

## SAILING VESSEL AKU-AKU By DAVE THOMAS

Paris had no sunshine welcome for us, the weather had been so kind to us until then so we really cannot complain. We were alongside a quay neatly tucked in astern of a floating restaurant with a fine view of the Eifel tower illuminations for one night. Then on, as tradition seems to dictate to the Paris Arsenal Marina which really is in the heart of it. To our surprise there were also two other Catalacs there. They were both 8m types on a similar route to us. We compared notes briefly then went off to explore. Fascinating is really all that can be said, as it is not possible adequately to describe the adjacent vicinity in a mere newsletter.

The Marina is very well run with staff about as helpful as it is possible to be. The facilities are excellent and security first class. It was a little odd to discover that the Peniches some times went right through the middle of the marina! With some regret we decided we must depart and press on. We felt it could be all too easy to become enthralled with the obvious interest of the city. We could easily lose sight of the objective which seems to have become going as far south as possible.

Continuing along the upper reaches of the Seine brought its own special delights. Probably the grandest properties we have ever seen overlooked the riverside. The imaginative and tasteful architecture has to be seen to be believed. Every one occupied by a multi millionaire, who else could possibly afford them? The adverse downstream water flow makes for slow going but the vista is so magnificent that it does not seem too irritating. It was however working the motor quite hard for long periods. A morning pre-start up check revealed a trace of engine oil in the coolant tank. Apprehensive thoughts of head gasket trouble sprang to mind. A catch tank was fitted to the tank overflow so that we could scrutinise its contents after fully topping up the heat exchanger header tank. We were about to cruise along another section of man made canal and we were afraid of it being built with the hostile concrete sloping banks which we had earlier encountered just after Calais. Taking a chance, the cylinder heads were tightened down a little. Past experience had demonstrated that such interference can sometimes make matters worse. There were no spare head gaskets aboard. Everything else!

The next section of the canal (man made) in fact turned out to be particularly charming. Beautiful long tree lined stretches, flat water and frequent tiny locks which seemed only just wide enough for *Aku-Aku* to squeeze into. Five metres is the dimension which matters so I will let readers ponder the fact that *Aku-Aku* is 4.3m in her beam! There were many grey heron, all of which could not seem to grasp the idea that flying ahead to escape the oncoming boat was not intelligent. Ducks behaved in a similar manner but one expects it of them. We did find a few black swans which are normally native to Australia. The locks were manually operated by keepers of varying dispositions. Their supposed half-hour lunch breaks appeared to be extendible whereas the working day seemed to contract to well inside the published hours. To be fair, they sometimes start at seven, so their insistence on lunch break is not unreasonable. Most were pleasant and helpful in response to our very limited command of their language. An encounter with an opposing peniche provided considerable interest. Their skippers are in fact absolute gentlemen and their skill in handling their boats can only be marvelled at.

As we progressed, the commercial traffic diminished and the lock keepers became more amenable to the point of being downright helpful. One morning we were asked what time we would like to start. Another keeper actually thanked us for coming to France. We do make as much effort as we can with our schoolie French, the only snag is that they think that if you speak the language, then you also understand it! Not always so, I wish now of course that I had paid more attention at school but it is surprising how much of it comes back sometimes. We are now being treated to sightings of coypu. We slacken speed and try not to frighten them. Kingfishers are frequently seen, one flew alongside us for a while, stopping at times on the bank while we caught up! Their brilliant plumage is extraordinary. Still the same friendly waves and welcoming smiles greet us. Ladies seem to be particularly pleased when the hat is raised. I think the biggest broadest beaming smile I have ever seen was from a lady Peniche skipper in response to this form of salute! Her smile remained with us for many kilometres. Again the weather is unbelievably good even though autumn leaves are beginning to settle on our decks.

