

## TO BRITTANY WITH OCC HELP AND HOSPITALITY Ernie Godshalk

*(In 2010 Ernie left Manchester, Massachusetts aboard his Hinckley Sou-wester 42 Golden Eye, bound for Scandinavia via Ireland and Scotland. After five years in the 'north' and exploring it in some detail – see Flying Fish 2012/1, 2014/1 and 2014/2 – in 2015 he and Golden Eye headed for new and warmer pastures. We rejoin them at Bruinisse in the Netherlands.*

*Much of this cruise can be followed on the plan which appeared on page 206 of the previous issue.)*

Brittany may be overly familiar as 'the front garden' to UK-based OCC members, but it was a new and wonderful cruising ground to this Yank member and his first mate, Ann Noble-Kiley. And it was made even more enjoyable by help and hospitality from several OCC Port Officers and members, as well as a Past Commodore, a Past Vice Commodore and the Club Secretary! The cruising richness of the area is illustrated by the fact that there was little duplication between the 32 ports reached by *Golden Eye* in Brittany and those mentioned in the Norris's excellent article in *Flying Fish* 2016/1, and we felt we had only scratched the surface of this delightful area.

Our cruise to Brittany started in the Netherlands – with OCC help. Tom Dujardin, PO for Bruinisse in the Netherlands, introduced to us by Past Commodore John Franklin, had taken good care of *Golden Eye* over the winter at Yachtservice van Swaay where he is manager. Tom and Nanda were very hospitable in Bruinisse, and gave good advice including to cruise west along the English coast, rather than the lee shore of France, en route to Brittany. (*Golden Eye* is now back at van Swaay for the winter.)

In Calais we thought for a moment that the cruise had ended almost before it had begun. We opted to use a government-supplied visitors' mooring outside the lock in order to catch the tide in the morning (and to steer clear of any refugees on the quay who might see my US ensign as an endorsement of Trump's immigration policies). After a very thorough hour-long search by four polite but well-armed and inquisitive French customs agents (who finally concluded that we were in compliance with their laws), we retired and were soon sound asleep. CRASH! The impact suggested that a large vessel had rammed us. Coming on deck in pitch darkness I could see a quay a few metres away, along which we were being blown by a fresh breeze, but beyond that I had no idea what had happened or where we were. I hastily started the engine, got my bearings, avoided hitting the quay again, and dragged the mooring float – which had become disconnected from the its sinker – back to the visitor mooring field and picked up another mooring. After dawn, we tied the two mooring floats together, reported the incident to a disinterested 'port control' and turned our stern to Calais. Fortunately the damage to *Golden Eye* was surprisingly minor, as we had apparently struck the quay pulpit first.

Our crossing of the Channel to Dover was relatively uneventful despite shipping traffic and current, but a thumping from the vicinity of the propeller suggested we needed



*Dick Davidson, PO for Dover and a member for 60 years, with his 30ft Callisto*

repairs. Dick Davidson, PO for Dover, Kent, also introduced to us by both John Franklin and Past Vice Commodore George Curtis, assisted in getting *Golden Eye* hauled to diagnose the problem (a failed cutlass bearing), entertained us first at the historic and welcoming Royal Cinque Ports Yacht Club and at an outstanding New Orleans Dixieland

jazz pub, The Louis Armstrong Pub – truly a full-service PO and great company! At his suggestion we toured Dover Castle and were especially fascinated by the exhibit detailing Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940.

Rather than waiting in Dover for repairs, we took advantage of favourable wind and tide to sail to the River Hamble, where Richard Nicolson, PO for Cowes, Isle of Wight, who had also been introduced to us by George Curtis, had already made arrangements with Hamble Yacht Services. Despite arriving late in the afternoon we were hauled

#### *The Louis Armstrong Pub in Dover*





*The umbrella factory/  
retail outlet in Cherbourg*

within minutes, repaired that evening and floated again first thing in the morning – all first class. Richard – whom we never actually met – couldn't have been more helpful.

After a couple more nights in The Solent, we crossed the Channel back to France. Cherbourg may be viewed by some as primarily a fine place to buy wine (which it is), but we were also charmed and intrigued by the 1964 musical film

*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, starring Catherine Deneuve, still being exploited after fifty years – a pamphlet guided us to the principal sites in the film. I now own one of the world's most expensive umbrellas.

***The principal site of 'Les Parapluies de Cherbourg' fifty years on. Opening hours are now reduced to 1400–1600 on the first Wednesday of each month***



Arriving in Jersey with toothache, I was met by OCC member Pete Thomson (father of the famous Alex Thomson of *Hugo Boss*). Pete arranged for emergency dental work for me, then he and Anne invited us to a delightful dinner at their waterfront home and sent us off with bounty from their garden. While in Jersey we took delivery of two Brompton bicycles, which were to expand our 'cruising grounds' several times later in the summer.

