

The 2020 Summer cruise of Croix des Gardes

Unlike many others, lockdown in the UK for me was busy and productive. I had managed to visit my elderly mother in Australia beforehand, and landed back at Heathrow on 17 March just in time for lockdown to commence. Work dried up quickly, but Croix des Gardes was in a barn a hundred yards from the house and there was much to do. As lockdown went on, and the immediate refit list was completed, items on the long-term list began to be cleared, and varnishing and painting achieved greater results than previous years. We launched on 18 June, somewhat later than other years, but early all things considered.



In the barn on a yard trolley

Launching Croix des Gardes from a barn outside Cambridge is a different affair to calling the Marina and asking them to put her in the water. There's the truck and the crane to book, the launch marina to select (and this can be anywhere in the country...) and the farmer to cajole into using his tractor to pull her out of the barn. It also helps to have control over the weather, and while March, April and May were beautiful, June was not. The 50 ton crane arrived with the rain at about 0800, and the low-loader shortly thereafter.



The rain persisted all day. The thunderstorms and the M25 did their best to launch her in Rickmansworth, but she made it to Saxon Wharf, and was finally afloat again for the first time in 9 months about 16:30 and in classic company. The large M/Y Alicia lay on the pontoon opposite. “M/Y Alicia a fine support vessel, comes with crew. No requirement for the owner to pick up the varnish tin.” reported a friend via Facebook, but he declined to do the honourable thing and offer to varnish CdG for me.



Alongside at Saxon Wharf after we launched and sea trials for the tender.



The following morning saw the mast stepped, sails bent on, stanchions fitted and the tender launched and checked for leaks. We moved to the new berth on the Hamble to prepare for the summer cruise.



9 Days, 6 anchorages, 1 Mooring and a Pontoon

It is a hundred and forty two miles from home to the boat, so to catch an early tide, I have to leave very early indeed and I didn't. I made tea, had breakfast and set off, visiting Tesco's in Bursledon for food, drinks and snacks. I was onboard by 13:00, thanks to Andy on the Hamble Water Taxi. By the time I stowed food and grog, and removed the covers, I was thinking about a cup of tea rather than setting off. The constant stream of boats going past and the wash against the pontoon began to annoy me and I slipped instead. We ran out of the Hamble and under yankee only and reached across to Osbourne bay for the night. Normally, a hop across to Osbourne involves towing a RIB, and maybe a sailing dinghy, but this time I had neither, the clinker tender was stowed on deck, ready if needed, and the few miles was free of the noise of a trailing tender.

Osbourne was to be the first anchorage of cruise. I sipped a beer, and thought about the week ahead. Light Northerlies. What to do with them? Lulworth is good in Northerlies, and when the weather turns, it can blow me home. The Beeb and the Scandies were both forecasting northerlies for a few days then building Sou-Westerlies thereafter. How far could I get? Three days out, and three days back left me a day spare. New moon unfortunately, so not great for night sailing.

Lulworth is about 40 miles, that'd be a good first anchorage and a Sunday night shouldn't be too busy. Dartmouth next, if my Godmother's at home, and Plymouth perhaps if Cornelius is about. Either was good day sail from Lulworth. After that, it would depend on the forecast.

The inshore waters forecast was for light N to NE winds and cloudy. Kettle on, main cover off and anchor up. We slipped out of Osbourne against the last of the flood and dropped into Cowes to top up the tanks about 0800. By 11:00, we were past Hurst Castle and out through the North Channel. It was



damp. Light rain had come in with some wind and St Albans Head was in view.

Even with full plain sail up, we were only making five and bit knots westward. The first target



was to be around St Albans before the tide went foul, and then equally importantly was to be anchored up for a pre-dinner drink, while dinner cooked. We were also being slowly overhauled, so with the wind aft, I dragged out the asymmetric and put it up. It wasn't all that successful; the wind was too far aft and we drifted along with it hanging forlornly. The yacht behind, passed us under power and commented that he was glad he hadn't launched his kite. I dropped the asymmetric on the deck and packed it.

There was still just enough wind to continue the temptation to sail, so I dragged out all ropes, set the starboard pole and set the symmetric instead. It managed to push as past St Albans Point, before I gave up trying to keep it full, and dropped it on deck too. I laid it out on deck and packed it. There really wasn't much wind at all. Lulworth Cove beckoned.

I dropped the hook in about 3 metres on the eastern side of the cove, and tried to bed it in. We pulled it down through the shingle until we were abreast one of the motor boats there. Another one lay close by, and rather than trying again in the same place I moved to the centre of the bay and anchored in deeper water, digging

the anchor in as the stern crept to the chalky cliffs on the north side of the cove. The catenary tightened up and CdG drew forward again. Head to sea out of the bay. No sea running, just about perfect. Engine off, oven on (oh and new alternator belt to replace the old one that had started slipping).