The engine has thundered on exhibiting no further gasket trouble symptoms. We crossed the astonishing viaduct at Briare. Built by monsieur Eiffel, it is a truly amazing masterpiece of engineering, 11.5 m wide and 662 m long. It is dead straight and one can see from end to end whilst passing along. Its height above the valley it crosses I do not know, but it is truly breathtaking! We also saw the *incredible seven ecluses built by Henri IV, they ascend a hillside looking like a giant staircase, they have now been replaced by automatic locks. These are particularly good but the absence of a keeper gives them a certain eeriness, especially the ascending ones where an unseen hand closes the doors, thus shutting the boat into a vast concrete chasm with slimy green walls full of cascading noisy water. Satanic belches gurgle within the automaton's belly as the water rises, boiling and swirling. Scary! In the downgoing ones, it often seems a long wait for the automatic doors to open allowing escape. In one instance they failed, but a keeper appeared like a genie out of a bottle and thankfully he quickly remedied the fault.*

So we are now alongside a pleasant stop and a visit to the local supermarket extraordinaire is necessary. We grossly overstock many items as the three day French weekend is looming and we have often had to call a halt deep in the French countryside where there are no shopping facilities. The shopping trolley, which actually goes in a straight line, is

overflowing and a second is almost called for. **We steel ourselves for the bill! There must be some mistake. It is a little over half what we would have expected in England.**

This leads me to reflect on the state of Britain by comparison. It is sad to realise the extent to which the long-suffering British are being ripped off at every opportunity. Government is seemingly top of the list closely followed by harbour masters. At many of the canal-side Marinas, payment for an overnight stay with electricity supplied is actually refused! The reaction is almost as if offer of payment amounts to insult! What a contrast to the incredible treatment we received at Lymington. **I will spare readers the details!**

What No Water? But what is this? We are beginning to get the feeling that something may be wrong. Ours is the only boat in the canal. By turning out early one morning, we had stolen a march on the tedious convoy we were in. We believed we were well ahead. Lock keepers are actually waiting for us with lock open. We are making amazing progress. Then of course it all became crystal clear. Ahead the canal was shut! We had missed the last locking by a few hours! The marvellous weather we had been enjoying had starved the system of water. Later in the day the following convoy caught up with us and came to a halt. Some had arranged rendezvous ahead with relatives and friends, which they would be unable to keep. Since the problem stemmed from natural causes, the return to normality could not be predicted and we were obliged to sit it out in a Marina where we would be kept informed of any change in the situation. Charges were payable but they were so small as to be well worth the convenience and relative security. The local supermarket was again very comprehensive, as are most in France. They make those which we are accustomed to seem rather inadequate and lacking in variety. The town is delightful but the weather is beginning to feel distinctly autumnal.

Here we met Peter and Liz who had elected to swap their sailboat for a rather grand motor vessel. Their tale of woe was frightful to contemplate. First they had hit a sunken wrecked peniche whilst coming up the Seine. Doing fifteen knots, a perfectly legal speed at that point, they sustained colossal damage to props and rudders. It is a credit to the type of vessel, a Birchwood, that she did not sink. In response to a "Mayday" they were taken in tow to a yard where the boat was hauled out for repairs. Whilst this was in progress, they returned to Britain. Repairs completed they returned to collect the vessel only to find her broken into and robbed of everything of any use or value that could be removed, stripped or prised away. Undaunted, yet another insurance claim saw them on their way once again, only to be confronted by the canal closure and a totally seized Sureflow water pump. For the unenlightened this means no water supply at taps or shower, as the boat had no form of manually operated back up water supply system. We have not yet asked if the boat's name was changed when purchased, but could the gods be angry? The run of bad luck continued when a new water pump turned out to be faulty and quite useless. A great deal of time was wasted in the fitting of it, only to find it must be returned for another. The boat must have a Jonah stowed away somewhere!

There has been little in the way of downside to the adventure so far. However two things stick in our memory. The first was when we arrived at our second halt shortly after leaving Calais. The area for going alongside was adjacent a touring caravan site. The free water and electricity supply had been pirated, since the area was fully occupied by what we sometimes refer to as "Travellers". We felt distinctly nervous and apprehensive as this was not at all what we had expected. Adding to our apprehension, the travellers were depleting the local duck population with the aid of shot guns! Several ducks cruised up and down, one of their number quacking loudly for a very long time indeed. We concluded that its mate had probably finished up as supper on the open fire which was set up in the camp site. We departed very early that morning somewhat disenchanted. However, there has been nothing like it since.

