

# Voyages



## Across the Channel in an open boat

Jean-Louis Grenier comes over to tour the West Country in his self-designed Drascombe Caboteur *Anne Lise II*

Come over for dinner before you go, several of our friends said; what they meant was: "This might be our last meal with you." They thought we were a bit mad – you probably have to be to envisage crossing the Channel in a small open boat.

"Aren't you scared of the shipping lanes?" they worried. I have never really understood why being rammed into by a tanker is such a common fear. In fact, when we crossed both shipping lanes we saw only about 12 freighters, miles apart. In the day-time, with good visibility, if you take frequent bearings of oncoming traffic, I can't see how you could be hit by one. Night and fog are different stories though.

Some 10 years ago, I made the crossing single-handed from Guernsey to Dartmouth (CB128) in my Drascombe Lugger. Most of it had been in flat calm; I had spent a not very comfortable night some 15 miles off the English

coast, 'sleeping' on the damp floorboards, opening an eye every 15 minutes for trawlers and roaming coasters.

This time, in our Drascombe Caboteur *Anne Lise II*, Bobbie and I chose to cross in daylight, a safer option. The distance from Guernsey to Dartmouth is 64 miles: at an average cruising speed of 4 knots, sailing, or motoring if need be, it's a matter of 16 hours.

### The crossing

We left the coast of Normandy from Dielette, a charming, well-organised newish marina southwest of Cherbourg. Camper and trailer had been parked in a farm campsite, cheap and friendly, 25km inland. I was a bit worried because the first leg to Beaucette Marina at the north-eastern tip of Guernsey meant playing with fierce spring tidal streams, known to be amongst the fastest in the world. We

certainly didn't want to be sucked into the Alderney Race: the steep seas there are not friendly to an open boat. But we got it right: leaving harbour one hour before high water Dover, the

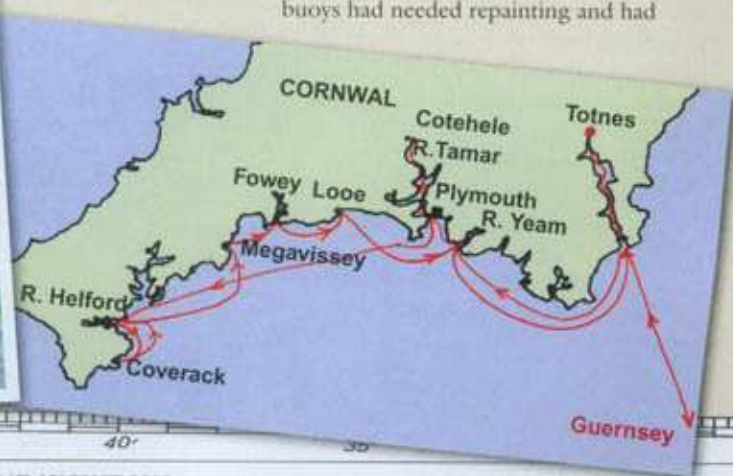
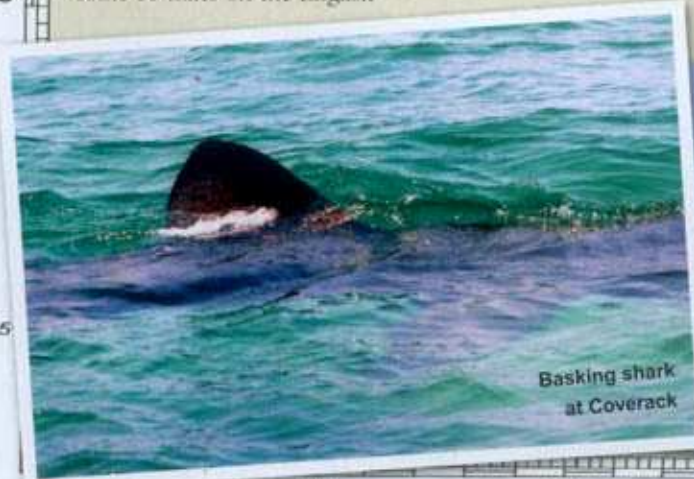
*"We couldn't find the expected double row of cans"*

current took us just far enough to the north of the dangerous Banc de la Schole shallows and then, three hours after high

water, the strong southwest ebb pushed us straight towards Guernsey at an impressive rate of knots. The wind was aft, the gennaker up. Perfick.

On arrival, though, we couldn't find the expected majestic double row of green and red cans to guide us through a maze of threatening rocks. Trusting bearings and GPS, we motored due west across the current which insisted on pushing us sideways towards the reefs.

