

# Forty years ago

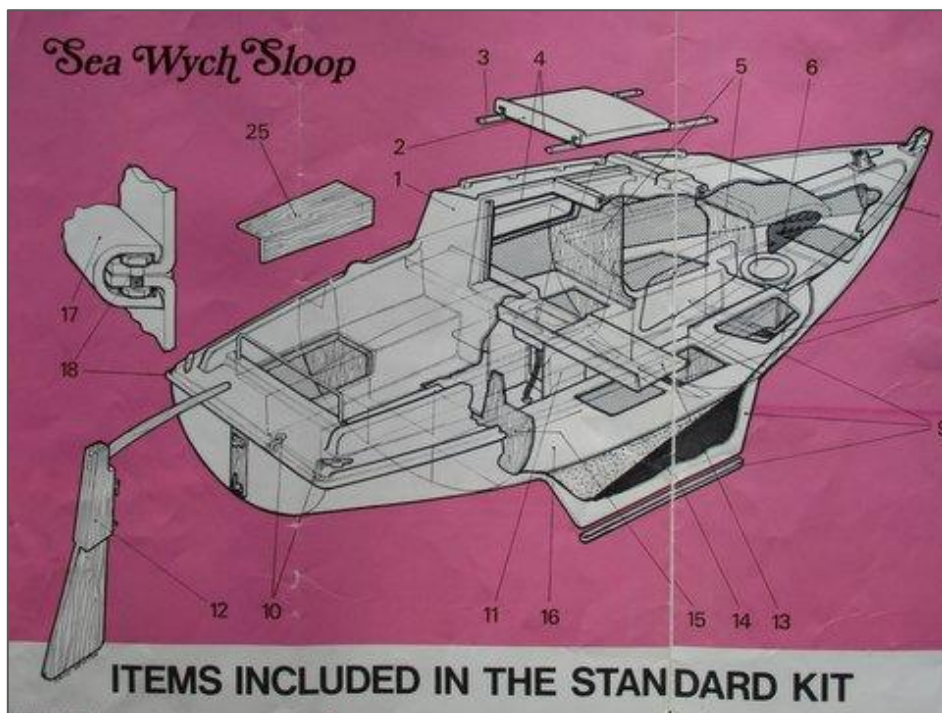
## A 1979 Yachting Holiday

Ted and Avril Sutton, sons Ian (12) and Neil (9)

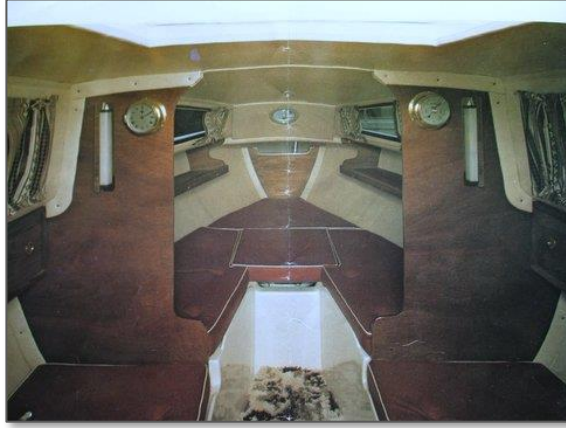
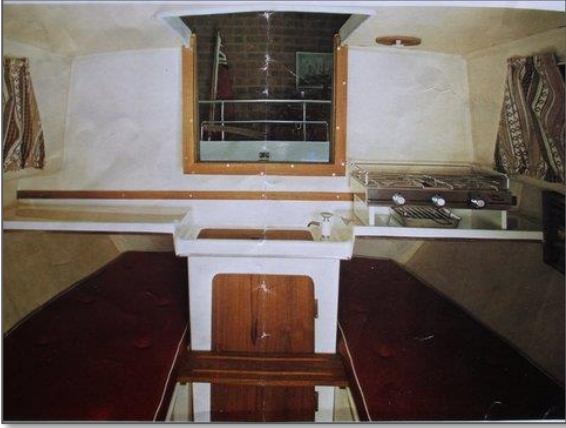
It was Ian who provided the inspiration for this holiday since he had started learning French. He suggested we all go to France in the Summer so he could get language practice but I thought if we could sail there, it would be an adventure and he would learn some geography as well.

