

Homeward bound in shallow seas

Helsinki to Salcombe

Jonno and Rosie Barrett

Years ago a boy stood on an empty beach pointing at the sky. Well wrapped up, for it was winter, young Fergus posed for our new company logo: a boy and his kite on the beach. Later it became a boy with a kite on *Whirlaway's* kite. Now grown up, Fergus repeated the pose while heading west along the Finnish Coast; after three

years in Helsinki and six winters away we were on our way home. Covid had deprived us of Baltic cruising years so making the most of our allotted 90 days was the priority, with a route via the Göta and Trollhätten canals across Sweden. It gave us memories, great, good - and that day in the Göta Canal.

A highlight-packed fortnight took us, via the Finnish archipelago in company with Andy and Anne Fleck (RCC), to the Åland Islands and the inside route through the centre of Stockholm.





Whirlaway at NJK Langholmen mooring

Brown's yard in Burnham on Crouch. Our clever idea of shipping the steering gear to the UK for servicing had triggered a post-Brexit custom's saga that inspired us to carry it back with us by ferry and train.

Once we were on the way, it became clear that the log was unhappy, and the electric windlass motor declined to play any part in the adventure, despite huge efforts. This rendered anchoring less appealing. Under power *Whirlaway* can show all the cooperative instincts of a sulky adolescent, and boasts no bow thruster, so I was concerned how she would take to the various exotic mooring arrangements outlined in Nigel Wollen's excellent pilot. In the event we managed OK with some impressive gymnastics getting ashore via the bow – and we avoided box moorings.

At Mem, the Göta canal entrance, Nick left us and Rosie and I went the 10 miles to Söderköping to meet Kit and Pippa, ready for some relaxed canal cruising. Fuel was low, but the half mile walk to fill jerry cans didn't appeal, so we decided it was OK for the few miles to the alongside pump at Norsholm. Off we set. Relaxed canal cruising lasted all of ½ mile until the engine stopped in a thirsty kind of way. A kindly motorboat towed us back and, red faced, we dug out the jerry cans. Off again to the calm of canal life.

Rosie faced a dilemma at the first lock. Was it too far from shore to leap safely back aboard? She compromised, and became the lock keeper's first swimmer of the

The NJK (Nyländska Jaktklubben) in Helsinki, with their island base at Blekholmen is a delight. There you'll be looked after excellently by Sammy. Better still, temporary membership allows you to use their little guest harbours among the archipelago. Jan and Anne Horhammer (RCC) pointed that out and we are grateful to them for so much support over the lockdown years

After the static years *Whirlaway* was feeling her age a bit. A 42ft Holman cutter, she's had a busy life since she was built in 1963 at Tucker

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Rosie 'cools off'

year. By good fortune travellers on a passing canal cruiser took pictures and kindly sent us copies later. Rosie says 'kindly' is not the appropriate adverb.

Together again, and off for more relaxing. The Göta Canal's locks and bridges close at 1800. Approaching our last bridge of the day at Hulta at about 1750, we found it shut and seemingly deserted. *Whirlaway* did the sulky adolescent thing in the cross wind and we found ourselves aground on the edge of the canal, and pretty well stuck. A nice lady off home for the day cycled down and we hoped for help. "You can't stay there," she said, "there's a cruise boat due" and disappeared. The elegant Edwardian tripper steamers can work the locks and bridges themselves so go on all night. Fortune smiled, the wind veered, we backed the jib and heeled ourselves off, mooring up by the firmly closed bridge. I wondered whether every day would be like this, and where to get a bow thruster in a hurry! We poured ourselves some relaxation.

That interesting day proved to be peak stress. The canal was pretty, clean, well run and enjoyable, especially the lakes that form part of the route. It was hot and sometimes hard work as we took just a week from Söderköping to Lyrestad. Ideally I'd allow a bit more time, particularly later in the season when the locks get busier (this was mid-June). Helpful folk at the locks (as long as it was before 1800) made the 56 locks in 120 miles doable even for our doddery team, but we didn't dawdle.

We'd planned on a crew change at Sjötorp, where the canal ends at Lake Vänern, but instead used the nicer and quiet Lyrestad with its more convenient request stop train connection. Here Kit and Pippa left and we enjoyed a few days make and mend before Andy and Charlotte joined us for the leg to Gothenburg.

Lake Vänern is quite big – the third largest lake in Europe (behind the Russian Lakes Onega and Ladoga). Any chance of deep water vertigo en route was countered by a beautiful, if shallow, inside passage at Spiken. We had three good sailing days

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Rosie in the Trollhätten Lock, intentionally

free, Elsinore castle. The playwright chap didn't really have much to say about small boat sailing, severely limiting his appeal, but at least the castle at the heart of the action boasts a lighthouse in one of the turrets. Arriving well after dark, we found Hamish Wilson and Elin Williams (RCC) who talked us into the Søndre Havn. Thanks to the darkness, we 'missed' seeing the 15 metre minimum length instruction writ large on the wall of Søndre Havn and so avoided the rather soulless marina option.

Good sailing and dull harbours packed with holidaying Germans on their way to Sweden took us down the Øresund under the amazing bridge linking Sweden and Denmark. Good sailing and charming harbours improved things as we crossed the Great and Little Belts. The boat museum at Svendborg ate my time till we left for an island hopping sail to Flensburg. It's a long way up the fjord but well worth it to find a vibrant town with a mainline railway connection. Best of all it's the start of a classier (in the sense of involving boats) literary trail, for Flensburg is where Carruthers joined Davis to kick off the *Riddle of the Sands*.

