



The two authors in the foreground with Michael, my brother, behind us.

SOME MEMORIES OF EARLY SAILING INCLUDING A CRUISE TO
CHERBOURG IN 1953, AND SOME EXPLORATION OF NORMANDY.

BY ANTHONY SARGENT, AND BETTY SARGENT WHO WROTE 'SOLLYA
GOES FOREIGN' FOR THE YACHTING MONTHLY IN 1953.

Introduction

We lived in Northamptonshire and I experienced my first taste of sailing when I was three years old. Father had bought a yacht, a 5.5 tonne Hillyard centre-cockpit, in 1950. He kept the sloop on a deep-water mooring at Bosham in Chichester Harbour. My great-aunt lived by the shore road in Bosham and this was also convenient for the family to descend on her from time to time! The family consisted of my parents, my elder brother & me.

Father had a maroon Alvis in which we would all set off after he had finished work on a Friday. We would drive as far as Petersfield or Amersham, and either get fed at our cousins in the former, or stop at a nice pub in the latter, where we would be allowed cider once I reached the mature age of six! By the time we reached Emsworth we would be aware that the journey was coming to an end and curl up into tighter balls on the back seat of the car pretending that nothing could wake us up. Then came the unloading, and either a welcome from Auntie Nell with a jar of desiccated coconut for me (a vital present for a sleepy five-year old sailor at midnight!), or we would row out in the tender to Sollya in the moonlight. Wet bottoms on the dewy thwarts, father dipping the oars in short, sharp strokes. Then bump against the topsides, and out of

the tender without upsetting father or the dinghy. The cockpit was always wet, but we were soon given hot cocoa and tucked up in our bunks in the aft cabin.

The next day after a quiet breakfast, there would suddenly be lots of shouting, ropes thrashing about, and plenty of toe-squelching as father ran up & down the deck! Mother would cast off the mooring and we would head off past the other boats, which included the Guinness's gin palace! Generally we would motor down the harbour, the fair channel of which was well marked with buoys, but woe betide those who took short-cuts across the mudflats! As youngsters we revelled in seeing yachts lying at crazy angles on the mud. Children are quite selfish like that. One yacht was beneaped for a fortnight and the explanation made a deep impression on me regarding the moon and tides.

Once we had nosed towards the entrance of Chichester harbour the sails would go up, accompanied by some more shouting and "mind your heads"- whack! That's one lesson I soon learnt: the boom really hurt! We would carry on for a while under both motor and sail which I disliked, but when you are young time is not so important, and one cannot always see the logic in adult decisions. Finally there would be a discussion, and then the start of the voyage would begin for me as the motor was shut down: blissfully there would be a ber-ber-ber-bump, and all would change as the boat breathed a sigh of relief and settled gently into the waves. The motion was noticeably different and I loved to feel the boat surge forward with each gust of wind. As children we would then coil or mouse all the ropes on the foredeck, and then be allowed to play. This was somewhat restricted as in those days life-jackets were huge May West affairs!

The forts in the Solent would then usually loom up, unless we turned left and sailed to Littlehampton, where Arthur Ransome (Swallows & Amazons etc.) once towed us up the river. If we did go in the usual westerly direction it was either Wootton, Isle of Wight with its good sand for digging and sandcastles, Cowes which was for serious adults only, or Yarmouth Isle of Wight with its huge piles, and rows of yachts to sail in between – all very scary, and father once did it under sail alone on a bank-holiday weekend! Beaulieu on the edge of the New Forest was also a favourite of mine with its beautiful Buckler's Hard. I loved the woods coming down to the river edge.

