

Fidget's Last Hurrah

David Mowlam

Outward Passage

The *Fidget* syndicate has its origins in 1934 when a group of four naval officers, including Colin McMullen, bought a 23.7ft, 4-ton cutter built in 1894 by W.J.Hodge of Dartmouth, already named *Fidget*. In 1937 Colin's brother Morrice joined the syndicate, but by 1963 Morrice was the sole owner when he replaced the original with a 30ft, $\frac{3}{4}$ rigged, wooden sloop built by Camper and Nicholson in 1939. In 1966 he invited his nephew, Colin de Mowbray, to join him in joint ownership, but, as an impecunious, very junior naval officer, Colin asked if a couple of other naval chums, Tom Blackburn and Jeremy Hurlbatt, could help him with his half share. Colin later recruited Martin Read and finally Simon Wilkinson to further support his half share, but after the second *Fidget* sank off Bolt Head in 1985 the third *Fidget*, a long-keeled, Halmatic 30, modelled on the Nicholson 31, was bought the next year and the syndicate re-formed with six, equal shares. Morrice died in 1990 and bequeathed his share to Colin who offered it to me and I became the newest member of the *Fidget* syndicate. I had just taken command of *HMS Amazon* and I set about learning how to handle two very different vessels. I was always more concerned about scratching *Fidget* than I was of denting one of Her Majesty's frigates; damaging my professional reputation seemed infinitely preferable to endangering five valued friendships. In 1998 we sold the Halmatic 30 and a year later bought the current *Fidget*. We have enjoyed her speed, particularly in a chop that brings shorter boats to a standstill, enabling us to cover more ground in a short leave period than in previous *Fidgets*. When we moved to a larger boat, Simon Wilkinson went freelance becoming, as a result, one of the most sought-after crews in the RCC and achieving more time under sail than



First *Fidget*

David Mowlam

any of us. Giles and Sarah Gleadell joined the syndicate as replacements and the boat had some memorable deployments to the Azores, France and Spain, but we were devastated by Colin's sudden death in 2010 and then by Giles's passing the following year. The rest of us continued, however, and, with Vanessa electing to maintain Colin's share, we have remained a syndicate of five members.

However, for all sorts of reasons we decided, at our Spring *Fidget* Owners' Meeting (FOM) to sell *Fidget* at the end of the 2017 season and that will probably be the end of the current syndicate. There have been many memorable FOMs over the years, usually held in one of our houses with dinner playing a large part. Once, at Martin and Suzanne's house, hockey, other sports, rocket launching, lunch and tea meant we didn't find time for a meeting as such. Another, at the Royal Thames, was exemplary in all respects, except one of our number had enjoyed a lengthy lunch and next day disputed all decisions recorded in the minutes - we did sometimes have minutes - saying he couldn't remember agreeing to them. This, in



A Windswept Syndicate

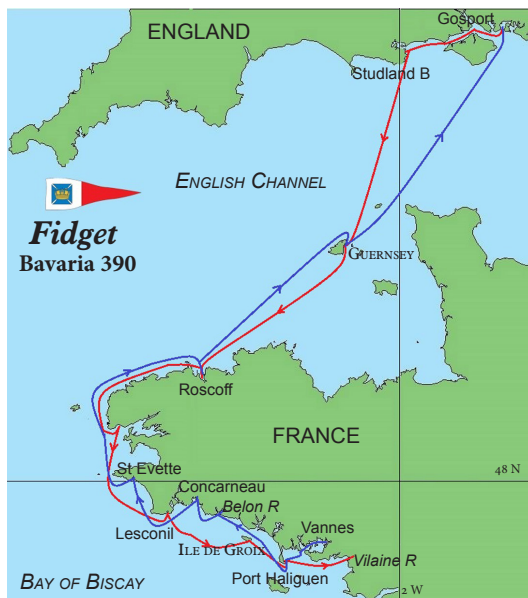
a way, was fair enough as he'd been asleep most of the meeting. After that it was tacitly agreed that decisions taken at a FOM were not to be considered binding, but any uncertainties afterwards were quickly and amicably sorted out in a flurry of phone calls, in later years by email.

This year's cruising was to be a deployment to Brittany, such that all owners would get some time in *Fidget*, and to take in the RCC Vilaine River Meet. The sailing date

from *Hornet*, in Gosport, was set for Sunday 4 June with Mowlams and Hurlbatts, but the jam-side-down law struck us unawares with defects to boat engine and autohelm, the latter not sorted until 10 June although the weather might have prevented an earlier departure in any case. Jeremy very sadly having retired hurt, Tom Blackburn generously agreed to help Kay and me across the channel and we sailed on Saturday 11 June deciding to anchor in Studland for the night and make the channel crossing the next day.