When in my early twenties, I had crossed the Channel several times under sail in chartered yachts to explore the Channel Islands and once to Holland in my own 18ft Caprice but this boat had been sold with marriage and starting a family. For the next few years, holidays involved sunny beaches and sandcastles but our growing adventurous boys obviously had the makings of useful crew. But, for that we needed a boat that wouldn't over- strain my finances.

After Christmas, we made an outing to the London Boat Show and looked at several small four-berth yachts aimed at the starter end of the yachting market. After much trying out with the four of us assessing space below, we settled to buy a 19ft twin keel Seawych available as a DIY kit for under £2,000.



We collected the kit from Bicester on a borrowed trailer in early February 1979, assured by the supplier John Sadler's suggestion that an average handyman could assemble the boat over 22 weekends. I had very much a full time job, often involving weekends so the assembly and building process on our drive turned out to be a huge challenge. But by the end of May, the boat was outwardly and structurally ready to sail.



Some of the internal fitting out was left until we were living on board since we were all keen to see our new boat afloat and try it out.



We named her 'Gypsea' and launched her from the public slipway at Hardway, Gosport and used a borrowed club mooring for trial purposes before taking up another borrowed mooring in Folkestone the week before our two week holiday.

## The Cruise

I had purchased (at a favourable price) a 9ft Beaufort inflatable dinghy and we used this to transport all of us and our gear across Folkestone harbour from our car to Gypsea on the Friday evening. We knew the harbour dried out to hard sand so it was a rush to park the car and trailer before the tide went out.

**Saturday, 21 July:** The BBC weather forecast for our first day was not promising with a NW force 6-7 but what woke me in the early hours were distress noises coming from our dinghy. Leaping into the cockpit I found the incoming tide had forced the inflatable under Gypsea's stern to tightly jam it between the keels. I couldn't pull it out so had to resort to hanging over the stern putting my full weight on the side tubes and walk it out backwards. As the bow finally emerged with a shriek of wet rubber, I was amazed to get a round of applause from passengers, I hadn't seen waiting for their car ferry directly above me on the quayside.

The weather was as forecast, so not a day to cross the Channel with a novice crew. Instead, we explored the town, registered our intentions with the local Coast Guard and generally relaxed. Ate ashore in the evening, fish and chips with strawberries, ice cream and a cup of tea for £1.00 each. Memorable value.

**Sunday, 22 July:** The wind had reduced to NW 3-4 overnight so after a phone call to let the Coast Guard know we were going, we dropped the mooring and set off with our inflated dinghy behind on a long tow line. It must have looked very odd for a little yacht to tow such a large dinghy but it caused little drag and provided excellent safety cover. Our departure time was planned to give six hours of west-going tide and as we cleared Folkestone, the cliffs of Cap Gris Nez were clearly visible on the skyline. Our navigational aids were basic but I hoped adequate for our intended cruise along the French, Belgian and perhaps Dutch coast. Detailed charts, some rather old, an ex RAF grid compass for steering and a hand bearing compass for position fixing. A simple lead line for depth measurement, parallel rulers for plotting and a portable radio for forecasts, news and entertainment.

The wind direction allowed full sail with the genoa boomed out on the boat hook, we sailed most of the way goose-winged, making best speed estimated between four and five knots.

Unfortunately, Neil was seasick and Avril spent most of the crossing comforting him and holding him tightly. We crossed the shipping lanes at right angles and when close to the French coast, altered course to run parallel towards Calais. Neil perked up and started looking for 'frog leg eaters' since this French tradition was beyond his comprehension.

Entering Calais, we found the outer harbour packed with yachts of various nationalities rafted five or six deep to mooring buoys all waiting for high water to lock into the inner basin. Several boats seemed keen for us to go alongside in what I thought was a pro-British gesture but when made fast to the one with the best fenders, we found they only wanted to borrow our dinghy to get ashore before the shops shut.

The lock gates opened at 11pm to let us into the huge inner basin and with the boys fast asleep in the fo'c'sle, Avril and I secured the boat to a pontoon and turned in.

**Monday, 23 July:** A day of relaxation, exploring the town, later with dinner in typical French restaurant, where Neil was shocked to find both snails and frog legs on the menu.

**Tuesday, 24 July:** After shopping, we locked out and headed East along the coast under full sail with a broad reach, wind force 3. We kept inshore of the buoyed channels to avoid large ships, passing Gravelines and Port Ouest, which seemed to comprise continuous chemical factories. Entered Dunkirk at 5.30pm and berthed in the marina. It was an unattractive town so we ate on-board and retired early.