One evening, having secured alongside a pontoon, this time with the benefit of free water and electricity, Michele preparing a meal in the galley was confronted by a **rat** which had boarded and was very interested in attempting to gain access to said galley. *Could it have been partial to curry we wondered?* It was quickly persuaded to disembark and we were amazed that in an instant it simply dived below the water surface. We departed that particular pontoon and went alongside a stretch of concrete where we would more likely be safe from the rodent's aspiration, thus foregoing the facilities provided.

So now we must simply wait as more boats arrive at the impasse! The town, whilst delightful is quickly explored. A few boat crews are quickly on first name terms with local innkeepers and restaurateurs. A young single-handed German is scouring the town for a new wife, armed only with a single French phrase. In view of its form of enquiry, he may find himself slapped on the face or possibly challenged to a duel by an angry husband.

## **AKU-AKU ... Crocodiles of the Rhone**

*By Dave Thomas CL 9.07*

Suddenly the Saone river/canal met the Rhone at Lyon after we first passed through a massive lock. The river broadens out and one is immediately aware of a substantial increase in boat speed, owing to the downgoing water flow. It carried us along to such a degree that our speed is increased to 8 knots and more at times. But with it there comes a new danger, which we have only encountered occasionally up until now. There are real Crocodiles in the river and they are lurking just on the surface, waiting for an opportunity to bite our hulls or

damage our propeller., I refer, of course, to driftwood which often looks very like a crocodile and is at least as menacing and dangerous. Often there is so much that picking a clear path through is simply not possible. We are obliged to reduce speed to a crawl, which only seems to serve to prolong the stress of the encounter. Once clear it is only too easy to believe we will see no more of it, only to be confronted with yet another barely visible tree trunk. What is particularly irritating is that a great deal of it is quite obviously the product of forestry, for it is clearly cut and sawn. It therefore did not just happen to fall in! There are also wine casks and bottles, but since these days they are usually plastic, they do not pose so much of a threat. The wooden crocs are, however, quite unnerving if they pass between our two hulls, perhaps striking the central engine nacelle or propeller on the way. The noise is guaranteed to startle even the boldest helmsman with resulting fears for the mechanical consequences. So far there has been no apparent damage even though some of our encounters have actually stalled the engine. Once again, we are glad of our liftable propeller, which enables us to inspect for damage!

The Rhone, which starts in Switzerland, has other peculiarities. Unpredictable strong winds spring up out of nowhere. This in itself may seem inconsequential but the wind puts a very uncomfortable wave motion into the water. The water surface does not seem particularly disturbed, but there have been times when Aku-Aku has been pitching fore and aft at least as severely as anything experienced at sea. When from the north west it is called the Mistral and it has gained a great deal of notoriety in the Mediterranean. There are large windsock at the entrance to the locks, so we can gauge the strength and direction of the wind and make due allowance for it. We are also now sharing the waterway with seagoing ships. The wake from these has sometimes given us a very nasty rolling whilst moored alongside a wall overnight. We must also be wary of a form of underwater structure known as a "Bem". It is like an underwater staircase of concrete leading to a wall where we might be tempted to secure for the night.

The consequence of receiving a beating against one of these, caused the wake of a passing ship or the Mistral is the stuff of nightmares! We cannot always detect these potential hazards with our sonar, so a good old-fashioned tubular pole is used to sound out the shape of the bottom of any wall we go alongside. We first encountered one of these at a halt which turned out to be closed for improvements and maintenance. Being unable to use the normal moorings we thought that alongside the usual wall would as good a place as any. That was when we discovered what a Berm was. The obvious solution was to anchor outside the roadstead, as near the bank as reasonable. However the hook did not seem to want to bite, so an alternative type was employed in addition to our usual "Bruce".

This worked well enough and we spent a peaceful night with our anchor light set up. It has now become necessary to record another light deployment in the ships log-book. *Insurance can otherwise be invalidated!*

We stopped only a few hours at Lyon, since its thieves are universally infamous. A Dutch man close by had suffered the theft of a motorcycle from on deck the previous day and we were indeed dismayed to learn of it. Our navigational guide book makes specific mention of such problems, so we took no chances here.

