

An Incident in a Voyage

Stephen Lennane

This year's cruise was more of a delivery trip for *Dulcibella*: a ten-metre, steel, gaff-rigged, Dutch boat with lee-boards, about fifty years old and on the register of classic Dutch yachts. Sue and I took her from the IJsselmeer with the mast lowered through the canals of South Holland to the Belgian canals, and then round Ghent and Bruges and so on, past Dunquerque, to the canal de Calais and Calais itself and then to go on to London. Some five hundred miles and not very interesting in RCC terms, but for one incident which made it a voyage to remember.

Fast forward then to the moment that Chris Hamblin (RCC) and I were sitting in the cockpit waiting for the bridge to open to the outer harbour in Calais. Chris had



Dulcibella at Muiderzand

kindly joined to help me across the Channel as Sue is no longer able to sail at sea. We were idly chatting when a young man appeared on the pontoon. In his twenties, long hair, back pack and music case, a hippie straight out of Glastonbury we thought. He asked in perfect English whether we were going to England. When we said yes he immediately asked if he could have a lift. That threw the two old men into immediate confusion. We both knew that we had a duty to help young people on their way as others had helped us in the past. But we both know that as soon as he was on board we had a duty of care to someone who was quite unknown to us. We thought about it and then sent him away for half an hour while we talked. Half an hour later he came back and I interviewed him having said that it was very unlikely we would take him. However, he seemed nice enough on interview. When asked why he wanted to go to England he said that he wanted to go to Brighton. When

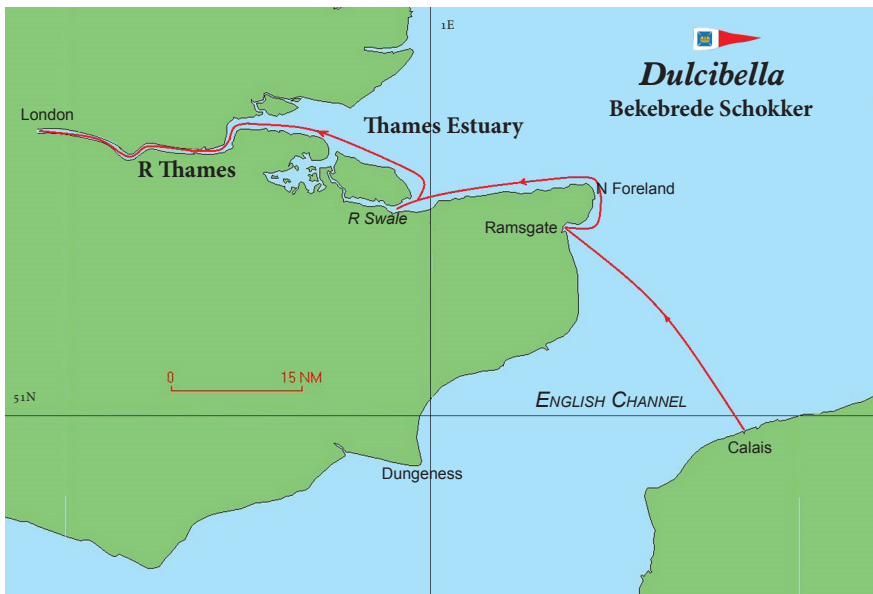
Stephen Lennane

asked why Brighton he said there was a vegan shoe shop there. I don't know what logical process went through my mind at the time, but it seemed to be a perfectly genuine reason.

Brought up in New Zealand, but living in France for most of his life, he was completely bi-lingual. I looked at this passport which matched his face and seemed to be in order. He had every right to come to the U.K., though I forgot to check the date validity – I shall never make an immigration officer.

So we decided we would take him, at least as far as the outer harbour and as the last bridge of the day was opening we had to get a move on. I told the young man, whose name we had now discovered was Xander, to sit still, do what he was told and keep out of the way while we picked up a buoy for the night.

If we were to take him there would not be enough food so I rowed him ashore and we went shopping. He said he wanted to go to get his clothes washed in the laundrette and promised he would be back in an hour and a half. So I rowed back to *Dulcibella* and wondered whether that would be the



last we should see of him. But in ninety minutes he was back waving to come aboard. We had had a meal, vegetarian at his request, and he spent the night on board and proved to be a good conversationalist and told us about his musical education at a *conservatoire* in south-west France.

In the morning Chris and I felt comfortable enough to let him come with us. And so we set off across the channel on a sunny day with not a breath of wind, only a slight swell from the day before. After about an hour Xander was sick and his projectile vomit hit us both. He was suitably apologetic and

An Incident in a Voyage



Arriving at Limehouse

in fact recovered well, went below and produced a wonderful lunch which we ate in stages, while dodging ships when crossing the shipping lanes. We instructed him in the mysteries of navigation and he was an impressively fast learner, telling us later on which side to take various cardinal buoys.

Without incident we arrived at Ramsgate, still without a breath of wind. We moored alongside a U.K. Border Force vessel, but they did not seem much interested in us and of course passports were not necessary. Remember if you read government statistics on immigration by E.U. nationals they are wrong by one person.

I pointed out that London and Brighton and the vegan shop were only an hour or two away by train and that we were going to spend the next two days going round the North Foreland and up the Thames Estuary towards London. Xander, who by that time had either taken to sailing or just liked living dangerously, asked if he could come to. By that stage we were confident about him and welcomed his joining us.

I had hoped to dry out in Margate, but the tides were just wrong so we fetched up in the Swale; the tide had turned so we could go no further by daylight. We took up a buoy. It was a gloriously quiet evening with a harvest moon, stars and no one around. And Zander took out his violin. Although his liking for music seemed to me to incline towards country and western, on hearing that I liked Bach he played, from memory, one half of the Bach double violin concerto. On an evening such as this alone on the water in the quiet, it was for me a moment I shall always remember.

Next day, with Xander doing most of the helming and very well too, we went

Stephen Lennane



Chris, Xander and Stephen at Limehouse

up river on the flood, passing the wreck of the *Richard Montgomery* with its thousands of tons of unexploded TNT, which seemed to fascinate Xander who busily photographed it.

I had been told by many in the Netherlands that *Dulcibella* was designed as a fishing boat for the Zuider Zee and should not go out to sea, let alone across the

water to England, so I was determined to take a photograph of the boat with Tower Bridge in the background to prove something to the doubters. In doing so we took much longer than expected and a furious ebb made the approach to Limehouse extremely difficult. There is a pontoon about two metres in from the current and a bridge about 15 metres further on, so mooring on the pontoon proved somewhat difficult. The Thames passenger boats throw up an enormous wash as they pass by at high speed and we lost one cleat, designed for a horizontal load but not a vertical one, from the waves.

Once the bridge was opened and we were locked through *Dulcibella* was in her winter berth at last and we all went off to the riverside pub for a well earned dinner. Next day Xander left for his shoe shop.

We were so glad we had taken the risk of taking him and we probably learnt more from him that he did from us. And I live in hope that after his first voyage he might get well and truly hooked on boats.