## Books

In addition to the usual pilots we had read several interesting books relevant to our cruising grounds, which provided focal points for our voyage and helped us to understand the region better. One of these was *Agent Zigzag* by Ben Macintyre, the true story of a notorious Second World War double agent which starts in Jersey where, as the island was invaded, our hero was in Jersey Jail doing hard labour for safe-breaking – the book provided a unique introduction to Jersey's tragic World War Two experience. Another was the *The Wreck of the Mary Deare*, by Hammond Innes, set among the Minquiers, an area of rocks south of Jersey. They are described, after the *Mary Deare* grounded on them, as 'rocks [which] stood up all round us like the stumps of rotten teeth, grey and jagged with bases blackened with weed growth', so we were intrigued to sail through them en route to Saint-Malo.

Even more navigationally interesting was to sail 'over' les Îles Chausey southeast of the Minquiers. At chart datum (lowest astronomical tide), much of the route and most of the navigational aids are well above sea level but, near high water springs, the 13m+ range makes the passage feasible by boat. The impressive tides and tidal streams of Brittany have an infamous reputation but, treated with proper respect, are at most a constraint to times of travel and can often be used to advantage to make speed and distance. Careful attention to neap and spring tides enables anchoring

where the chart shows no water at chart datum, and passing over land that dries several metres at lowest astronomical tide.

Another relevant and charming book, *All The Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr, is set in Saint-Malo near the end of World War II. Although fiction the setting, as in *Les Parapluiers de Cherbourg*, is geographically accurate, and Saint-Malo – being more modern – offered an 'app' for our mobile phones to help us find the principal sites mentioned in the book. Our port of entry to Brittany, Saint-Malo is a spectacular walled city, meticulously restored following heavy damage near the end of the war, with excellent restaurants and walks. It was one of the highlights of our summer.

*The author and a port-hand beacon, betwixt chart datum, 3m below his feet, and high water springs, 4m above his head*

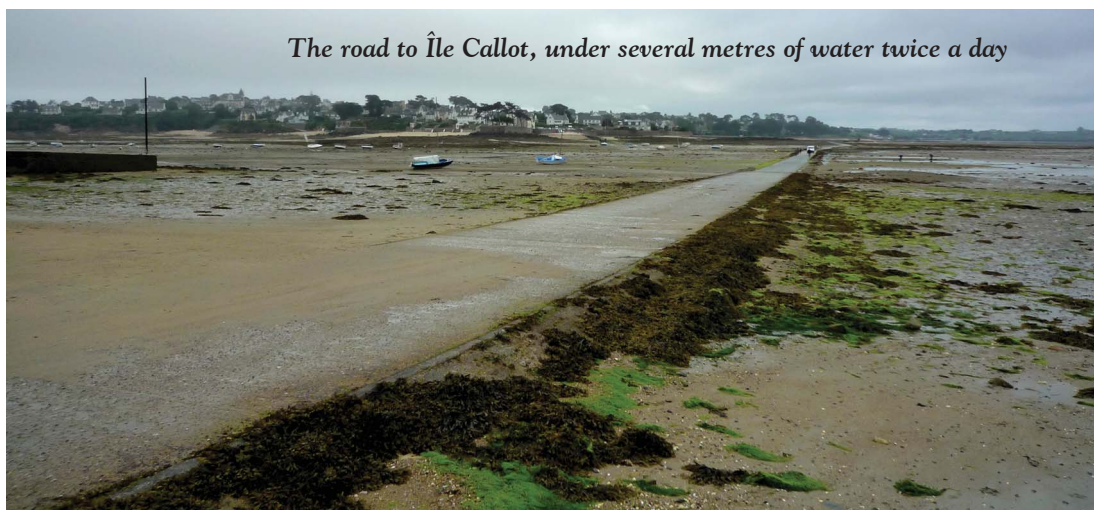




*A wall tablet in Vannes – note the Breton language inscribed above the French*

Saint-Malo also afforded an introduction to the works of Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707), who was given lifetime employment building forts to thwart English approaches from the sea. His forts and name are still prominent along the coast of Brittany – in Saint-Malo, Brest, Camaret, Concarneau and Belle Île, which we visited, and Port-Louis, Hoëdic and Houat, which we didn't.

