

Adventures of a pilot book author in France

A cruise from L'Aber Wrac'h to Rochefort and back to Foleux

Nick Chavasse

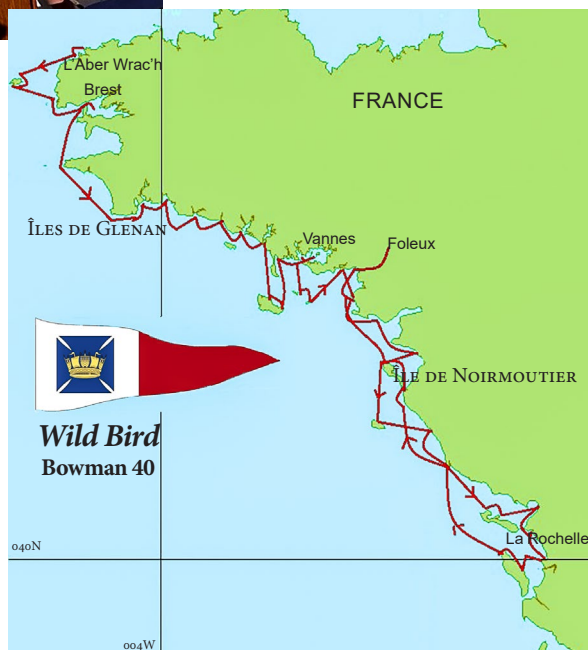


Nick Chavasse

on Zoom in their offices began to feel sick! We spent the time loitering between Poole and Helford enjoyed the company of numerous RCC members on their yachts. The highlight was the excellent Plymouth meet in June, organised by David Southwood.

The green light came at the end of July and we set off from Torquay bound for L'Aber Wrac'h, leaving several sorry looking cruise ships in Torbay, on 2 August. We

Margie and I spent June and July waiting for the green light to go to France without having to quarantine on return home. We decided to do the waiting on board the boat, rather than put up with me grumbling in the garden. *Wild Bird* became Margie's office and my task was to provide a relatively stable platform with a good mobile signal. The norm of WFB (Working From Boat) functioned well except when Margie's background started to roll and other participants



Adventures of a pilot book author in France



Fishing boats in Lesconil

were a little nervous of contravening the confusing and daily changing Brexit and Covid rules and regulations. On arrival in L'Aber Wrach we made an appointment with Brest customs and went there by bus to have our passports stamped. The rules of entry were subsequently changed to limit arrivals to official 'Ports of Entry'.

Îles de Glenan



The job in hand was to research the next edition of my pilot book, Atlantic France. The area covers the whole of the Atlantic coast from L'Aber Wrach west of Roscoff to Hendaye, the most southern town in France in the corner of Biscay, next to the Spanish border.

We had our work cut out as there are 106 ports in total and Margie needed to be back in time for the birth of our first grandchild, due in mid September, and I needed to be back in time for the Catchup Dinner in early October. This gave us two months maximum

Nick Chavasse

in France. With time being short and itching to get on with the job, we found ourselves storm bound as the aftermath of Storm Evert played havoc in Brittany.

The neighbouring river of L'Aber Benoit provided a beautiful safe

Hoedic Cafe

Wild Bird at anchor off Hoedic



haven and an opportunity to hire a car from Brest for three days to visit eight local ports in the Brest area. The journey to Brest from our anchorage was a half hour dinghy ride, a half hour walk to the bus stop, one hour on the bus and another half hour walk from there to the car hire office.

As soon as the weather allowed, we set out for Ouessant and the neighbouring islands via the Portsall inner passage, always a challenging and exciting event. The fast flowing current through the rocks mean there is no time to re-read the previous pilotage instructions as by then it will be too late.

We have met 'old' people who use only paper charts and 'young', who have never seen a paper chart. As someone who is hanging on to the middle of the spectrum, we have both paper and digital. Just as well, as south of Ouessant we fell off the bottom edge of the chart plotter! I had not realised that you must specify the exact area you want to download when purchasing a digital chart. I had thought that if you purchased an area, it would automatically come with the whole area. It turned out that my new download had helpfully only downloaded a section of central Spain. This proved particularly challenging as I was left with my iPhone to navigate through the rock strewn passage to the north of Île Molène to join the Chenal du Four and on to Camaret. There was evidence of the reduction in the amount of fishing being done from south Brittany ports. There was visibly significant

Adventures of a pilot book author in France



Wild Bird leaving St Martin de Re

investment in the leisure industry, particularly projects including a ferry port hub serving the islands and alternative energy projects in the form of wind and wave farms. The lack of British boats in France this summer was noticeable, mainly due to the uncertainty of pandemic rules for travel. We did not see any other boats that had sailed out from Britain. In contrast there were plenty of Dutch, Belgian and German boats. The French people we met were delighted to welcome us back and extremely friendly. They missed the usual string of British boats which routinely sail the French coast.

Tools needed for a pilot book author include a boat, preferably with a bow thruster to manoeuvre when

single handed in tight marinas and a bicycle to reach places the boat cannot. Crew are handy extras and always helpful for putting out endless warps and fenders. It may be stating the obvious, but you need warps and fenders ready on both sides, particularly when single handing, as you never know which side you will need for mooring. Other attributes include a smattering of the language and a copy of the book when trying to get the attention of those on duty at the various ports and marinas. I usually gained their attention when I held up the book and pointed to my name on the front cover and said proudly “C’est moi!”