On longer voyages during the holidays we would sail to Poole with its stunning backdrop of heathland where we would picnic on hot afternoons. This area is now completely unrecognisable due to the march of progress, and as one developer put it when talking about Canford Heath, "it's only wasteland". From Poole harbour we would sail to Weymouth, where I once got lost on the beach amongst the bank-holiday masses! Finally and not least, we would sail from Weymouth around Portland Bill across Lyme Bay to Salcombe. As a child Portland seemed awesome as father always sailed inside the Race, so that it seemed one could almost reach out and touch the cliffs! The long haul across Lyme Bay was worth it as Salcombe was the favourite with all of us. It seemed to incorporate everything a family could need on a sailing trip with two young children. We would drip into the Marine Hotel with sodden clothes and be welcomed with open arms. Beaches & digging prospects were marvellous, and everyone, including father seemed to be in a good mood.

This brings my sailing experiences forward to the point where my mother, writing for the Yachting Monthly sixty years ago, can describe our first voyage to France. This was to *Cherbourg* and it seems entirely apt to reproduce this, being such an important anniversary in the history of the Cherbourg Yacht Club!

'SOLLYA' GOES FOREIGN (July/August 1953). By Betty Sargent.

We have owned our little sloop for three years now and having cruised with the family to Salcombe two years running, we decided that it was time for 'Sollya' and the boys to cross the Channel. We planned to go first to Cherbourg and then slowly make our way via Alderney and St.Peter port, and then home. This is what we had planned but owing to the rather indifferent weather we only made Cherbourg, and had to explore Normandy by land. In actual fact this proved to be a most satisfactory holiday from the children's point of view.

During the passage from Yarmouth they had had really quite enough of the sea, which came over continually and imprisoned them in the after-cabin! Having waited five days for the strong S.W. wind to go round, it eventually veered and we were able to lay Cherbourg close-hauled.

We left Yarmouth Isle of Wight at three in the afternoon on a very blustery day at the end of July. The forecast said, 'A little light rain at midnight'. Actually it began to pour at six that evening and it never ceased for one moment until we reached Cherbourg the next day at dawn. The boys were battened down in the after-cabin wearing their life jackets and remained extremely cheerful in spite of the rain and sea which came in at intervals. They munched their apples and biscuits quite happily, which was all that the skipper and I had time to organise in the way of food.

I have tried giving the children hot drinks in a rough sea – it is quite impossible, they cannot cope like grownups can and are far happier with things they can manage.

We spent our first day in France drying out and resting, although needless to say the boys were quite rested and rearing to go!

Our second day was very hot and sunny so we climbed to the Font Du Roule which was so gallantly assaulted by the American Forces under General Patton. From here one has a glorious view of the harbour and coast line. The Fort is now just a museum and we were intrigued with the posters offering rewards for the apprehension of local saboteurs.

The next day, which was Sunday, we caught the Paris Express to Bayeux, which left at seven in the morning. We wanted to visit the Airborne Forces Cemetery which the War Office had informed us was south of Bayeux. Actually this was a mistake and Ranville turned out to be not south of Bayeux but north of Caen. However as we didn't discover this till we had arrived at Bayeux, we were able to visit this lovely old cathedral town. We arrived in time for Mass in the Cathedral and afterwards went across to see the famous Bayeux tapestry. This thrilled us very much and the boys were intrigued at the words 'Bosham' woven into the fabric. We lunched at the ancient Lyon D'Or hostelry and then had to catch a very local train to Caen. This seemed to be a cross between a train and a bus, and the children adored sitting next to the driver and tearing at breakneck speed through the countryside.

We were shocked at Caen, which still showed a considerable amount of bomb damage, but apparently the rebuilding was going on at tremendous speed. Caen was very hot on this August afternoon and we sat in the sleepy square after lunch and watched the locals parading in their best, while we waited for a bus to Ranville. This proved to be a tiny hamlet six kilometres north east of Caen where we found the cemetery beautifully kept and full of flowering shrubs and rose trees. This tiny place is full of associations and even the small patch of grass in the centre of the village is called 'Place des Airbornes'.

The boys loved every minute of their day in the country and were most amused when the conductor shouted “All change at Lisons” and then found he’d made a mistake, so that we all had to tear back into the train just as it was moving off!