**Wednesday, 25 July:** In the early afternoon, we departed to continue past Dunkirk's historic evacuation beaches. Again the wind was a perfect force 3 and we counted down the miles to the Belgian border and a change of courtesy flags and hoisted the yellow Q flag. We needed the outboard for the last few miles to Nieupoort and up to the Yacht Basin. This gave us time to have the sails neatly stowed before berthing and being visited by Belgian Customs officers and having our passports stamped. We were very impressed by the extensive marina facilities and the boys loved the beach and promenade when we walked there in the evening.

**Thursday, 26 July:** Up early to return to the beach for a swim but the calm conditions brought a thick mist rolling in from the sea. Visibility dropped from half a mile to only a few yards in a couple of minutes and our family whistle brought us together to return to the boat. In the afternoon, a gentle breeze blew the mist away and we were able to enjoy a quick passage to Ostend and the North Sea Yacht Club moorings in the middle of the town. In the process of berthing among rafted boats, our outboard fouled a mooring rope and broke a propeller sheer pin, leaving us drifting. However, a thrown rope was taken by a German yacht crew and they made us fast alongside. We spent a pleasant evening with them when the boys were asleep.

**Friday, 27 July:** In the morning we explored the town finding the club facilities poor and crowded compared with the marinas in Calais and Nieupoort. The tide served us by late afternoon and we sailed the fairly short distance to Blankenberg and found a pontoon berth in the shallow side of their yacht basin. In the evening, we enjoyed an enormous meal in a restaurant on the promenade with chips served in buckets. We had never seen the boys eat so much.

## **Saturday, 28 July:**

In glorious sunshine, the day was spent on the beach and exploring the town. The boys fished from the boat, an occupation they both loved. However, the weather forecast predicted strong winds with rain later and I was glad we hadn't pressed on further East. We needed to be back home by the following weekend with me back at work on the Monday morning.



## **Sunday, 29 July:**

We awoke to heavy rain and were thankful for our home-made boom cover which kept the cockpit dry and gave us more space. But after spending the morning huddling out of the rain, we decided we might as well get well and truly wet by returning to Ostend.



Even with the tide under us, the short passage beating into a force 5 was a slow and wet business. We had the partially deflated dinghy lashed down on the fore-deck to provide some shelter but even with two rolls in the mainsail and half the genoa, Gypsea was very hard pressed and wet. We used the outboard motor to help over the last mile and found the harbour much less crowded than before. Other yachts came in later breaking their intended passages because of the steepness of the seas along the coast.

**Monday, 30 July:** It was still blowing hard although the rain had stopped and we decided to stay put for the day. I looked over the Belgian square-rigged training ship 'Mercator' while the boys went to the beach for a swim. During the afternoon we pedalled one of the four seater go-karts along the sea front against the wind which blew us back in half the time.

**Tuesday, 31 July:** Still blowing hard but running out of time, we set off on the ten mile trip back to Nieupoort. With all of us in oil skins, life jackets and harnesses and another reef in the mainsail. Short tacking avoided the worst conditions further offshore but the breaking waves, motion and noise must have been very frightening to our inexperienced boys. Avril and I tried to raise morale with cheerful stories but the conditions were horrible. Ian was stoical and helmed the boat while I lashed things down and managed the genoa sheets when tacking and having to spill wind Gypsea was overpowered in the gusts. Avril made sure Neil was not thrown out of the cockpit by the violent motion and there were a few tears of relief shed when Nieupoort Harbour channel came abeam and we could ease sheets to enter safely. 'North Hinder' lightship was apparently experiencing force 7 winds at that time.

When safely moored up in the marina a chap in a dinghy rowed across to us and said he had watched us come in from the harbour entrance. He claimed to have seen our rudder and both our keels and at one time all at once! His next comment after saying yachts would be stuck in Nieupoort for the next few days, was "of course, you are small enough to get back through the canals if you are prepared to take your mast down". This was an option I hadn't considered beyond leaving the boat and getting back to Folkestone by bus and ferry. However, a map purchased from a local garage showed the extensive network including the route to Calais. Further enquiries in my school-boy French at the office beside the confluence of six canals, provided the following information from a surprised group of lock-keepers through a thick fug of French tobacco:

- 1) The canal on the right connected to the system to Calais
- 2) The lock gates would be open at 6am
- 3) Passage through the canals to Calais was free
- 4) Since Gypsea was under 1 tonne, we didn't need permits or papers.

