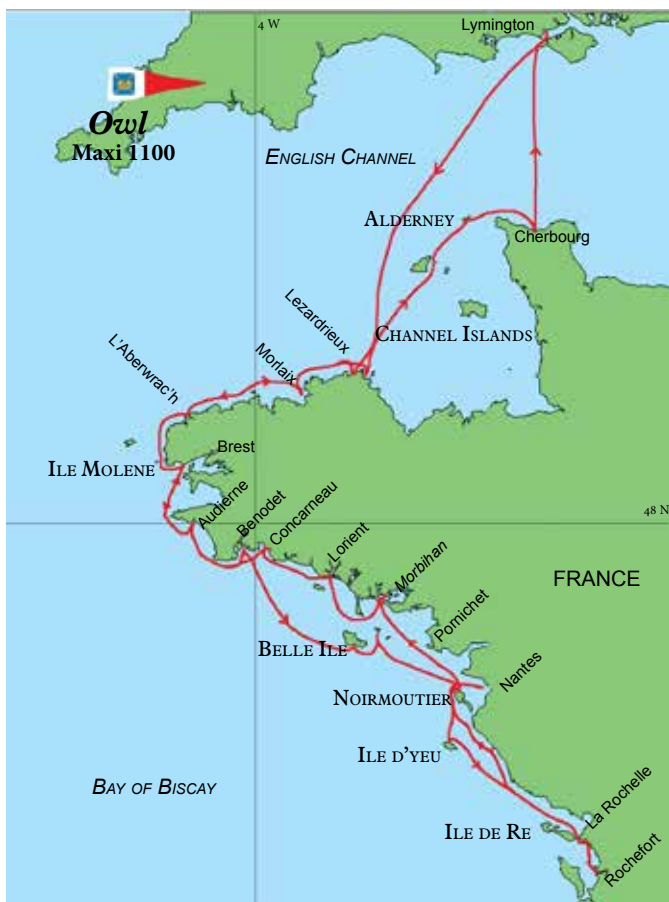


# Back to the Nice Old Biscay Playground

## Lymington to Rochefort and Back

Peter Bruce

*Owl*, our Maxi 1100, left Lymington on 27 June 2016 with me, Sandy, my wife, Jonathan Bradbeer, (usually known as Brad) and Millie, Sandy's bright 16 year-old god-daughter. She was keen to learn about offshore sailing and her mother had persuaded us, although she had never actually been in a yacht before; she would travel well and this turned out to be true. We planned to swap over crew at various points on a cruise south



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to Rochefort, which is near Millie's home, and back. In the afternoon I picked Millie up from Eastleigh airport and also bought a useful SIM card from 'Three' whilst passing Southampton to optimise use of our i-Pad on the continent.

Wanting to catch a weather window, we left the same evening arriving at Lezardrieux 26 hours later. We motored quite a lot in the night, but the last three hours were in force 7 - on the nose - so the forecast had not been quite right for the window. *Owl* revels in these conditions but we had to come down to three slabs and managed to tear a batten pocket right off the headsail. We spent the night up the lovely Lezardrieux river on a buoy and then moved to the marina for fuel and water. We found ourselves amongst the finishers of *Le Figaro* single-handed race and, when our card didn't work for fuel, the Figaro spectators joked that this was because the British had voted to leave the EU.... A sail-maker fixed our batten pocket and we left before dawn to catch the best of the tide.

We had a good beat to Morlaix in SW 5, arriving in time to dine at the admirable historic *La Terrace* restaurant. At 1610 next day, 1 July, we left for Roscoff, a surprisingly nice newish marina, and spent the night there. Again the tide served early, as it seemed to most of the cruise, so we took the Ile de Batz channel bound for the Malouine channel into L'Aberwrac'h. As expected the western end of the Batz channel was rough with wind against tide and at first we needed two slabs in the main. By now Brad and Millie, who got on famously, had developed an awful screech which they both gave out at the sight of gannets, which were all too plentiful - not that gannets do emit any sound except at their nesting sites. Our usual L'Aberwrac'h up-river buoy was not laid but we spotted *Reflection* (Rikki and Ro Gatehouse RCC) and joined them in the marina. The forecast for the next day was for fresh headwinds and rain, so we decided to take a bus to Brest and visit the aquarium which has a terrific collection.