There followed a chapter of accidents and misfortune. We caught and held the spring tidal stream from Portsmouth all the way and with a SW5-6 we were through the Needles after three hours and at anchor in Studland after five hours at 1704. It was an exhilarating sail, but Tom was quiet, refusing a cup of tea or even a piece of his own excellent cruising cake that he had brought with him. We weighed, went to the Poole Quay Boat Haven and next morning Tom, clearly ill, went home by train and Kay and I sailed mid-morning for Studland Bay, with hopes of crossing the Channel on Monday, anchoring at 1230. However, the GPS Plotter, which had worked intermittently on our short passage from Studland to Poole the evening before, now absolutely refused duty.

There was nothing to be done on a Sunday and I was reluctant to continue without it, so we returned to the Solent, the Beaulieu River, from where we could seek help on the morrow. I spent most of Monday morning on the phone speaking to marine technical firms and the Standard Horizon office in Winchester, the fault was diagnosed as in the aerial and the best hope was the marine superstore in Port Solent. We had a lovely downwind, downtide sail through the Solent to Port Solent but it was a false hope. The helpful manager of the marine superstore said he couldn't get me one until mid-July and suggested I buy a stand-alone Garmin Plotter with a built-in aerial; so I did. Port Solent has 'leisure facilities' and we had supper in one of the many restaurants which would have been perfectly alright if one hadn't expected to be in La Belle France by now tucking into moules and Muscadet.



On Tuesday I fitted the Garmin Plotter while Kay watered ship, cleaned, ditched gash and so forth. Tom, still not 100%, arrived to lend a hand and he and Kay sorted the reefing lines which was going to be my task number 2. This saved us a couple of hours, we sailed with the plotter fitted at 1330 and were anchored in Studland after another tide-assisted Solent passage at 1905. In four days we had covered 127 miles and were back where we

had been three days ago.

Next morning Kay and I finally left Studland Bay for Guernsey some 10 days later than planned and condemned to sailing against deadlines. The first was to be somewhere where our friends Michael and Penny Moore could reach us by train on Friday 16 June. The strong winds of previous days had subsided and we had a pleasant channel crossing in E3-4 making 7 plus knots. Having set off at 0445 we entertained thoughts of continuing past Guernsey to Treguier, but the wind died as we neared Alderney and we motored through the Swinge, alternately sailing and motoring from then on as the wind came and went until finally anchoring in Havelock Bay, just south of St Peter Port.

We intended weighing at 0400 and making for Roscoff with the option of continuing to L'Aberwrac'h. From there we could easily make Brest to pick up our crew the next day and even from Roscoff it should be possible. It was still dark at 0400 so we weighed at 0430 when we could see sufficiently. A bright dawn it wasn't either, lowering skies and more than a hint of fog with a surly grey sea, although calm enough in the lee of Guernsey. With a reef the main for the forecast F4-5, we motored round the southern end of the island before setting course 240° for Roscoff, motor-sailing. The wind was on the nose, the sea short and steep over the Atlantic swell accentuated by wind over tide; a beat of 75nm to Roscoff was unattractive. We stuck with it until the 0700 forecast predicted the wind increasing F6-7 with rain and fog. We put a second reef in the main, bore away for Treguier and with about half the genoa unfurled cracked along at a good pace. Fog banks rolled in and out, the drizzle began to become more noticeable,



A Silvery Mole

the wind freshened and the sea got up a bit: the sort of conditions that, whilst by no means onerous, made one look forward to the end. Eventually we entered the Passe de la Gaine from the east, downed sails and motored into the wind. It was a joy to get further up the Treguier River, lifejackets, oilskins and fleeces being discarded in succession and morale increasing with every sunnier and more sheltered bend of the river. We passed an elegant, blue-hulled yawl at anchor wearing the RCC burgee, tugging at her chain with gusto and with a couple on deck waving in the friendliest of manners, but we didn't divert for a look as the fleshpots (well the marina) of Treguier beckoned.

The harbour staff at Treguier are exceptionally helpful: not just sitting in the *Capitaineirie*, but guiding yachts to their berth, assisting with lines and so forth. After a provisioning run ashore we met the Harbour Master in the waterside bar and I mentioned I had forgotten to ask a wi-fi code. With many a *desolée* he explained the office was locked, the computer switched off, so he couldn't give me one; after a while he brightened, gave me a piece of paper with his own log-in details and told me to use that.