We finally just managed to spot the narrow slit in the cliffs leading to the marina, hardly visible against the setting sun. The explanation came later: the buoys had needed repainting and had



15'  
10'  
5'  
55'

55'



Anne Lise II sailing off Totnes on the Dart

been sitting ashore for a couple of months. No temporary replacements. Thanks for the help...

Beaucette Marina is neither idyllic nor cheap, but it is well placed for a crossing to Dartmouth. Originally, it was a landlocked quarry; they simply cut away the cliffs and connected it to the sea via a tortuous channel. This makes it very safe if rather bleak. But, because of the sill, your average cruiser can sail in or out only three hours either side of high tide. Of course, thanks to our ridiculous 1ft (0.3m) draft, we expected to be able to leave at the crack of dawn. No way! "I wouldn't recommend it," the harbourmaster said. "Just watch the torrent of water rushing in when the tide rises and you'll understand why."

So we left no earlier than 7.30am, wasting almost three hours of precious daylight, and crept into the Dart estuary just before night. It was a fairly boring crossing, motoring most of the time on a very smooth sea. We could have been sitting on a train for 14 hours for all the excitement we experienced. I had anticipated this flat calm and we carried enough extra cans of petrol to cover 80 miles: motoring for 20 hours at 4 knots meant taking 42 litres of fuel. The only events that broke the monotony were the crossing of the shipping lanes and our first encounter with the legendary Channel Light Vessel which we'd heard mentioned so often in the

shipping forecasts. A pallid red ghost of a ship floating in light haze, it boomed its powerful foghorn at us, so we kept at a safe distance for fear of going prematurely deaf.

#### Dartmouth

We found a berth at Darthaven Marina, a place we like for its informal welcome and for the stunning view of Dartmouth across the river. And then, ah! The first full English breakfast at Zanne's Bistro overlooking the marina. And then the first sip of English bitter at the Windjammer in Dartmouth! Our crossing had not been that tempestuous but we still liked to think we deserved these little rewards.

We spent five lovely days in the Dart, waiting for the winds to veer east; we stopped at Dittisham, a beautiful spot famous for its abundance of seagull droppings on the tent; Bow Creek and its excellent restaurant, the Maltsters Arms, and Totnes where we had

a great welcome at Baltic Wharf. We found Totnes a very lively town with good quality everywhere; fortunately, storage space on a small boat is limited so Bobbie had to be reasonable and bought only two pairs of shoes, three T-shirts, etc, etc. For my part, I found myself back to earth with a vengeance, pick-axe in

*"Our first encounter with the legendary Channel Light Vessel"*

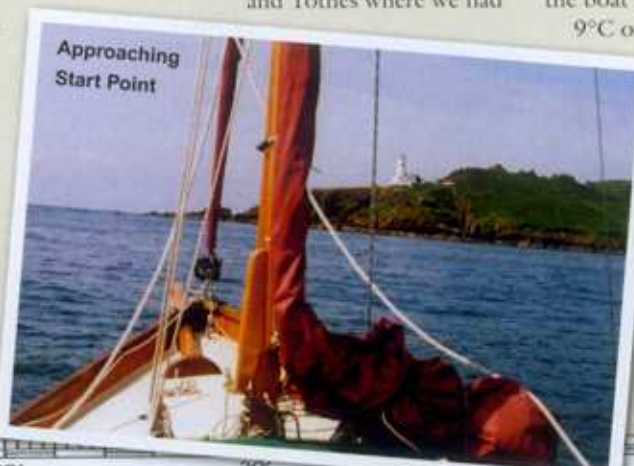
hand, helping our old friend Tony to build a conservatory on to his house nearby. A sailor's life is varied indeed.

Then it was back to Darthaven under jib and mizzen with the wind aft, a rare boon in a river, and plenty of time to admire the wooded banks.

#### River Yealm

The first leg of the coastal trip took us to the River Yealm with not much wind. I don't find the entrance to the river very attractive but the upper reaches are superb. We dried out in a muddy creek; the boat perfectly flat. Peaceful but chilly: 9°C on deck in the morning.

Sailing up the Tamar River, after passing the bustle of Plymouth, was another pleasure. The tourists had left Cotehele by the time we arrived and we borrowed the enormous moorings of the *Shamrock* for the night – probably strong enough for us! The *Shamrock* and other sailing barges used to carry lime, stones, wood



55'

Jean-Louis and Bobbie aboard their floating home at Baltic Wharf, Totnes



At Cotehele, Shamrock in the background



the name of Death by

and iron ore; a great little museum on the quay tells it all. The night was peaceful, it was a beautiful spot, we hadn't a care in the world.