Brad steers *Owl* down the Odet river

We then dined with the Gatehouses at The Captain restaurant which has good food and a view and agreed to leave with *Reflection* at 0500 next day for the inner Portsall channel in order to catch the first of the fair tide. It was a dank, misty morning though the rocks looming out of the gloom kept us awake. The Navionics on the i-Pad gave better detail than the old chart plotter and we tend to use both in intricate channels such as this. After the Chenal du Four spat us out into the military area off Brest we

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were asked by a French frigate to go west to the Basse Royale buoy, but we still just made the tide at the Raz. We moored at Audierne and took the dinghy up the river for minor purchases.

Next morning we set off early to optimise the tide and rounded Penmarche, expecting the cloud to clear in the usual way as it eventually did, but the wind was still ahead and we decided that Brad, as a past commodore of the RORC, could be expected to sail for the rest of his life but, having presumably upset some god at some time, was fated to sail always to windward. After shopping at Benodet we went up the beautiful Odet river in bright sunshine and anchored at the picturesque Toulven pool for tea. Going down the river again we spotted what we thought might

have been a pair of honey buzzards. We went alongside at St Marine and dined at our old favourite *Hotel du Bac*.

Still going to windward, at Concarneau we were greeted by our French friend, Pascal Tocquec, who invited us to dinner at his home overlooking the bay. Next morning Brad, our fountain of merriment,



Ponton Anne de Bretagne at Nantes

left for home. We left next day after a noisy night celebrating France's triumph over the Germans at football. On the way to Belle Isle Millie was invited to pick up our horseshoe lifebuoy as 'person overboard' drill and so she did, but only after about a dozen circles. Without Brad and his windward curse, at last the wind allowed the asymmetric spinnaker and we had a splendid run down the west side of the island trying to decide from seaward for David Joel, our neighbour in Lynington, where Monet had executed his dramatic paintings of the *cote sauvage*. We anchored at pretty Port Kerel, where Millie and I took the dinghy off to the cliffs to look for more Monet views. Later Jake and Judy Backus RCC, who were anchored beside *Owl*, came over for drinks. Next day we set off to Hoedic, observing a dead Common Dolphin floating on the surface en route and anchored in the Point du Vieux Chateau Bay, clear of the massed vessels to the east. A small but acceptable price to pay for such seclusion was a bit of choppiness coming round the corner from time to time. The girls swam, keeping an eye open for compass jelly fish, quite a few of which we'd noticed on the way round. We visited the sunlit Vauban fort, built to keep the English out, and the church.

We were due to pick up David and Jackie Hughes at Pornichet, chosen

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on account of its good car parking arrangements for the Hughes vehicle, but, as we were ahead of schedule, we elected to go up the Loire to Nantes where we berthed at Ponton Anne de Bretagne and had a half-quiet night but only because France did not win the football final against Portugal. We inspected the Nantes cathedral, the fairground giant spider and elephant and eventually mastered the tram system. Nantes is a big and pleasant, French city but does not quite have the charm of La Rochelle.

Down the great river, which takes surprisingly large vessels and is interesting but only attractive in parts, we found David and Jackie waiting for us at Pornichet and had a good seafood dinner at the much-applauded Fish and Chips restaurant just outside the marina. Our departure next morning was slightly delayed by Millie's ring which had dropped through the floorboards at our breakfast spot! Our gallant French hosts got the



Gentleman's residence on the River Loire with a slight damp problem

floorboards up and the valuable silver object was retrieved. Swift progress was made to Port Joinville, Ile d'Yeu, in poor visibility. We even pulled down a reef at one point and, once there and with good weather restored, we hired a mini-moke-type vehicle - actually a Renault - to tour the island. Fun though the Renault was, we noticed that many roads were only open to bicycles so our planned circumnavigation was foiled. The 11th century chateau, once held by the English for 37 years, was a good visit and we lunched at Port de la Merle where *Gauntlet*, built at the Berthon in 1933, had anchored off in 1964, she was then a Royal Navy yacht which I had chartered for my first Biscay cruise. There was a magnificent firework display that evening to celebrate Bastille Day.

We felt we had to make a 0500 start from Port Joinville to be sure of making the lock at St Martin, Isle de Ré but, as it happened, the wind served well and we flew there under a taut symmetric spinnaker. Millie had been a bit shy with the two lively youths who took our mooring fee in Audierne and was told by Sandy that she was old enough to have boyfriends so was invited to share her quarters with the two kites, Asym and Sym. One of the many skills she acquired was that of re-packing Sym.