The oven was replaced over the winter with a newer version of the same model. The old oven had a particularly limited capacity to heat, something that it had acquired over the years. The



replacement had a larger gas ring, and now I discovered that it was the rocket, to the old ones 2CV. When I'd had a beer in the cockpit and went to check the temperature, the gauge was off the end of the 250°C gauge. I stuck the pizza in, turning the oven down and dug out a bottle of Cote du Rhone. Set up the

cockpit table, and found a glass. By the time I managed that, the pizza smelt and sounded ready. The oven was slightly cooler, the pizza crispy round the edges, so dinner was served.

Those of eagle eye might question my wine selection for the evening. Cote du Rhone? Yes. Organic, sustainable, screw top, 2019? Perhaps not. I don't know what possessed me to select it. It won't happen again.

The morning dawned with significantly more wind coming down the cliffs than the evening before and slipping out of the cove with a cup of tea, I could see the white caps, widespread across the bay towards Portland Bill. Outside Lulworth, the gusts came off the cliffs in strong enough bursts to warrant a reef and then we bore away for Portland Bill. To the north west, there were seven or eight cruise liners anchored off Weymouth, presumably laid up because of the virus, and three or four yachts running down from Weymouth towards the Bill.

It should have been about slack water by the time we made the Bill, and as we closed with it, passing north of The Shambles, we met with the other yachts, a couple sailing and another under power. We all rounded close together, a hundred yards or so from the light, the water smooth, but some wavelets kicking up a mile or two out.



One the joys of cruising is maintenance. Keeping on top of the little bits and pieces as the year goes past, rather than delaying them for the winter refit, and trying to sort things out in damp or wet or freezing weather. Hence the calmer waters west of the Bill (possibly not a common turn of phrase) led me to attack the toilet (it tended to slowly back fill after flushing). I had a gasket and valve spares kit on board, so out it came along with the pump from the toilet and a bucket of salt water, to the relative calm of the cockpit.

I rang my Godmother once I had signal again, somewhere in Lyme Bay. She didn't answer, but a follow up text revealed that she was some distance from Dartmouth, the Isle of Kerrera off Oban to be precise. I tried Cornelius. He was chasing a new boat down in the Netherlands. I looked at the charts and decided I'd skip Dartmouth and anchor off somewhere.



A few years ago, waiting for the wind to come up before the Channel Classics Regatta off Dartmouth, we'd anchored off Redlap Cove. It was pretty spot, calm and we even managed some swimming. Despite the north in the wind, it was not so welcoming this time. A westerly swell seemed to be working round Start Point, and rolling into the cove. I altered course back to Dartmouth, ducking inside Homestone Rock, and managed to get a pontoon berth, thanks to the Harbour Master taking pity on me.

The return of mobile signals, meant that work was able to catch me, and I duly accepted a Zoom request for UK/US meeting to deal with a burnt ship in Florida. That meant a commitment to have a decent and continuous mobile signal around 15:00 in two days' time. The forecast was for continuing light nor-nor easter. So, with an early start to get around Start Point at slack water, I should be able to make Helford River or Falmouth and have a full day there before thinking about return passages to the east.

Dawn in Dartmouth was soft, the houses of the main town catching the early light as the sun rose over Kingswear. I put the main up in the river and slid past the town and the Castles at the entrance. Full main, staysail and yankee for the forecast northerly four. A steady five knots through the water had



us inside the Skerries and around Start Point by 0900, and we picked up a knot or two as we rounded up and headed past the entrance to Salcombe.



The wind began to die at we closed on the Eddystone light, and I had the choice of ducking into Plymouth, or starting up the donk, and chugging all the way to Helford. I'd been to Plymouth before but not Helford, and as

Cornelius was elsewhere I decided to sit down and put in the miles for Helford.

An hour or so later, I saw far off splashes. They were getting closer and soon I was joined by dolphins, keen to play in the bow wave. A dozen or so played around, in what was now a glassy sea, for nearly an hour, diving in and out of the bow wave, crossing each other and the bow,



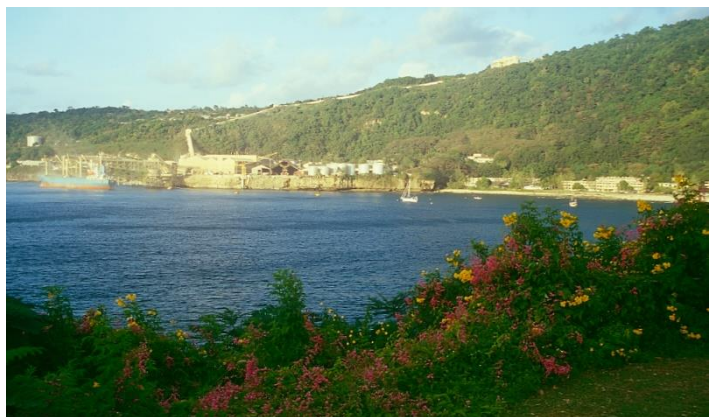
before charging away and zooming back again. It was more pleasant way to pass the time than the previous days' toilet repair.