Another pre-cruise volume, *Les Chouans*, by Honoré de Balzac, is set in Fougères, just southeast of Saint-Malo and itself a symbol of the Breton autonomy terminated following the Revolution. Written shortly after the Revolution, it is a contemporary description of Brittany's sense of self, which continues to this day with a sense of distance and dismissiveness approaching disdain for anything or anyone Parisian and with its own language, dress and customs. A prominent stone tablet in Vannes continues to remind the world of the perceived injustice done in 1789, explaining that, following the Vannes treaty of 1532, 'Brittany retained a status of autonomy abrogated by the French Revolution'.



*The road to Île Callot, under several metres of water twice a day*



*A turreted château near the Odet River, en route to Quimper*

Although the southwest coast of Brittany was our primary goal, the north coast also offers many tempting options for cruising – as Tom Dujardin had advised. Our favorite was Île de Batz, just north of Roscoff, which we visited by ‘vedette’ (a small ferry) from Roscoff and later anchored off. The island is attractive, quiet and has an ancient history. Another interesting day stop and walk ashore was Île Callot in the Baie de Morlaix – at low tide pedestrians, bicycles and cars reach the island via the Passe aux Moutons, a road that is otherwise under several metres of water. Île St Molé, northwest of Île de Bréhat – one of several anchorages that we learned about from *Secret Anchorages of Brittany*\* – also afforded a particularly peaceful night.

Rounding Finistère, we caught only half of the 8 knot spring tide stream in the Passage du Fromveur to arrive in somewhat remote Ouessant. We spent a slightly rolly night, but had a pleasant walk and a beer ashore in Lampaul.

### Rivers

The Aulne River, which empties into the Rade de Brest, is one of four rivers that we explored to the limit of *Golden Eye*’s 1.5m draught, continuing up-river by bicycle or dinghy. The Aulne took *Golden Eye* to Port Launay, where we tied up near Alan and Mary Phypers aboard *Stella*, the only OCC members we met in Brittany. From there her crew continued by bicycle along its shores for a couple of kilometres to Châteaulin, in the pastoral interior of Brittany 36km (22 miles) southeast of Brest as the gull flies.

To reach Quimper, we cruised 10 miles up the Odet River, lined with castles and châteaux, as far as Corniguel, where *Golden Eye* settled gently a few centimetres into the mud at low tide. We cycled the last 5km to the city, famous for its long history, its cathedral and Breton traditions such as Faïence pottery.

\* *Secret Anchorages of Brittany* by Peter Cumberlidge is published by Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson Ltd at £25.00.



*The Aven River flows into the harbour at Pont-Aven ...  
... which dries at low tide*

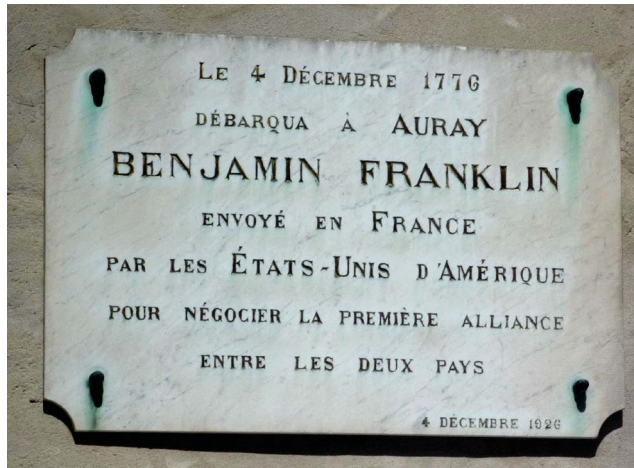


The Aven River, which meets the sea 10 miles southeast of the port of Concarneau, carried *Golden Eye* as far as the tiny village of Kerdruc. There we left her, continuing by bicycle 10km to Pont-Aven, made famous by artists such as Gauguin and Sérusier, and spending the night ashore. Under the window of our hotel room the Aven River flowed through the village, past ancient mills, under the eponymous, flower-bedecked bridge and, at low tide, around boats sitting high out of the water on their keels and stilts in mud. At high water, the tide came in and made this small port accessible to the world by sea. In addition to being picturesque, Pont-Aven is the setting of the murder and investigation in *Death In Brittany*, the latest in a series of murder mysteries by Jean-Luc Bannalec. The tale is fictional, but is set in buildings that still exist in Pont-Aven and Concarneau, and in surrounding

towns including the quay in Kerdruc where we had left *Golden Eye*. It is based on the town's art history, which sharpened our interest in our surroundings and in the book<sup>1</sup>.