Charming St Martin is always jammed full but the vessels seem to pile in with great goodwill. We ate well at the recommended *Bistrot du Marin*. Some of us climbed the church tower which gives a splendid view of the

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town. Next day, 14 July, we re-berthed on the wall just outside the lock gates from where we had another most agreeable view of the town and its water craft for the benefit of Millie's parents and two of her younger sisters, who had come over for lunch. Afterwards, and with the tide going down, we said goodbye to our guests and left bound for Rochefort, thinking to stop for the night at Ile d'Aix with a visit there in the morning. However a brisk NW Force 6 had appeared and made that prospect uninviting so we found ourselves careering up the



Charente River into the strong outgoing tide in steep waves at over nine knots with not much under the keel.

High up the river just short of Soubise, now with the breeze gone, we picked up a mooring where we spent a quiet night although our mosquito coil was thought necessary to keep the insects at bay. The following day, with the lock gates at Rochefort not opening until 1600, we had time to spare, so went alongside the pontoon on Soubise and explored the village, inspecting the church and making friends with a local in the *Bar du Port*. We spotted a pair of Montague harriers further up the river.



Anchored on the gorgeous Blavet River

At Rochefort - *Owl's* sixth visit there - Millie was reunited with her family. She had become a useful member of the crew and we were sorry to be losing her. We went off to stay with Millie's parents at their home in nearby St Jean d'Angely. Meanwhile David and Jackie viewed the museum and *corderie* of the attractive 17th century Colbert-designed, naval arsenal town, located well up-river to be safe from you know who...

Next stop was La Rochelle *vieux port*, the city as usual teeming with happy people enjoying some music festival. The sun shone ruthlessly and it was very hot. David and Jackie caught a train back to their car at Pornichet and Michael Coombes joined. We sailed that evening, 18 July,

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heading home under asymmetric and glad to be out of the heat. Having covered 26nm, we found a most pleasant sheltered anchorage off the Payre river and spent the night there. It was still very hot. Next morning the symmetric spinnaker was soon up and we found ourselves bowling along at nearly 9k bound for Noirmoutier. We victualled and watered at L'Herbaudière and then went round to anchor off the pleasant scenery near Pointe des Dames on the east side of Noirmoutier. Quite suddenly clammy fog came down and the hot weather changed to cool but by the morning was clear again and it was greengages for breakfast amongst other



Tucking in as *Owl* goes up the Tréguier River

delights. We were soon on our way again, having established that the sea bed was heavy mud, with shell inclusions, and jolly good holding.

One element of the crew was bent on visiting the famous *La Venette* restaurant at Arradon in the Morbihan, so there we went. We found this restaurant outstandingly good and the proprietor must have approved of

us; he said most yachts-people dressed rather scruffily - as he invited us around for a free breakfast the next morning. Shopping at the Spar *marché* at Ile du Arz gave way to a mooring off the west side of Ile Berder, this being one of the prettiest coves in the whole glorious Morbihan. It was near spring tides and incoming yachts were typically gliding past the gap between our island the Ile de la Jument on the flood as if on skates. Next day we took the tide out and went for fuel and water at La Crouesty, seeing two familiar racing yachts there which I knew well in the '70s, *Winsome VII* and *Wizard of Paget*.

From there we beat the short distance to Houat and anchored off Er Yoc'h rock at the north end of the spectacular Tréacher er Gourhed beach. On the way ashore for supper we spotted, amongst the many anchored vessels, James and Hilary Grogono's *Simba* (RCC) and invited them aboard *Owl* for breakfast. After landing we walked to the village and had an excellent meal at the *Sirene Hotel*. After a merry *petit déjeuner* next morning with the Grogos, we set off north-about Houat and took the narrow and slightly hairy passage between Borfen Bras and Bonnen Plat. We had a good sunny beat to Lorient where we found supplies, and a train ticket for Michael who was leaving the following Monday. From there we went up the Blavet river to the lovely stretch between the du Bonhomme and Locoyarn bridges. We spent the first night alongside the *Hotel de Locguénolé* pontoon and climbed up the path for a luxurious breakfast at this *relais* hotel next morning. It was still spring tides and we shifted to a



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deep patch off the rocks on the southern bend west of the hotel. Then in the evening we went up the river on the tide to the Hennebont bridge and back to the anchorage at the pool off Roche du Diable near No 10 post, surely one of the most quiet and beautiful anchorages in France. There are two or three metres in the pool at chart datum. A family of kingfishers swept by flying low and, in response to our owl whistle call, a parliament of tawny owls on both banks of the river were triggered into asserting their territorial claims. A mosquito coil was put into use again that night.