After a day making sandcastles on Naqueville Plage beach and meeting friendly people at every turn Anthony, aged six, remarked “I adore this French life” – so we knew that the holiday was proving a success.

The next day we set off for Omonville in an overcrowded bus. It is a thrilling ride and follows the coastline for most of the way: this climbs steeply in parts reminding one of the Corniche road. Omonville is my idea of heaven and made me think of the rocky bays around my Channel Island home of Guernsey. There is a small, very sheltered harbour except when the wind blows from the north. The harbour is rocky but adequately buoyed, and there is the smallest most adorable customs house.

Madame Mauger made us very welcome in her little café, and afterwards we lunched superbly if ruinously, at the Anchre D’Or. We made our way regretfully back onto the bus as our French holiday was coming to an end.

Our week flew all too quickly and we left Cherbourg most unwillingly for Bosham and home. After fifteen years absence I found everyone in France as happy and charming as ever. Madame at the Yacht Club de Cherbourg was kindness itself and when the children and I dripped into her kitchen on the morning of our arrival she took us in hand at once. In no time at all our sodden clothes reappeared snowy and dry and how grateful we were.

Michael and Anthony insist that they must return next year to see their friends and eat French bread for breakfast.

Sixty years on my memories of parts of this trip are still quite clear. During the long wait at Yarmouth we went for a walk in the driving rain all togged up in oilskins, and this impressed on me that if you are dressed correctly rain is of no consequence: it was great!

The outward voyage is still very vivid in my mind: grey sky to starboard and grey sea to port. I was on the port side bunk so had the better deal. The water (both sea & rain) trickled down by my head and soaked my blue corduroy pillow - I arrived in Cherbourg with a blue face! As Sollya had a centre-cockpit and we were in the aft cabin, the quiet waft of voices from above was reassuring on this long trip.

The sighting of Cherbourg was memorable albeit damp and grey. The breakwater (I think) and the booming of a foghorn through the mist all presented a rather depressing picture! Father seemed in good spirits however. The reason now is clear, but it had not occurred to me at the time that father had just sailed with extreme accuracy from Yarmouth to Cherbourg by just dead-reckoning alone. He had a compass, a log which was towed behind the boat to record our distance, a watch and the BBC shipping forecast. There was no VHF radio, no RDF beacons then, no radar and definitely no computer with satellite-aided GPS. Cherbourg just appeared out of the fog mysteriously. The harbour master motored out to pilot us in.

We then moored up alongside the other yachts on the pontoon so this made it all quite sociable: everyone one very friendly and welcoming.

Madame at the yacht club was petite and pretty, and definitely took us under her wing. That was fine by me!

One night when we ate out I had my first fruits de mer. I had managed a difficult voyage without being seasick, but now here I was kneeling on the foredeck in Cherbourg not so smug!

We were always allowed to go off rowing in the dinghy and Cherbourg harbour was no exception. I remember being a little too bold and rowed up to a massive liner. I bent my neck upwards and read the words Queen Mary. Michael was getting a bit nervous and said we had better move on!

My memories of the many inshore trips are a bit vague apart from the Bayeux Tapestry and the War Cemetery with its endless lines of neat white graves. We stood by my uncle's grave for a while. He was one of the many Airborne Division casualties on June 6th 1944.

We must have returned in 'Sollya' but I have no memory of the voyage home at all: I don't think I wanted to leave France! My mind must have put it in the recycle bin! Life takes many twists and turns as we all know; the next time I sailed again with my mother was ten years later in a tiny lugsail in Salcombe. The marriage and the yacht were history.

The next time I finally managed to sail across Lyme Bay was only two months ago in Challenger 2 of the Tall Ships Trust. We had just had a memorable voyage from the Azores battling against a NE gale the whole way, but that is another story!



The author contemplating his next voyage.