Next morning we sailed at the luxurious hour of 0945 to catch the west-going stream. Forecast was a WF4, so we hoisted the main with one reef and motored down river. The lovely RCC yawl was *Caper of Falmouth* with John and Tracey Lancaster-Smith onboard, so we went close for a short



Crew chill on passage to Lesconil

but cheery chat before continuing on. The Moores were due to arrive in Roscoff at 1800. It was a lovely, bright sunny day with a marvellous sailing wind, but from exactly the wrong direction and our course was undeviatingly westerly. Speed was essential if we were to make Roscoff in time, so we motored until we were able to come off the wind a little for the last 15 miles having passed Les Sept Isles. We berthed in Roscoff at 1750 and the Moores arrived as we were checking in to the *Capitaineirie*. They had started out at 0545 to catch the Eurostar, so we all voted for an early night after a perfectly pleasant meal in the marina restaurant.

Saturday morning, after croissants supplied by the staff of the *Capitaineirie*, we sailed at 0830, a bit later than I would have liked as we had to negotiate the Chenal du Batz only two hours before low water. Michael was a navigation specialist in the Navy. With his help and extra eyes to pick out the marks, we motored through without difficulty. On passing Basse Plate we hoisted the main. It was a beautiful day again, the first of the hot spell that followed and the wind had veered to light ENE and the tide was agin us so we donked mostly. At 1330 the tide turned and at 1500 we entered the Chenal du Four when the wind strengthened from the north and we ran free cheerfully, in sunshine, making over 7kts. Although the wind died for the last part of the Chenal, it picked up once we were in the Rade de Brest and we had a feisty reach down to Anse de Berthaume where we secured at 1845 to a vacant buoy for the night.

The RCC Meet at La Roche-Bernard was originally planned to begin on

Wednesday 21 June, but we had heard the Arzal lock was to be closed for two days on the 20 and 21 June to preserve water levels in the Vilaine River; boats were urged to arrive on Monday 19 June if possible. On Saturday night we were 125nm away so we aimed to be on the waiting pontoon at Arzal by Wednesday afternoon, join in the evening's junketings from there by taxi and go through the lock on the Thursday. This decided, we slipped early, and sailed or motor-sailed arriving at the north of the Raz de Sein at slack water as planned. It was a quiet, hot sunny day; oily smooth water made for a pleasant passage to Lesconil. Kay and I first visited Lesconil in thick fog in 2013 and we have always liked this port with its tiny marina and *Captainerie* in a portacabin and small restaurants, one of which provided an excellent supper. For all its charm Lesconil was useless as a source of provisions as the only general food store was '*fermé le Lundi*', as was the *Poissonnerie*, so all we managed was a



Redon

baguette and some not-so-fresh looking fish from a small dockside stall. We slipped mid-morning and nipped in to Le Chambre anchorage by St Nicholas Island in the Iles de Glenan for lunch and a swim. It was still hot and sunny and, after we sailed, the wind died, so we motor-sailed to Ile de Groix hoping to anchor in the tiny bay on the south coast by St Nicholas, but three boats had beaten us to it. The weather was quiet, the sea calm, so we anchored just outside the approach channel to Loc Marie, the mooring buoys further in all being taken and dined off the not-so-fresh fish without ill effect.

We woke to a still, warm morning with hazy sunshine which quickly cleared to make for another scorcher. No wind, so motored south, through the inner passage past Le Teignouse Lt into Quiberon Bay and anchored just north of Port Haliguen for lunch and a swim. *Matarva* passed by, but didn't respond to shouts and waving giving Vice-Admiral Sir Michael Moore an excuse to send Lt Cdr Nicko Franks (RCC) a senior-officer-like admonishing text message: they are good mates. Thence to Port Haliguen marina and a long trek for provisions, but a really delicious meal in a delightful *crêperie* by the old port. Next day was completely windless so, after a leisurely croissant breakfast, we motored to the Vilaine River and berthed alongside the waiting pontoon at Arzal from where Guy Graham, who organised the Meet, and Nick Charman kindly provided

a taxi service to La Roche-Bernard for us and the crew of *Matarwa*. After a great RCC evening we sailed the next morning, with the usual chaotic jumble of boats in the lock, into the upper Vilaine River stopping briefly for breakfast at anchor before berthing in the marina at La Roche-Bernard around midday. Ashore for lunch and to explore this lovely town and to pick up more provisions for the safari supper that evening which was a hugely enjoyable event that will live long in the memory.