Moving on to a pleasant rural vineyard area, we discovered the meaning of the word "Cave". It has no connection with troglodytes. It means cellar and it is of course, full of wine. The difference being that you are first allowed to sample the goods without spitting it out. You may then have your own containers/bottles filled with your choice. The cost is ridiculous. We have just suffered our first encounter with a bit of French sharp practice. Having gone alongside the usual free pontoon and plugged into the electricity supply, we went off on our bikes to explore the nearby village. On our return, a uniformed Frenchman appeared out of thin air and informed us that a charge was payable. It follows that, since it was by then late evening there was little option but to cough up and remain. It was however a particularly pleasant spot, the village being very quaint indeed and full of helpful friendly people. Our bikes proved particularly invaluable for shopping and sightseeing in these sort of places. The only snag being that it is often difficult to find our way around in the very narrow, often cobbled streets.

Avignon! We arrived in glorious sunshine and thus enjoyed splendid views as we passed up the river and beyond the end of the world famous bridge which comes to an abrupt and somewhat ignominious end, right in the middle of the river. The place has organised itself such that there is no option other than to use the moorings provided. However the facilities and security are good and since they cost, we made full use of them. It so happened we arrived on a Sunday. The street entertainers were out in force. Particularly unique and enchanting was a marionette show set up on a corner. The puppeteer, in clown's dress kept up a continuous tour de force with various string puppets operating many of them together with the benefit of any form of assistance, other than recorded music. It was somewhat reminiscent of the Black Theatre of Prague in its presentation but a large

variety of characters were used and the clown who pulled the strings was very obviously enjoying his art. There was the usual juggler and mime artist in the square, a few inoffensive amusements, surprisingly, hot chestnuts, which seemed odd in view of the temperature.

We continued on down to Arles where the once free pontoon was found to have changed its status. However, we were able to retrace our course a short way back up the Rhone against the current, thus taking an alternative route along the Petit Rhone. Once again with the benefit of sunshine, we followed it into the area of France known as the Camargue. Here there were far fewer crocodiles and no fast flowing current to contend with. Wildlife abounded. The famous wild white horses accompanied by cattle egrets were first to be spotted. Then the huge black bulls with egrets often stood close beneath their bellies, picking their share of the spoils kicked up by the animals' hooves. We have seen many brilliant kingfishers, butterflies, dragonflies, different ducks, a beaver, lizard and numerous small songbirds. No pink flamingos yet but we hope to be lucky. Sometimes the kingfishers actually fly around us as we move.

There is a travelling fair in town at this time and we have gathered that we are in St. Gilles during a festival. Some streets are occupied entirely by the amusements and there are barriers here and there. While visiting the Sunday market there was a very loud explosion in the town. The streets were empty of vehicles and clearly something was about to happen. Suddenly, a posse of horsemen came galloping through the streets, driving black bulls between them. The riders reached the end of the street, turned around and drove the bulls back at breakneck speed. Again some onlookers risked life and limb to get near. Thus we witnessed the local means of advertising the bullfight what was to take place later. Having visited the local tourist office, we find there is to be a series of bullfights culminating in the grande finale on Remembrance Day. We had no idea that bullfights take place in France,

believing it to be peculiar to Spain. We would probably enjoy the pageantry but not the barbaric cruelty which the animals suffer. In our naivety we even thought that perhaps the thing was watered down to acceptability in France.

Not so, by all accounts, so after little consideration and we did not attend.

### Friday the Thirteenth

No we are not superstitious but I, for one, would not change the name of a boat whilst she was afloat! So it was on this day and at this particular pontoon, we were given the news we had been awaiting. After five days of enforced waiting around, the VNF, which is the authority responsible for the smooth running of the canal system, decided we could proceed. A number of boats slipped their moorings immediately and a small convoy formed all heading for the first lock, with Aku-Aku at the head. This was all to change however, since a Dutch power boat was already waiting at the lock and another power boat driver claimed next spot since he had been first to be halted at the Marina.