We left the anchorage at 0630 for Lorient so Michael could catch his train and then had a nice fetch to Concarneau in WNW 3. We spotted *Summerbird* (RCC) on AIS five miles ahead and had a chat with the Southwoods who were bound for Loc Tudy. Once at Concarneau we were greeted by Pascal and daughter Julie who had been following our every move on AIS. Later we were joined by new crew Kip and Sue Punch for a grand dinner on board, together with Pascal, his wife Ruth and Julie. We sailed in the mid afternoon for the Iles de Glenan next day, giving a lift to Arthur, a French student reading history. We anchored at La Pie in 2.2m and, having put Arthur ashore, we all landed and spotted the trim and nicely refurbished *Mabel*, a 1960s wooden yacht that we'd last seen in the Tamar river in June, owned by Bruce Thoroughgood (RCC), who kindly invited us all on board for a glass of wine.

The weather had turned dull since Kip and Sue had joined and the next morning we got fog and rain, not that this deterred Pascal and Ruth who came over from Concarneau in their Boston Whaler for lunch



The harbour at Isle Molène

aboard *Owl*. After lunch we weighed anchor and set off under power into a Force 3 wind to Penmarche then Audierne. On the corner we thankfully doused the engine and sailed, arriving at Audierne at 1930 .

The tide required an early start and, at 0630 from half a mile off, with the stream setting north it looked as though the whole Raz passage was a breaking wave but the actual transit was, as usual, bumpy but not alarming. We were off to the Ile Molène in the Chenal du Four, planning to arrive from the south at slack tide which made the apparently rockbound approach easy enough. We could just get behind the breakwater, it now being neaps, and found a free visitors' buoy. The village was charming though its diverse paths needed one to have a good sense of direction. We went to the Drummond Castle museum, featuring a British ship wrecked with great loss of life in 1896 on the Pierres Vertes rocks which

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we had passed on the way in and then had a memorable lobster dinner at *L'Archipel*, the other notable restaurant having closed down after 'the children' took over its management. Landing at low water was no problem as the steps were scrupulously clean.

We left next morning at 0700 to optimise the tide for our passage to Tréguier. Sue's commands to the heavens for sun, which had only been briefly experienced in her past week, were now properly met at last. The wind got up and we rocketed into the river, arriving at the marina at 1920. We had a good dinner at the *Sarl Ty Braise* restaurant not far from the boat and then entertained David Reynolds (RCC), and his crew in *Firedancer* on board *Owl*.

Alderney beckoned and next day we set off before breakfast for the Passage de la Gaine. Fairly soon we found suitable breeze for the asymmetric but then the wind came aft and we changed to the symmetric and sped up the Little Russel channel in a slightly intermittent fresh breeze, passing the anchored Cunarder *Queen Elizabeth* in style. By 1815 we had reached the Casquets and were out of wind so had to motor. We went in close to the encrusted-with-gannets Ortac rock and then to the Burhou anchorage which is pretty enough, but the swell was coming in and we didn't stay long. We chose to anchor in Braye Bay, the middle south of the harbour, beside Jim Macgregor,



The Ortac rock with gannets

an old friend and racing rival from Poole who came over with his wife for drinks. After a disco-music-filled night beaming out from ashore, at 0600 we weighed anchor, bound for Cherbourg and were soon charging along the Normandy coast with the asymmetric pulling like a dray horse on steroids. We berthed at 1040, happily to meet and lunch with John and Alice Macnamara (RCC). We also made an appointment with Gilliaume of Normandy Wines and were offered a car lift back by Dutchman Jan whose boat was *Dawn Raid*, sister ship to my last yacht. There was a most attractive one-off German yacht beside us and we invited the German owners, another Dutch couple and the Macnamaras aboard for drinks on *Owl*.

Departure for the last leg back to Lymington on 1 August was dictated by the time of the start of the flood tide at Hurst and we set off at 0830 in mainly good asymmetrical weather, arriving conveniently at Hurst at the first of the flood tide and berthing at Lymington at 1755. In five weeks we had covered 1,243 miles, had some joyous sailing, happy meetings, good eating and felt we had done justice to the nice old Biscay playground.