On Friday morning boats started to disperse from the Meet and we sailed for Redon which has the advantage of a station served by the TGV. We enjoyed canalling up the Vilaine, lunching attached to a buoy below the swing bridge at Cran whilst waiting for it to open then berthing on the western side of the basin that forms the port at Redon. On Saturday the Moores left by train, whilst we were joined by *Morgan Le Fay* in Redon. Allan and Diana Collison (RCC) kindly invited us to drinks and, together with their guests, we went into town for supper. Sunday was spent cleaning ship and getting *Fidget* ready for other owners who were joining shortly after we left the next day, by train to Nantes and then home by air.

Return Journey

Reads and Russetts had 10 days' cruising the Morbihan and outlying islands before leaving *Fidget* in Vannes where Kay and I, with our chums Neil and Felicity Pattenden, re-joined her on Monday 17 July. It was hot and muggy, but the previous *Fidgeters* had left the fridge on with cold beers and a simply delicious selection of French cheese and we soon cooled down. Next morning we victualled in Vannes as we were stuck until 1150 when the canal bridges were to open. The moment we sailed the sky went black, deafening explosions of thunder accompanied by great forks of lightning and sheeting rain made for an apocalyptic scene. 'Perhaps the gods don't want us to leave,' said Neil cheerfully. Sadly we didn't get far, as a lightning strike crippled the power supply to the canal swing bridges and we hovered damply in the narrow approach canal for 90 minutes whilst workmen struggled to restore power. We finally cleared through at 1315 and picked up a buoy in the Morbihan for lunch by which time it was a beautiful sunny day if windy. We slipped at 1645 and set off with two reefs in the main, motor-sailing out of the Morbihan with the tide, occasionally reaching speeds over 12kts. Once outside the wind became SSE4, so we shook out the reefs for a delightful sail across to Port Haliguen where we picked up a buoy outside the port. We sailed early on Wednesday for the Belon River to ensure we arrived whilst there was sufficient water to get over the bar, Neil and I on deck allowing the girls a 'Guard and Steerage' lie-in below. It was a strange, eerily overcast day with the SW wind fluctuating from nearly nothing to F5-6 which had us reefing and un-reefing all day. Irritatingly we got a riding turn on the foresail Furler

drum and had to drop the genoa. 'The gods are still annoyed,' said Neil. Anyway, we arrived in the Belon with plenty of water and secured at the visitors' buoys alongside *Tyrian of Truro*, Peter Flutter (RCC).

Thursday dawned windless, so Neil and I seized the moment to re-hoist the genoa before nipping ashore to buy bread from Chez Jacky restaurant, but returning with oysters and Muscadet. A good start to the day, but the highlight was a superb seafood supper in Chez Jacky. The wind got up overnight accompanied by lashing rain and there was no question of sailing on the morning tide so we went into Pont Aven courtesy of a car arranged by Madame Jacky to prowl around this delightful town and visit the well-known Musée des Beaux Arts which was closed for a massive restoration when we visited in 2013. It was still blowing when we returned, the rollers crashing over the bar at high tide, so we resigned ourselves to another night in the river. Next morning the weather had abated a little and we sailed at 0600. It was a bumpy ride over the bar with the wind a good W6 funnelling into the bay creating a short, sharp sea that nearly stopped *Fidget* as we motored gingerly out. But once we emerged from the bay we could turn NW, then N and finally ENE. With just two-thirds genoa set we made 7kts arriving in Concarneau at 0915. Felicity had to get back to England for Monday and Kay opted to join Felicity, forgoing another Channel crossing that, with time constraints, was likely to be in less-than-ideal weather. Travel arrangements were made, we provisioned and watered then went ashore for a slap-up dinner in the old town to celebrate Kay's birthday the next day.

Sunday was 23 July and the forecast was disheartening, Neil had to be back in UK the following Friday without fail, so we decided to sail earlier than planned, at 1000, in the hopes of catching the last of the northerly stream through the Raz de Sein. We landed the girls to catch their bus for their journey to the St Malo ferry and set off. With our hasty departure, adapting to a reduced crew and unforgivable lack of concentration, I went the wrong side of a channel marker and hit a



Kay

rock. We came off quickly but returned to the marina in Concarneau to assess the damage. I forlornly explained what had happened to the marina office who offered to contact the shipyard the next day and arrange a lift-out and keel inspection. I sent an email report to the other *Fidget* owners who were typically generous in their response, but the miserable, drizzly day in Concarneau exactly matched my spirits. Neil and I lifted

floorboards, inspected keel bolts and bilges but could detect no crazing in the fibre-glass or water ingress; still it seemed prudent to lift out for a proper inspection. The next day I went to the marina office as soon as



Fidget in Concarneau

it opened at 0800, but the staff had changed from the day before and were not helpful. The shipyard would not answer their telephone and, after phoning Tom Blackburn to discuss the matter and emailing the surveyor who knew the boat, I decided to sail.