**Looe to Helford**

The next stage was Looe where we were stuck in pelting rain for a day. A cosy bed and breakfast for two nights was the obvious solution. Getting out of Looe proved a bit animated: short, steep waves built up as the fresh easterly blew against the strong spring ebb. A few dollops of green wave occasionally passed over the stem but the Caboteur behaved beautifully, rising to the waves with determination.

That day we sailed all the way to the Helford River, 30 miles, taking advantage of the three-quarter easterly just aft of the beam: that's what Anne-Lise likes best and it shows. The entrance to the Helford in a dramatic light, all greys and golds, was magic. We dried out off the sailing club pontoon, using their free facilities and good restaurant. And a special mention for the crab sandwiches at the Shipwrights' Arms opposite – delicious as ever.

Our favourite spot though still remains the harbour at Coverack, round the corner from the Helford and just before the Lizard. Because of our small size we were lucky enough to be accepted in the harbour once again amongst the fishermen's smacks. We have good friends there as it is where Bobbie used to spend her holidays with her family; over the last half century little has changed – it's a gem of a typical Cornish fishing village.

We spent five days there, giving up sleeping on board after the first night because of the gulls (again!) and the fumes from the boats leaving at 5 o'clock in the morning. But we know a great B&B run by Anne Rogers which goes by

Breakfast: we survived, but only just! We went sailing on a couple of days with friends but the weather was funny again: no wind and big waves. Whatever happened to those regular sea breezes which used to make sailing so pleasant in summer on our Atlantic coasts? Is global warming changing the pattern of our winds already? Not much good sailing then, but quite a few good picnics; after all, sailing is as much about eating and drinking as anything else. There's nothing like a meal in a cockpit at anchor in a beautiful spot; people who haven't experienced that just haven't lived.

**Gweek and Gillan**

The winds are veering to the southwest at last. Time to head back east, stopping in the Helford for a while – we just can't tear ourselves away from its magic. We explore it as far as Gweek and stop for the night at Gillan Creek at the mouth of the river, drying out off the village of St Anthony and its beautiful church. Of course, free public toilets are available there as in most harbours in

*"I fell in slow motion into slushy brown mud"*

England, which simplifies the life of camper-cruisers. The odd 18 miles to Mevagissey in a following 4/5 south-westerly was pleasant, enlivened with strong gusts just around the last cape. Main lowered in seconds, we had no problem in finding a drying out spot right opposite the... public toilets.

With a 5 to 7 gale from the southwest forecast we decided to take refuge in the Fowey River, just as I had done 10 years before. The breeze was already fresh and the sight of the local racing boats, the Troys, tacking through the dense traffic ranging from Optimists to kaolin-carrying freighters was stimulating. The rumour that they are going to stop extracting kaolin here in favour of Brazil was less stimulating as it will mean the loss of 800 jobs. But I seem to have heard that story somewhere before...

Shelter was found in a shallow cove off the first branch of the river to starboard. We spent an excellent night as heavy rain battered the tent and the boat stayed firmly stuck in the mud. The next day was spent entirely on board as the water would only be back around 4pm. We still find it amazing that we didn't feel claustrophobic for a minute, probably due to the comfort of the spacious tent, radio, books, watercolours, meals; in fact it felt as if the day wasn't long enough.

**Silly idea**

But then I had the silly idea of trying to reach the bank through the mud in my wellies. And, guess what? I lost my balance and fell onto my back in slow motion into slushy brown mud. Washing in the river and building a causeway to get back to the boat took me a couple of hours. Another way of whiling away the time, I suppose, but not really serious at my age!

When the weather had calmed down, the next leg took us back to the Yealm, to Noss Mayo, to visit Kate Watkinson; her late husband, John, was the brilliant designer of

A quiet spot at Mevagissey



55' 50' 40' 35' 30'

40'

35'

30'

25'

20'

the Drascombe range. Our Caboteur is based on the Drascombe Longboat, modified for a camping-cruising programme. We wanted to show the result to Kate and her son as they already knew all about it. They seemed pleased to see the boat and to meet us again.

A brisk northwesterly Force 4 took us back to the Dart. As the wind freshened round Start Point, under full canvas, we averaged 6.5 knots for an hour to the red can at the entrance to the Dart. The boat was at the limit of surfing, with a bow wave sometimes up to the stemhead piece. A superb feeling.

