interesting, where we bumped into a rally of motorcyclists, principally of the Japanese vintage kind, or at least our vintage!

Saturday 27 June - Paris Arsenal

The DDs spent the day sort of sight-seeing. First off was Notre Dame, only we could not enter the cathedral, because 300 priests were being ordained. The spectacle of the procession of clergy in their grand gowns was quite a sight. We then travelled on the Metro up to the Sacre Coeur. We walked up all the steps to the top, which was hard going in the heat. We stopped in Montmartre for lunch; a fabulous spot in the shade, whilst listening to a female singer who sounded like Marlene Dietrich, accompanied by her old organ, which she "played" by inserting folded cards. Then it was back to the boat for the Nelson evening cabaret and farewell dinner. Adriaan and Karen had flown in from the US, and their daughter Emily also joined us. Simon had driven over from the UK with Gill (Mrs Admiral), Christine and the lovely George and Ann (Lyme Lady). What followed next was rather special and unforgettable. Our Admiral (Paul Gamsa), our Lieutenant (David) and Steve (Out of the Blue) had been secretly practising for a cabaret which they presented for our entertainment on the quayside. Our Admiral set up his electronic keyboard on a table on the quayside, and the Nelson guests were invited to a "bring a bottle soiree" on the decks of DD. The first number was sung by the trio, with the fleet joining in the chorus of the "Streets of Paris" (or "Streets of London" as it is usually known). Sonia

and Jon of DD were then invited to sing "I Will Survive" after their quarrel at Vernon a few days earlier! This was followed by a moving rendition of "Yesterday" sung by Gill and a heartrending "Lady in Red" by David to Christine, as Christine leaned over the handrail of DD looking down to her Romeo on the quayside. Meanwhile, local Parisians promenading along the Bastille, watched with curiosity. The finale was enacted with great spirit and courage. "You are so beautiful" (a Joe Cocker number) was sung by our Admiral to a fair lady, Joanna (aka John Clark from DD crew). "Joanna" was beautifully turned out in a white flowing tunic, a summer bonnet, and lips so cherry red, it was impossible not to succumb to her beauty. At the end of the romantic sonnet, the couple embraced and our memorable cabaret came to an end. Just to add that there had been a Gay Rights march going on that day along the Bastille, so John's attire was most suitable.



Our farewell dinner was at the restaurant, situated at the other end of the Arsenal. It was a wonderful evening spent reminiscing on the past few days and sharing the stories of our adventure with our guests who had joined us in Paris. Our journey had been very much enhanced by travelling in company with the Nelson fleet, punctuated by much banter on the radio, and led so ably by Paul Gamsa on Seiren. It was also an opportunity for us all to show our appreciation of the time and effort Paul Gamsa had put into making this such a successful cruise, and in recognition of this, he was presented with a number of gifts as a token of the fleet's real admiration and thanks.

For me, the experience and knowledge I gained on this trip was invaluable, and the memories of the laughter and camaraderie will remain with me always.

Sonia James
Deeply Dippy

The fleet:

- Deeply Dippy
- Out of the Blue
- Seiren
- Soundtrack
- Windrift of Wight