Even though it was after 1000 before we slipped I had hoped to make Camaret but, in filthy weather with wind against, we just missed the tide in the Raz de Sein, which we had to clear through by 1730, so we picked up a buoy in St Evette

overnight. On Tuesday we sailed at 0400 and made the 85nm passage to Roscoff carrying the tide through the Raz and Chenal du Four and then, after a short period of adverse stream, along the north coast of Brittany to Roscoff. It was sunny, dolphins came to play and it was the only pleasurable day's sail we had. From Roscoff I had hoped to make Alderney by going up the west side of Guernsey, but the forecast SW4 turned into a F6-7 and progress, when the tide turned to the south in mid-afternoon, was reduced to 1-2kts, the swell had built to an extent that it was a struggle to avoid broaching. We had put a second reef in the main early on and, just as we were about to lower the whole thing, a 5ft vertical rip in the (also heavily reefed) genoa deprived us of a foresail and we were stuck with a double-reefed main. At 1800 we were at the top end of Guernsey with 4 hours of southerly set to come and we realised we weren't going to make Alderney in daylight so decided to round the island and go with the tide down to St Peter Port. We arrived at 2000 to be told the outside berths were all full and we would have to go inside the basin to the marina with the disadvantage that we wouldn't be able to sail before about 0830 next day. There was no option but to go in and it was sufficiently sheltered inside that we were able to remove the damaged genoa and put up the only other foresail in the locker which was a small, rather scruffy storm jib. I was in two minds about whether or not to sail across the Channel the next day. The forecasts indicated at least F6 in the Channel and, since the forecasts had all been overly optimistic, I wasn't sure I could trust the F6 to be only that. The swell would have had another 24 hours to build on what had already become a marginally unsafe height and we had a keel

that might be untrustworthy. Also, there was a storm coming through on Friday at some stage, forecast for the evening but these things sometimes push through more quickly than anticipated. I rang Tom again to discuss the options and he looked at what weather forecasts he could find. We agreed that it was either Thursday or it wouldn't be possible for many days and, if I were to leave the boat in St Peter Port, it could be a very long time before we could get back out to her in weather that would be suitable for a Channel crossing.

Neil and I went ashore for a steak supper and a bottle of claret and felt more robust. We decided to prepare to go next morning, but reserve our decision until we had seen updated forecasts. As it happened the wind died down overnight and the forecast in the marina building indicated nothing worse than 18kt winds in the Channel. There was sufficient water over the sill for us to leave at 0800 just as the tidal stream turned northerly. We donked initially with no main, just the storm jib drawing and 6 hours later we had done 52nm at an average speed of over 8kts. The wind was a SW5 and the swell not so bad that the autohelm couldn't cope, the sun shone and we began to feel optimistic. We had decided to go east about the Isle of Wight past the Nab and straight to *Hornet*. But by 1400 the tide had turned, the wind increased to a good F6 then a F7 and the swell quickly got up. We started steering by hand. Shortly after 1700 we broached and shipped it green into the cockpit. From then on for five long hours progress was painfully slow, even though, under the small jib alone, we were making 7kts through the water and much more when surfing down the front of rollers. The tide slackened, then turned and we made 8kts over the ground again, sweeping past Bembridge and into the Solent. In the shelter of the IOW the sea went down but the wind never slackened and it blew a good F7 until we reached the shelter of Haslar Creek at about 2315. It was wonderful to arrive at *Hornet*, but I couldn't get into our berth with a large boat on the outboard end, boats alongside opposite and the wind blowing off, so I berthed on a Joint Services owned jetty at 2345, made fast and prepared to go below for a dram when an M.O.D. security guard arrived and said I couldn't stay there overnight. He was an unshifting jobsworth, so we flashed up again and berthed on the detached pontoon. We had the dram at 0030!

Neil and I had covered some 310nm in four days from Concarneau and crossed the Channel in conditions not ideal for recreational sailing but *Fidget* is a good seaboat and a 'Good old blow' at the end seemed a fitting end to her last cruise. Those doughty men who sailed the first *Fidget* before the war would have approved too I felt. A few days later she was lifted out and the surveyor could find no damage to keel, hull or rigging from the Concarneau crunch.