

Dutch courage

Colin Ford

Last Autumn, after two years of near silence from the market, someone turned up with warm pound notes and suddenly *Nandisa* was gone. We had decided to hang fire with plans. Another boat? Charter once a year? No boat? No! By December the mist had cleared and a small 30ft Robert Clark cruiser/racer seemed to be the thing. After several shocks at how run down the few on offer in England were, Marylyn and I flew to Amsterdam and we found one. An hour later we sat in a bar with the broker by a log fire, sealed the deal, signed the paperwork and promised to pay within



Nana under way in Huizen

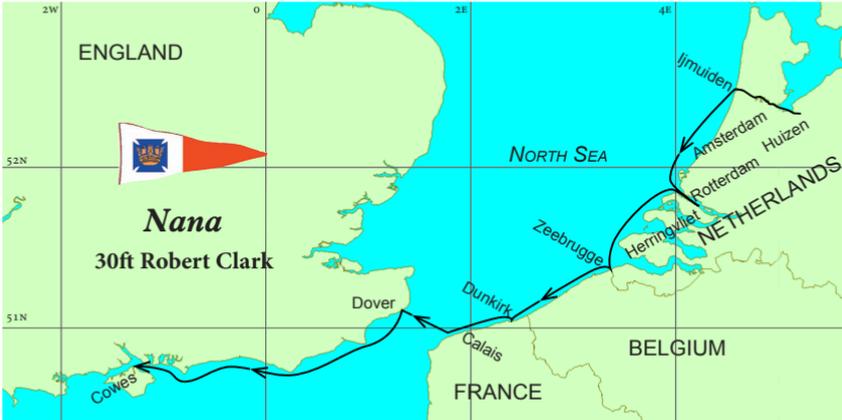
a working week. They do things differently there.

In March this year we took the car, laden to the gunwales with stuff, to the boatyard to have a quick fit out. A dejected yard manager told us that the yard owner was bankrupt and the hoist and crane had failed safety checks. In short order the broker answered our cries and said, 'Follow me'. The upshot was that the marina along the road agreed to take *Nana* to their yard to launch her after we had anti-fouled her. Cost? 'Don't be silly. The

problem is not of your making', said the affronted broker.

The work went well. After the tow down the avenue, she was launched and parked in a box mooring to await collection and delivery to the Isle of Wight after the Easter weekend.

Our son Jake wangled a week's leave and the three of us arrived in Huizen on a cold dark night. Up at first frozen light, we bent on sails and put me up the mast to reeve flag halyards. Alas, there was no masthead cheek block, so the burgee went on the port spreader and the courtesy flag on starboard. With that faith in the future without which no sailor could live, we started the tiny Volvo and motored off to Amsterdam and the Nordsee Kanal, with no wind and poor visibility.



To enter Amsterdam we had our first bridge and lock.

‘Advance! Advance!’ people shouted.

‘But the bridge is closed.’

‘He will open once you are there.’

Yes, with the mast about to be truncated. It was the same with the lock. ‘He won’t open until you’re there.’ Hysteria seemed inappropriate with a blue ensign and so many spectators.

The city seen from the canal is not pretty, but is well marked. The last lock out to IJmuiden and the North Sea opened invitingly as we approached. As we exited, a small ship nudged past to enter. We moored in the vast and rather forlorn sea marina, with the visibility fast deteriorating. The plan was to go down the outside to Calais, cross to Dover and then coast to Cowes. If it blew up in the North Sea we could go inside and face more locks and bridges.

To say dawn broke would be a joke. The visibility was ten metres with no wind. We had a fair way to go to cross the busy Maas/Rotterdam entrance before we could stop, so we reluctantly decided on a lay day. But the next day was the same, so we decided to chance it. Just north of the Maas crossing route for small craft, Marylyn called up traffic control to request passage. They were very courteous, permission was given and on we went. We saw nothing, but could hear and smell ships. Maas control said he had asked a container ship to reduce speed so we could pass under his bow. Marylyn replied that he was a gentleman and Maas passed that on to the ship.

We found the buoy that marks the start of the tortuous channel into Haringvliet, where Jacob rather than our old eyes counted off the marks. At Haringvliet we could have locked into the ‘mast up’ route to Flushing, but we decided to chance our arm going through the North Sea to Zeebrugge the next morning. There everything was as it had been before,

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except that now the marina grounds were fenced off like Fort Knox from the free world. Everything was locked and no sight or sound of anyone, so we attended to more boat stores and 'chateau cardboard' before, fully clothed, we turned into our frozen bunks.

In poor, but the best yet, visibility and still no wind, we squeezed *Nana* through the gaps in the myriad of sandbanks along the route to Dunkirk. The one thing that must not be missed is buoy E11 at Zuydcoote, just east of Dunkirk. It marks a cul de sac, but is the most poorly maintained buoy we have ever met in French waters. From there we found a well marked channel to the Dunkirk harbour entrance and a berth in the furthest marina. To port on the way in is a vast, post-industrial wasteland. Then, oh joy, we had showers, food, drink and peace, followed by a south-westerly gale warning. Well, we needed a break. I had a shocking moment next day in the museum which produced this:



The author now fully in command

Dunkirk

Reading the bald count

The unknown

Dead

Retrieved in pieces

On Flanders beaches

Tears fret my cheeks.

Not the sobbing

Breath devouring

Sorrow

Of a pet bird's passing

Seventy years ago.

No.

Soft regret

For senseless slaughter.

Still.

Two days later the gale had abated. We continued on past Calais before making our statutory right angled course to Dover. Almost at once the

sun appeared and there were the white cliffs. We saw one car transporter in the up lane and slid around his stern. Not much wash from these shallow draught types. The down lane seemed to be empty until we were almost across. Then suddenly a mass of ships filled the eastern skyline. Our concern now, however, was that fog was creeping over the Kentish heights and Dover was disappearing. In my rather tense mood I thought I saw the large grinning face of Charles Dickens in the sky.

The reply to our request to enter the Western End was quite curt. We were told to report when we were two cables off and were then given the go ahead. It was not so easy in the turbulence to be found off this entrance. Here we put Jake on a train back to work, but we felt we were as good as home. Two days later we were - despite collecting a mass of rope and net around the drive leg.