This research period is followed by the writing period that has to be done so that it would be print ready for the 3rd edition around Christmas 2022. I was keen to ensure that I visited all the ports, harbours and rivers by boat. People do like to try and catch me out to see if I really have visited all the ports by boat. Some of the passages need sufficient water whilst bridges need enough air draft. If these are incompatible at the time of arrival, it is unfortunate but also unrealistic to have to wait for the next spring tide. Whilst these provide a tempting challenge to the intrepid author, the conditions often need to be perfect.

In 2016, with my daughter Joanna as crew, we were not convinced with the accuracy of my calculations so we tentatively backed into the bridge at Île d’Oléron and bounced off the backstay! I had mis-appreciated the fact that French charts calculate heights using Mean Level rather than Highest Astronomical Tide. Two hours later and the rule of twelfths replaced with more accurate data we slipped under the bridge as we watched the VHF aerial bend to the horizontal. Having

Nick Chavasse

got under the bridge, we then promptly grounded on a sand bank and had to wait for sufficient water to allow us to continue towards Bordeaux.

This summer on the way south, I had ruled out the possibility of going across the Gois Causeway in the Bay of Bourgneuf, which links the Île de Noirmoutier to the mainland, as the conditions were not right. The Gois causeway is a road which is completely covered at High Water and used by vehicles at Low Water.



Marans at Sunset

Leaving that challenge untouched, *Wild Bird* continued south and visited the delights of Île de Ré and La Rochelle before reaching Rochefort in the river Charente. Rochefort was the southern-most port visited this summer, and therefore La Rochelle



Adventures of a pilot book author in France

the turning point before making my way back north towards the Vilaine, where *Wild Bird* would be overwintering.

For a successful crossing of the Gois Causeway which sits in eight square miles of drying mud and abundant marine aquaculture, one needs perfect weather conditions with no swell, a spring tide and the luck of the gods! I was sailing with main, staysail and yankee towards Île d'Yeu when it dawned on me that maybe the conditions might just be suitable for a crossing. The first obstacle would be the the Fromentine bridge, before crossing the flats and the causeway, and onwards north on the east side of Île Noirmoutier.



Gois Causeway at low water

Thinking it only reasonable to keep Pilotage Foundation HQ abreast of the situation, I sent a message to Jane Russell, Editor in Chief as I was approaching Fromentine from the south to tell her what I had in mind.

Time: 1450, 22 Sept.

“The challenge is that the height of the bridge is 24m at Mean Level. The tide will be about 2m higher than ML which reduces air draft to 22m. The height of the mast is 18m plus 2m for the burgee. If everything is correct, then I should have 2m to spare. When I get under the bridge I will have to make best speed against a three knot spring tide to reach the causeway at high water. Therefore I need at least 4.5m and preferably 5m of tide to get across. My Tide app says I will have 5.5m at 1810. I will let you know how I get on. Did anyone say the life of a pilot book author is dull?”

Nick Chavasse

Time: 1610, 22 Sept.

Editor in Chief replies: "I've checked the page and it all looks quite hairy! Crossing my fingers!!!!"

I reached the causeway at 1815, almost exactly at high water with 0.9m under the keel and breathed a sigh of relief hoping that all I had to do was motor as fast as possible to get off the mud flats before the water ebbed out of the bay.

Time: 1831, 22 Sept.

"Done it and through the other side"

Time: 1850, 22 Sept.

Editor in chief replies: "Whoop Whoop!!"

It would have been more prudent to push on to Pornic on the mainland, but I was keen to cycle back to the causeway the following day, at low water, to see where I had crossed the causeway the previous evening. That night, familiar for this season, the north-easterly wind got up again. I found myself on anchor watch at Pointe des Dames, standing in the companionway, reading *The Times* on my phone, urging the Rocna to live up to the sales pitch in the marketing blurb and not drag any closer to a lee shore.

The following day, it was a 36km round trip cycle ride back to the causeway but well worth the effort to see the amazing sight of the cars and hundreds of people conducting their own *pêche à pied* looking for cockles, clams and winkles. The view from the Refuge, a tower for stranded pedestrians caught by the tide, close to where I had crossed the causeway the previous evening was breath taking. Miles and miles of mud flats all around and the Fromentine bridge in the far distance to Looking north from the Gois Causeway at the '*pêche a pieds*' at low water



Adventures of a pilot book author in France

the south. With Margie's help for August and various friends in September, I visited a total of 86 ports, of which eight were done by car. There are 20 ports remaining which we plan to visit over the winter months. *Wild Bird* is safely ashore at Foleux in the idyllic River Vilaine above La Roche Bernard.

Being a pilot book author is very rewarding when you meet so many British and foreign yachtsmen who use the book. One German recognised *Wild Bird* and said he liked my stories the best. Another family arrived in their yellow catamaran in St Denis d'Oléron, as I was standing on the pontoon ready to take their lines, with a copy of my book open on their coach roof! That makes you feel it is all worthwhile.

The Pilotage Foundation was originally supported by an endowment made by RCC member, Dr Fred Ellis. If you think you would like to help the Pilotage Foundation, do get in touch with them as they would love to hear from you.

The excellently organised Plymouth Meet, an early highlight of our summer