Around 20:00, I nosed into Ponsence Cove at the entrance to Helford River. To the north a collection of yachts lay off a beach, with a couple of bonfires ashore and the chatter of social groups. To the west, the river wound inland and I could see numerous yachts and small craft close together on their moorings. I felt more in need of dinner than exploring, and dropped the



hook off the small beach in Ponsence Cove, already darkening as the sun began to set to the north west. A peaceful spot, well appreciated after the hours with the engine on to get there.

Close to exactly twenty-two years ago, I'd anchored in a much larger bay, off the small tropical Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, in my 34 foot timber sloop Dawn Wind. Christmas Island had a peculiar link to where I was now anchored some 25,000 miles later. The island library was giving away old books, that were either out of style or so well read that the islanders didn't want them anymore.



I picked up a collection of Daphne du Maurier stories, Frenchman's Creek being one of them. Du Maurier's collection was sitting on the shelves in the saloon. Given that Frenchman's Creek

was no more than a couple of miles up river, I thought I should, a) start reading it again, and b) visit Frenchman's Creek the next day.

I moved up to the visitor's moorings at Helford village first thing. I'd been a bit light on provisioning, so needed milk, cheese and bread. The water taxi took me ashore, and I walked up the quiet path from the quay to the village shop. The pub was closed and due to open the day after my departure, but the village shop was open. Bread, milk and cheese purchased, I wandered back to the quay to wait of the return of the water taxi.

I hadn't really thought this process through.

If I wanted to visit Frenchman's Creek, it wasn't going to be possible in Croix des Gardes. It was too shallow. I'd have to launch the tender. If I was going to launch the tender, I could just have easily rowed ashore, rather than paying for the water taxi



and saved myself the wait. Nothing I could do about that, so I waited at the quay and chatted to a lady who staying on the other side of the river and walking the coastal paths.

I launched the tender on my return aboard, and rowed up to Frenchman's Creek, or the entrance of it anyway, as it was dry, even the tender wasn't going in, at this state of the tide. I rested on my oars, there was small house on the point at the entrance to the creek, but little else in view.

If I wanted to get up the creek it would have to wait for a high tide another time. There was a fork in the ahead river ahead, the main branch running on to Gweek, the north branch to Polwheveral, but time was passing and I had a meeting to attend.

Thursday's dawn was slightly ominous, west to sou-west 3 to 5, smooth or slight, fair then rain, fog patches. At least it was blowing from the right direction, although at dawn there wasn't much sign of 3 let alone 5. I slipped the mooring at 06:30 and motored down the river.



By 08:30 there was enough to wind to warrant putting sails up, and by 10:00 there was a useful



westerly 3 to 4, and I dragged out the spinnaker again to make the most of it. The Royal Navy was out too, playing games. Several black jets streaked over head before swooping round and skimming back out to sea, targeting the grey shape just on the horizon to the south. The passage on to Start Point was smooth and uneventful. The log recalls, "Rolling a bit, grey, manky, damp!"

Rounding Start Point at about 18:00, I closed in on the shore at the village of Hallsands. The shingle gently sloped down to the water edge, and the Admiralty charts had it as an anchorage. Despite the wind, the sea was flat, and the open valley



running down to the sea meant that there were no gusts rolling off any cliffs. The flood and ebb running along the beach weren't strong and we had a very peaceful night in the lee of the point.

My alarm went off at 04:30 to catch enough tide to beat the overfalls at St Albans Ledge again. A bleak morning with fog and drizzle and not much in the way of wind. Out past the Skerries again and course of 080 for St Albans Ledge. As we ran east, there were more dolphins, and motor boat heading west at speed close inshore. It was a lifeboat on a shout, in the end turning into towards Lulworth Cove.

We didn't meet the overfalls at St Alban's Ledge, but a few miles later as the tide began to run against us at Anvil Point. A bouncy swirling ride round the point and then past Swanage and the Old Harry Rocks had us hard on the



wind to the anchorage in Studland Bay.

The sou-westerly built overnight and the passage back to the Solent the next morning was a bit on the lumpy side. We dodged a laid-up cruise liner off Poole and then bounced our way through the North Channel and then the overfalls at Hurst. Once in the Western Solent we made good time with wind and tide behind us. So much so, that going to the berth in the Hamble seemed a waste of the day, so we returned to our starting point and anchored in Osbourne Bay for lunch and a snooze.

The west country cruise was done. A couple of new anchorages found and enjoyed, and a few old favourites revisited. The best part of it all, was the start had been at the Hamble and the typical 180 mile beat round from the East Coast had been circumvented by a crane and a low loader.