I raced back to the boat and rallied the crew to help lower the mast ready for an early morning departure. We made a crutch from the dinghy oars to keep the mast clear of the hatch and provide head room in the cockpit.

**Wednesday, 1 August:** After a wild, windy night, we were all up at 5am and arrived on Gypsea at the entry lock promptly at 6am. The boat's name was recorded, the requisite gate opened to the start of a most unexpectedly interesting part of our cruise.

Our first stop for a swing bridge too low for us to pass under was at about 8am in the town of Furnes. We bought fresh bread and rolls for breakfast but the bridge keeper was unhappy with our lack of papers and made several phone calls before letting us through. From then on with numerous locks and low bridges, nobody queried our right to passage. The next few miles were pretty with overgrown banks and unspoiled countryside and it was apparent from the hysterical reaction of ducks and moorhens that few boats ever came this way.

We arrived at the Belgian border at a point where the canal and a road ran parallel and we were required to fill in forms and show passports. Cars just sped past without stopping. Three or so miles further on was the French customs border with more forms to fill in. It amused me to write our home port as 'Beaconsfield' and no-one queried this.

Later, as we neared the outskirts of inland Dunkirk, we came across a lock and the start of a series of problems we had not expected. The lock keeper appeared promptly from his cottage when we tooted on the foghorn and as he opened the gates we were concerned to see the canal surface inches thick in weed with cans, cartons and old tyres lying on top. We decided to take a run at it with our weight as much aft as possible to keep the engine water intake clear but Gypsea slowed to a stop. But by rocking side to side and using boat hook and mop to push rubbish aside, we gradually made progress to clear water. Apparently, the wind had blown all the debris down the straight canal to this lock.

Ten hours of motoring that day had taken us inland again to the village of Bourbourg, where we moored to trees on the bank. Later we called in to the village bar, mainly to use their toilets and several of the villagers came along to see the unusual sight of a tiny yacht sporting a red ensign.



**Thursday, 2 August:** After shopping, we set off again and soon our map indicated that we were about 15 km inland. There were more bridges and locks but amazingly, despite only seeing two other vessels that day, lock keepers appeared as soon as we tooted. Some even cycled ahead to open the next set of gates. Approaching Calais we encountered fishermen on the banks and in answer to our question, Calais was always twenty kilometres, straight on.

At about 6pm, now close to the outskirts of our destination, we had another encounter with thick weed and floating rubbish. As before, when the gates were opened we were confronted with what looked more like a field than a canal. The previous tactic of rocking and pushing clear worked until the propeller picked up a large plastic bag and broke another shear pin. From my original stock of three, that left only one. We were left stranded close to a road bridge and fortunately, I was able to climb up and gain access to a row of barges moored alongside the canal. Clambering along these with long warps, I was able to tow the boat through to clear water. However, this delay cost us a comfortable night's sleep since we were one bridge and one lock away from Calais Yacht basin when the lock keepers finished work at 7pm. So we found ourselves with busy roads each side of the canal and between bridges with loose metal plates, clanking as each car passed. The canal sides were sloping concrete so we used the dinghy as a fender moored to the crash barrier.

**Friday, 3 August:** At 7am the lock keeper turned up and let us through to Calais deserted outer harbour and half hour later, the gates to the inner yacht basin opened. No boats departed and Gypsea was the only one to go in. Apparently, a full gale had blown down the Channel and no yachts had moved for the previous two days so many yachties were surprised to see us appear. We spent the day in the basin resting and I bought more shear pins for our outboard motor. We noted improving weather in the shipping forecast.

**Saturday, 4 August:** With calm, sunny conditions, The inner basin soon emptied in the morning. We lay to a buoy until the westerly tide served and used the engine to push us to Cap Gris Nez where we set sail on a close fetch towards Folkestone. Neil was too occupied catching mackerel to worry about sea-sickness and half way across the wind lightened, requiring the engine for us to make best speed. Alarmingly, the visibility reduced to about half a mile and just as I started to worry, we spotted the Folkestone car ferry. Recognisable cliffs then appeared and we found our way into Folkestone and the borrowed mooring.

UK Customs were staging a 'Work to Rule' but when I rowed over to the quay and their office, a customs officer immediately volunteered to come back with me to clear Gypsea. He was happy to leave the car ferry waiting! We had planned to leave Gypsea on the mooring for another week before trailing her home so we relaxed, spent the night on board relishing what had been a most memorable cruise