We reformed in the original order, which made everyone happy. So on we went having decided that this particular date had in fact brought us luck. We noted however, that Peter the German stayed put. He had perhaps found the success he sought ashore! As we progressed, a couple of lock keepers mentioned peniche ahead. We realised it would be in the opposing direction but so what, we had encountered them before with no problem. But in fact this part of the canal is both narrow in places and shallow. It was built, I was amazed to discover in the 1700s, which accounts for its modest depth and meandering aspect. So when we found a peniche about to emerge from the next lock we did the obviously prudent thing, going astern to the widest bit we could find where we manoeuvred as close to the bank as possible. A bilge keel sailing boat ahead of us with far greater draught, decided on a similar tactic. The bank on this side was overgrown with foliage and it was not possible to get ashore with our mooring line to secure the boat to a tree or whatever. This was a safety tactic we had instinctively used in this particular canal and it had at the time, seemed a little overcautious.

The lock gates opened and the bows of the peniche hove into view. A bow wave developed as she increased speed. She was low in the water and was obviously fully laden. Hundreds of tons of huge vessel gathered way, plumb in the middle of the canal. It headed inexorably towards the first yacht, which hugged the bank some 100 yards ahead of us. Because of her bilge keels she could not get as close to the bank as we could. The peniche was about three quarters way past the yacht when, for some unknown reason, the smaller boat seemed to turn sideways on, bows to the bank. Why? The preceding bow wave approached and it was on us and passed some three feet away. The dark and menacing black side slid past rather more quickly than expected. The wheelhouse seemingly towered above us, then suddenly in an instant, we were picked up and spun hard against its side, our

bows were pushed hard into the canal bank and our stern quarter banged and thumped along the side of the peniche. Full power from our engine and full opposite rudder did nothing to improve matters. Extra protection, which I had made during the refit were working overtime and undoubtedly saved us from damage at this point. Our mast, carried horizontally on our trestles had swung across the peniche's deck. It just missed the wheelhouse but our dish type omnidirectional TV antenna was destroyed and the current whereabouts of its innards are unknown. Then as suddenly as it had developed, the peniche was gone and it was all over. So Aku-Aku licked her wounds and together with somewhat shaken crew, continued on to the next lock which thankfully contained no peniche. Little did we know what lay in wait for us!

Once inside we learnt that another peniche was waiting to enter. This time there would be no problem as it should stand off until we were clear. On exiting the lock we were amazed to see that it was making way towards us. The yacht ahead of us cleared the open gates and dived hard for the bank with the result, unbeknown to us that she fetched up hard on her bilge keels. Astern of her we had no alternative escape, so we tucked in as close as possible. The peniche came on, her stern slewed sideways toward us as she lined up with the lock. Closer and closer it came. Somehow we must escape or surely be crushed! The yacht ahead now had clear water and could apparently go ahead, thus leaving us an escape route. Go! Go on! Move! Go Ahead! We shouted and gesticulated whilst jumping around the decks armed with boat hooks in a forlorn attempt to deal with the threat. But nothing moved other than the peniche. Slowly she cleared past us with a few inches to spare. Our hair was surely stood on end (would not notice much in my case I suppose) the danger passed. The yacht ahead explained why she had been unable to move away and offered apologies. Decidedly shaken one again, we realised that Aku Aku was quite unscathed, only our nerves had taken a beating. The incident had been very close indeed!

Once again, on we went, but by mutual agreement Aku-Aku took over leading the small convoy, a position which felt somewhat more comfortable as far as we were concerned. We could work out our own salvation should it be necessary. Thereafter things went very smoothly, we were only three in number, it was not possible to put more than this into a lock at any one time. Each boat worked out its own routine and method of keeping station whilst in the lock. We quickly developed into a team and so smoothly did we operate together that we frequently caught up with the power boat convoy ahead of us. We must have become quite fit as there is much scaling of ladders to do and the layout of securing bollards is quite varied. **VNF** were very good and worked locks for us beyond normal hours in an apparent effort to help recover some of the enforced time loss. In view of the aforementioned narrow squeaks we have reflected on what **VNF** actually stand for. **Very Nearly Flattened** springs to mind, some readers may think perhaps of an alternative appropriate "*F*" word! So on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> were we lucky to have survived these frightful incidents or were we unlucky to have suffered them?