The Auray River is referred to as 'Oyster River' in the extraordinary book of the same name by George Millar. A recounting of a summer's cruise 50 years ago in the Gulf of Morbihan and the Auray River, which empties into the Gulf, it includes fascinating

descriptions of sailing in the Gulf and its strong currents in a brilliant writing style, and was a wonderful complement to our cruise in the area<sup>2</sup>. We got over the bar at mid-tide just south of the village of Auray, picked up a mooring south of the 14m bridge and took the dinghy to St Goustan where we were fortunate to be invited by friends to their home in the old castle with its splendid view down the river. We spent a further three relaxing days in the Morbihan, including a night in historic Vannes, the turnaround point of our cruise, where the Irish crew of the boat



*The Auray River – one of my countrymen  
got here first*

next to us entertained us on the fiddle and, ashore, we joined in to (unsuccessfully) cheer on the French football team against Portugal in the European Championship. We also read *Oysters of Locmariaquer*, which told us far more than we needed or wanted to know about oysters although it did persuade us to visit the quaint and charming village

1. *Death In Brittany* includes the following perceptive comparison of coastal Concarneau and inland Pont-Aven: 'Inhale in Concarneau and you tasted salt, iodine, seaweed, mussels in every breath, like a distillation of the entire endless expanse of the Atlantic, brightness and light. In Pont-Aven it was the river, moist rich earth, hay, trees, woods, the valley and shadows, melancholy fog – the countryside. It was the contrast of 'Armorica' and 'Argoat', as they were called in Celtic, or the 'Land of the Sea' and the 'Land of Forests'.'
2. This quote from *Oyster River* describes our entry into the Morbihan in language that I can only hope to emulate some day: 'Letting draw, we sailed inshore at 8½ knots. The entry was spectacular. It carried a roar. While the main flood on which we rode and tossed was bullocking up mid-channel, at either bank the last of the ebb was fighting its way out in a bed of smoking foam. From a mile out we had picked up the leading marks, and as we shot through the narrows we picked up the marks within. Hard aport round the first red buoy and harden sheets to beat into the Auray River. At first view the wind-stirred Gulf of Morbihan was bewildering. Islands everywhere. Islands, islands, islands.'



Breton oyster culture, from spat to plate

of Locmariaquer by land and to eat oysters whenever possible, including in Belon, the source of perhaps the most famous oysters in the world. We learned about *huîtres creuses*, sized from 0 (almost a meal) to 5 (tiny) and ‘flat’ or ‘Belon’ oysters, sized from 00 to 4. Oysters are an important part of the Breton economy – the shores are lined with oyster beds and, at low tide, with their owners tending them<sup>3</sup>.

### Islands, islands, islands...

As a complement to river cruising, we also enjoyed stops at many islands in addition to those named above, including, in the Morbihan, Île D’Arz and nearby Île aux Moines, each with its picturesque village. Even more remote Île Molène, just east of Ouessant, offered a delightful walk and some of the best and largest crab – one fed two people – we have ever encountered. On Belle Île we bicycled the seven somewhat hilly kilometres from quiet Sauzon to busy Le Palais, and also rented a car to view the magnificent north point and the house built by French actress Sarah Bernhardt. The Îles de Glénan were one of the few places we felt compelled to visit twice during our limited cruise – their pale green waters and white beaches are more reminiscent of the Caribbean than the often-intimidating coast of Brittany.

During our Brittany cruise we stopped in 32 ports, anchoring in 11, marina berthing in nine, using moorings in eight and mooring along quays in four. In retrospect, our need for electricity (primarily for refrigeration) drove us into marinas and onto quays more often than we would have preferred – *Golden Eye* has no source of electricity other than the alternator or shore power.

3. As described in *Oyster River*: ‘At low water the *tuiles*, the oysters’ *crèches* or *chambres d’accouchement*, I am never quite sure which, are partially revealed. Then elderly men and young women work in the river, wearing thigh-boots of leather or of white or black or orange rubber. They constantly seem to be lifting old sections of tiling and replacing them with new ones. It is a trade that was flourishing in its present form in Caesar’s day.’



*Sarah Bernhardt's house on Belle-Île*

The weather in Brittany in the summer of 2016 was cool and occasionally rainy, but we did not experience the dreaded 'vent solaire' or other strong winds. Winds were generally westerly. We diverted only once due to wind, and stayed in port two or three days due to rain.

After 41 days in Brittany *Golden Eye* passed close abeam the Roches Douvres lighthouse, left France, and entered St Peter Port, Guernsey. Local Port Officer Dick Emery kindly visited us in the marina and arranged emergency medical care for Ann, who had a nasty cut on her leg. We met again in Alderney, where Club Secretary Rachelle Turk and her husband Tony Brighton, PO for Dartmouth, Devon, spotted our flying fish burgee and invited us, together with Dick (cruising aboard *Moonshiner*), over to *Saltwhistle III* for cocktails. A nice coda to our cruise in Brittany, made extra special by the help and hospitality of so many OCC Port Officers and members.



*Château de l'Hermine at Vannes*