The persistent leak we'd thought cured in Helsinki was back. The prospect of beating across the North Sea and down Channel meant that some attention was in order. The great crew of shipwrights at the museum downed tools and came over to *Whirlaway*. In their traditional tradesman gear, fuelled by vodka and Red Bull, they powered through as our anticipated simple tingle became a week long epic of plank replacement and caulking.

with blue skies as we crossed the lake to the entrance to the Trollhätten Canal at Vänersborg.

The canal boasts larger locks and room to turn. We enjoyed a fascinating day at Trollhätten itself exploring redundant lock systems (on a grand scale) that reflect the growth of trade since 1800. The pilot books reckon you can then get to Gothenburg in a day, but it's a stretch with the current. If you are coming the other way perhaps best plan for two. We made it to the Gothenburg bridge by the skin of our teeth (at 1759) on day two.

It was a fascinating and enjoyable couple of weeks – but how nice to get back to sea where the steering can wander a bit!

On to Helsingør, with its literary connections and impressive, if ghost

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New plank at Flensburg

It was the Womens' European Cup final and Germany was very confident of beating England. Yet in 1966, when England won the men's World Cup, *Whirlaway* was in Rensburg on the Kiel canal. I warned the lads not to be too optimistic. Very pleasingly *Whirlaway* worked her magic again and we enjoyed some rather sulky headlines in the German press; of course, we don't claim sole credit ...

Instead of Carruther's no 3 Rippingille Stove, Pippa arrived boasting a more welcome (and lighter) supply of tiny Marmite capsules, acceptably small for hand baggage. She'd had quite a journey of German rail strikes and moving destinations as our finishing date moved. We were all glad to meet at last.

We launched – and no leak. It was a very good day, rounded off with a good sail to the charming little Shleimünde Yachthafen harbour at the entrance to the Schlei Fjord. The huge locks at Kiel easily dealt with 50 yachts – quite a contrast to our nearly day long wait at the Berg flight on the Göta. Pushing on past Rensburg to Gieselau where the canal links to the Eider gave us a charming night's stop.

Gieselau Loch on the Kiel Canal



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In the morning we locked out at Brünsbuttel to meet proper sea, with salt and waves and the wheel's kick and so on. Not oceanic depths though as we headed out past *Dulcibella's* scary Scharhörn sands towards the shallows of the Frisians. It was a shallow summer overall, what with canals, Finnish Archipelago passages and now the Frisian Islands and the Suffolk coast to come. Rosie even wrote a poem (apparently really a Tanka):

We draw two metres
Long weed streaming in the tide
We feel a small bump
Call it Braille navigation
It's the Sailor's bungee jump

Sunshine and gentle breezes took us along the outside of the Frisians to Terschelling via uninspiring Borkum and Norderney. I'd like to say that it was as a *Dulcibella* tribute that we bounced over some sand on the way into Norderney, but it was actually simple inattention. Terschelling, was busy and fun – and very crowded. Woken early in the morning by bow thrusters, I WhatsApp'd the RCC group with a comment that quieter bow thrusters would be for the common good. Hornets left their nests in a big way among the RCC group. It's just the noise I mind, honestly; perhaps a little jealousy too.

Bored with shallow water, a northeast wind triggered abandonment of the planned route via Amsterdam, and we cleared out from Den Helder (very nice officials) and headed for home with a few of our 90 days in hand.

We shifted from Childers to Ransome via a Heineyland bereft of puffins as we ended an enjoyable passage at Southwold, mooring safely alongside the Vice Commodore's boat. And more shallow water! A couple of days of bucket and



spading followed, with my shaggy resemblance to Raymond Briggs' *Father Christmas goes on holiday* causing joy among the crew, and then we set off for the Ore in the wake of James Morrow and family aboard *Tai Tai* (RCC).

We were bowled over by the charm of the Suffolk rivers. It was quite a social time too, meeting up with the Hon Treasurer and Jane and

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David Russell (RCC) off Pin Mill. Clean winds, charming scenery and a population of yachts that were distinctly simpler and more attractive than in ritzier areas. A special pleasure was to find *Sunstone*, (for many years sailed extensively by Tom and Vicky Jackson [RCC] and their home), and now based at Fox's in Ipswich. A couple of days in the Walton back waters included a memorable dinghy trip full of waders and seals (but no Secret Water Mastodons). Ever thoughtful, the Met Office promised a northeast wind to take us home, giving us the confidence to take our time and enjoy both Suffolk and Essex rivers thoroughly. Altogether this had been a high spot of the year.

Is it ungrateful to mention the slightly sub-optimal supply of depth? We dredged into Brightlingsea and then on for a sentimental visit to *Whirlaways'* origin port of Burnham. Running into the Crouch, the Burnham Week was beating to their turning mark, and a bit of dodging was necessary; a tad tense as it's a small river and a large fleet. A lumpy wind-over-tide mooring was compensated for by a pleasant evening at the RCYC, where we found out a bit more about her past. Wind over tide, eh? We were really getting home after those tide-free years since Shetland.

After a 15 mile motor sail out of the Crouch, we delightedly bore away to thread across the Thames Estuary. Wind farms have made the banks more apparent, rather diluting that mysterious charm, yet we enjoyed the reach to Dover and on. In Brighton, with a brisk quartering wind we called on their workboat to help us out of the berth without troubling the insurers; no need for a bow thruster if you have a tug handy. The fair wind held down channel to the Solent with its eye-catching charm and eye watering prices.

Past Beachy Head



The Beaulieu Meet had been an objective throughout the Summer, but cancellation, following the death of the Queen two days before, meant we headed out for the second overnight passage of the year. Our luck with the wind held through a breezy night and morning found us off Salcombe at half flood on a lumpy bar – ideal timing.

We'd had six rich and contrasting years, but it was good to be home, to have *Whirly* safe in the shed ready for some well-deserved care. I'm off to scrape some varnish and contemplate cutting holes in the bow area ...