### **Peniche Extraordinaire**

One evening, whilst alongside a grassy bank secured for the night, we were invited aboard a peniche. The owner skipper had magnanimously decided to allow our entire convoy, including the power boats, to start ahead of him the following day. We jumped at the chance and bolted down our meal hurrying aboard as quickly as we could. Nothing could have adequately prepared us for the sight which confronted us as we opened to door to what we expected to be the owners cabin. My jaw dropped open wide enough for a dental extraction! We were actually in the cargo hold. It held a secret from the outside world however, since it was converted into a palace, so opulent that it compared more than favourably with the foyer at the London Dorchester. The entire interior was panelled in light oak or pine. Wooden framed windows cut into the sides gave a good view out. Artistic décor, many pictures and maritime artefacts abounded providing unique interest. There were model ships in glass cases, a huge bar constructed from what must have been a vast wine vat. The deck was varnished planking with a finish like glass. Many and varied exotic carpets from all over the world lay here and there. There was soft hidden lighting, which had the effect of giving great height to the deckhead (ceiling). Soft music played discreetly somewhere in the background. It was comfortably warm and dry. An African grey parrot eyed us with considered curiosity from his perch by the ornamental fountain. Satisfied he greeted us in English. A large wooden sea chest containing doubloons and a tattered parchment chart purported to suggest as to the owner's source of wealth. A large copper standard diver's helmet lay on a shelf above. Brightly coloured lovebirds were in large cages. Leather bound books stood on the many and varied shelves. Ornamental African, Chinese and Indian wood carvings added to the ambience.

After what seemed like an age in which we tried to absorb these wonders, the owner joined us introducing himself as Phil. We retired to a vast wooden refectory style table. Unlike the table, Phil had no wooden leg. He spoke excellent fluent English whilst we did our best to reply in halting French. With parrot settled comfortably

on his shoulder he reiterated his life story and future intentions. He was born on a peniche he explained, as had been generations of his forebears. He, however had gone off to London where he ran a delicatessen.

Returning to France he bought the peniche and converted it into the floating hotel in which we now sat, taking, to my amazement only a year to complete the task which included shortening the hull by a few metres. We did not learn why this was done. He was now heading for the Canal du Midi, thus returning to the life of a bargeman but carrying paying guests instead of cargo. He showed us more. There were comfortable cabins with en suite facilities.

We were in the lounge/diner/bar. The vessel had the benefit of a constantly running 240 volt generator so standard electrical appliances, power showers and full size baths were provided. The central heating system was also standard domestic. It is difficult to adequately describe the vast space within the boat but several houses would have easily been swallowed up in it. Permanent residence and life aboard the peniches exempts one from all taxation, Phil explained. There were, therefore, considerable advantages to such a way of life and any commercial enterprise or activity aboard was similarly exempt. Even the car carried discreetly on the aft deck, was we believed exempt from certain regulations and taxes. Most of the main deck above was set up rather like a Mediterranean taverna with canopy overhead. Other seating was provided fore and aft so as to give an excellent view of the passing countryside. There were shrubs and bright flowers in baskets. The entire vessel gleamed with fresh paint. All in all, very comfortable and salubrious. Since there is such a revival of interest in cruising, the enterprise is bound to be successful. One of the many advantages to inland cruising is the greatly reduced likelihood of sea-sickness although there have been times on the broader river stretches when we have been surprised to find it quite rough. *An interesting bit of French history came to light during our conversation.* It seems the English once owned large areas of France and it was they who taught the French to make wine! *Well, so Phil told us!*

But now there is a problem. We set off this morning only to run into fog. We can no longer use our radar since the mast is down. We quickly decided conditions were too hazardous to continue. We returned to the safety of the pontoon at Tournus on the Saone where the previous night had been spent. Here, to our surprise, we found one of the convoy, which had disbanded once we left the last lock on the canal du centre. The boat was of course "Erevan" the bilge-keeler which had barred our escape from the last peniche incident. She had developed an engine overheating problem which the crew, Tony and Bernie could not rectify. We cannot just leave them stranded on a public use pontoon, for one thing it is not allowed and for another it would be unsafe in a fast flowing river containing substantial potentially damaging flotsam. Tomorrow we shall try to tow the stricken boat to a yard or marina where it may be possible to carry out repairs. We have been obliged to stock up with provisions once again. As before the bill was far less than anticipated. The pontoon at Tournus is a magnificent 100 m. long, all free of charge, again with free mains electricity. We have now covered 946 kms. and 198 locks. Soon we hope to sail sous la Pont d'Avignon!