### Return trip


The original plan had been to sail east as far as Poole and cross direct to Cherbourg. But the forecast was east-northeast 5/6 for the next few days. And we didn't

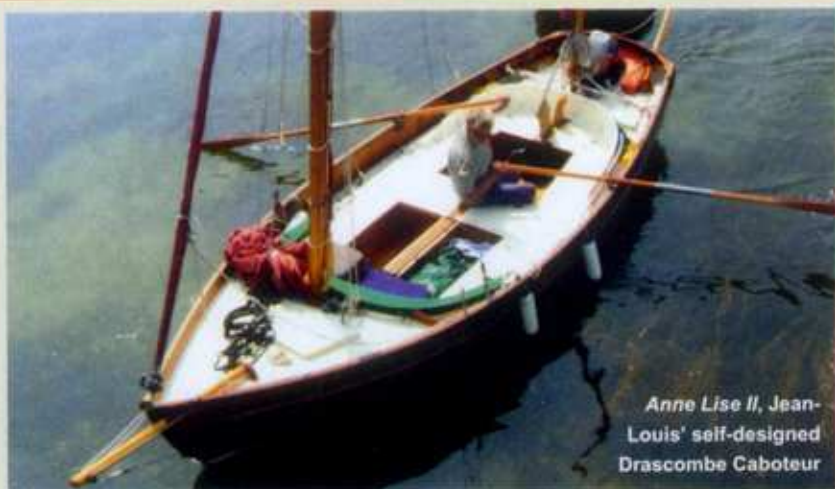
*"A sea like a field after heavy bombing"*

fancy beating the 75 miles against such winds. So it had to be Guernsey again. We paid a last visit to Baltic Wharf in Totnes, and revelled

in the luxury of the Steam Packet Inn for a night. Finally, we left Darthaven Marina after the 5.20am BBC shipping forecast: still east-northeast 3/4 with 2m (6ft 6in) waves, the remains of several days of Force 6 easterlies. They were to decrease to 1m by noon. Cross waves: a bit bumpy but not dangerous.

We were tearing along at 5 to 6 knots through a sea that looked like a field after heavy bombing: holes, ridges, crests. I enjoyed steering my little boat through this maze. Bobbie was not so happy, lying harnessed to the bench, feeling seasick for 14 hours. I had the confirmation though that this boat could be sailed single-handed in brisk conditions: steering, taking bearings of freighters, navigating, grabbing some food from time to time posed no big problems.

On approaching Guernsey we realised that we wouldn't make the northeast corner: the strong tidal current was taking us to the south west at a rate of 3 to 4 knots as it was springs. So I decided to sail round the island anti-clockwise, around Les Hanois lighthouse. On the south coast gusts were falling from the cliffs, just as they had done 10 years before when I was leaving for my first crossing. We reached St Peter Port just after dark for a welcome shower and a night's sleep – and the good feeling of having done it, again, after 10 years. 



Anne Lise II, Jean-Louis' self-designed Drascombe Caboteur

## Caboteur improvements

I first crossed the Channel in a standard Drascombe Lugger which I had equipped for camping-cruising. I designed my Drascombe Caboteur (CB152, 192) specifically for this kind of cruising. This repeat trip was a good way of testing the improvements.

### Safety

- Increased buoyancy: wooden boat, more foam, watertight compartments.
- Removable deck to fore cockpit reducing floodable area.
- Efficient two-pump system, vital when steering single-handed.
- Higher coamings to deflect water.
- Much bigger scupper holes.
- Strong harness points.
- More petrol carried giving greater range.
- Furling jib system for sailing under reduced foresail (right).

### Sailing performance

- Caboteur is faster thanks to increased sail area.
- She points better due to a larger centre-board.
- She is faster in light airs where the Lugger was rather sluggish.
- The gennaker makes all the difference when running.

### Comfort

- Both boats are very dry for their size due to high prows and lapstrake hull form.
- Living on board requires a stable hull; both boats are like pontoons, the heavier Caboteur even more so.
- The Caboteur's built-in tent/pramhood system makes all the difference to comfort: easily rigged, roomy (the 'cabin' is 14ft x 6ft (4.2m x 1.8m), it is totally waterproof and does not flap in the wind; large plastic windows give panoramic views so no feelings of claustrophobia; canvas inner shutters make it dark for sleeping. The front pramhood can be rigged for shelter against spray or rain whilst sailing.
- Thermarest self-inflating mattresses almost as comfortable as our bed at home.

### Convenience

- Space to carry a small inflatable dinghy makes going ashore easy.
- Collapsible oars, hidden in tunnels under the foredeck, are now out of the way.
- 15 waterproof lockers provide ample storage: no more plastic screw-top tubs.
- The 12 volt battery provides energy for tent lighting, navigation lights, VHF, electric inflator, mobile phone recharging.

### The downside

The Caboteur is about twice as heavy. Hoisting the boat on rollers for a quiet night on the beach is no longer feasible. Winching the boat onto its trailer is harder. Towing requires a more powerful vehicle as the total weight of trailer and boat is 1.4 tons.



40'

35'

30'

25'

20'