*Next month we will tell you about Tugboat AKU-AKU ED.*

## **TUGBOAT AKU-AKU**

*By Dave Thomas CL 9.07*

Before setting off toward Macon where there are supposedly repair facilities, Erevan tried her motor, it was evidently very sick indeed! There was little point in her attempting to move under her own steam so we decided to take her in tow from the outset. First we found ourselves obliged to clear a vast raft of flotsam which had collected under our hulls during the night. Huge lumps of timber, tree trunks and branches, plus a sickly porridge of twigs and leaves were the main components of the mess which was firmly jammed between our hulls by the downgoing stream. Taking our mooring lines around our hull we turned Aku-Aku around in the hope that the debris would depart downstream of its own accord. The manoeuvre was a limited success but a great deal of pushing and shoving with the boathook was still needed. Our unscheduled collection of this material had woken us at intervals during the night as it announced its arrival by bumping the hulls. Most of it must have swept past but that which did not gave us an unexpected form of inconvenience. We rigged a bridle on our stern cleats with which to tow Erevan but still we just could not rid ourselves of the entirety of our forestry. We motored away from the pontoon, circling and weaving in an effort to shake it off. Finally after a great deal more encouragement with the boathook it was all gone.

We picked up Erevan's tow-line by ferry gliding alongside a few feet away. The skipper heaved us the tow-line and we quickly bent it on to our bridle, the other boat letting slip at the same moment. All went well with this stunt and soon we had turned downstream heading towards Macon at a comfortable six knots or more. This meant that we were not appreciably slowed by our tugboat role and we should reach our destination soon after lunch. A *peniche loomed large ahead*. We had looked through our inland waterway navigation books for an authorised signal or flag to warn of our towing status. Finding none we decided to wear flag Delta which means "*I am manoeuvring with difficulty, keep clear*". It was the nearest to our circumstances we could find. I hurriedly rigged it on a lofted boathook where the oncoming peniche could easily see it. In the event the vessel gave us a wide berth, as did another some time later. So far so good, *but sinister great wooden crocodiles* of flotsam littered the fast flowing river and a sharp lookout was required to avoid them. We noticed that the cormorants here had white fronts, giving them a penguinish look. We also observed several grey herons looking amusingly ignominious for they were stood in a field amongst grazing cattle. We become so used to their usual stance on the riverbank they looked very incongruous close to such animals.

The tow was accomplished with relative ease and soon we approached the marina destination. We reduced speed so that we could put Erevan alongside a pontoon without towing her either past it or worse, into it! This done we found ourselves a berth nearby and secured. Erevan's skipper Bernie approached, he grabbed my hand and shook it with the firmness of sincere gratitude. Michele was below and thus escaped the bear hug, which would probably have ensued. Erevan was now in a place of absolute safety and her owner was obviously much relieved. But what of engineering facilities available shoreside. Guess who it turned out to be? Having done my very best to cure the old Volvo engine of its ills, it was running again and starting well without overheating, but had little motive power, not to mention water and oil escaping from many and varied unscheduled places. It was decided that it would best be consigned to *Davy Jones' locker* at the earliest opportunity. These old Volvo engines have become generally uneconomical to attempt to repair where major overhaul is required and fitting a modern lightweight "Beta" type is a proven success, as I had seen demonstrated at Dell Quay.

I was rewarded for my attempt at repair even though it was not entirely successful. It was then mooted that perhaps I might consider staying on and fitting a new engine, to be brought over from England sometime during the winter. Erevan's owner footed our marina bill whilst we considered the viability of this idea and he made a great many calls to England, trying to establish costs etc.

We explored the town, which was interesting enough, but was not anything like as far south as we had hoped to be by now. At last a compromise plan evolved. I would remove the defunct engine thus enabling an accurate drawing of the engine bay to be made. Once Bernie returned to England everything required for the transplant could be prefabricated, ferried over and fitted either by local labour, myself or an imported British engineer. We felt very sorry for Bernie and Tony, things had not gone too well for them. I had always entertained misgivings as to their engine, to my eye it had always belched more smoke than coolant.

Next day I dismantled the errant engine, finding a blown cylinder head gasket in the process! Fortunately Aku-Aku has a powerful portable hoist aboard, so removal of the engine from its mountings was not too difficult. *Getting the heavy bits out of the cockpit and ashore however was not easy*. Next they had to go up the steep ramp from pontoon to the shore for storage in a convenient shed. Thus I earned some more wages. Bernie and Tony are to return to U.K. on both train and aeroplane, where Bernie can decide what to do about his problem at relative leisure.

We are free to continue.

## MODS DONE ON AKU AKU



AKU-AKU moved away from the berth at Dell Quay where she had lain for so long.

Within seconds we had collected a rope around the screw and progress was arrested with some ignominy. However the drive leg was easily raised and the offending line cut clear with the serrated edge of my multitool. These things really are a boon, particularly when working aloft. This proved the convenience of the lifting Sillette leg and I remembered only too well donning diving gear to clear the prop for another vessel which had suffered a similar fate only a few weeks earlier. Out in deeper water we borrowed a buoy, and sorted things until Aku Aku was more shipshape. Setting off down the channel we were immediately called upon to negotiate the

local dinghy race. Clearing this without incident served to test our manoeuvring capabilities. I was more than pleased.

Why is it we always doubt our own ideas?

We motored on down the weed encluttered water till the overheat warning squawk screamed at us.

A quick inspection of the inlet water strainer showed it to be full of greenery. Because of its inboard location it was quickly and easily cleared. After restarting, the temperature gauge fell to its normal reading so we continued towards the anchorage.

We began to learn the value of our forward viewing Echo Pilot. It has subsequently proved to be an enormous asset, enabling the exploration of creeks and estuaries where one would normally only venture in a dinghy.

This is just one of the many advantages of catamarans as compared with the keel boats I had owned in the past. We still use the good old lead line to check bottom contour and type of ground. This way we normally dry out level and therefore comfortable. A clothes peg on the lanyard makes a good adjustable sounding marker incidentally. We also find the inboard raw water strainer to be very convenient, there is so much weed about these days that easy access to the strainer seems to have become a priority.

On reaching the anchorage we found it crowded to capacity so we sneaked off into the shallows away from the crowds. We set our anchor, motoring it in to be sure and settled down to a bit of peace and quiet. Inevitably, a large highly polished plastic stink boat arrived and steamed about looking for a vacant spot. The skipper evidently concluded that there was plenty of water where we were and parked the plastic monster a little downstream of us. Oh well we thought, he will learn. The sound of music rent the air! The tide ebbed unrelentingly, the way it does, and soon there came the sound of diesels starting and a rattling anchor chain. Thankfully the monster departed breathing foul black smoke and noise, but leaving us in peace once again. We actually took a welcome rest from our labours that weekend, returning to our Dell Quay berth with ease, running before the wind with only the genoa set. I was agreeably surprised at the speed achieved though we were on a flood tide. We were obliged to start the donkey once we encountered the usual dinghy race. Dodging them, (giving way?) can at times be both interesting and exciting, as I am sure you all know!

In refitting AKU-AKU. to be our home afloat we have introduced a number of modifications.

I shall try to explain them as this saga progresses in the hope that some of the ideas may be of interest. High on our list of important requirements was a means of keeping properly and thoroughly clean. We were quickly disenchanted with the shortcomings and heavy water consumption of a conventional shower system. Facilities ashore are in our experience often both inadequate and expensive, not to mention jolly fine Verruca breeding grounds. Cruising on a limited income demands economies, one of which is a reluctance to go alongside to be at the mercy of the outstretched authoritarian grasping hand.

Our vessel is therefore geared to be as independent of shoreside facilities as possible. Gradually we evolved the arrangement shown in the diagram. It very simply recirculates a relatively small amount of water contained in a sump set into and below the shower tray. The unit is in fact an adapted automatic shower drain pump unit. In our case the shower is in the heads, which benefits from an outlet port coupled to the warm air forced draught heater. Some may view a wet locker as more appropriate place for a shower facility. So aboard AKU-AKU, the drill for taking a shower is something like this:-

In winter first open the heater outlet and warm up shower/heads compartment. Ensure cleanliness of shower tray and sump. Fill with hot water and perhaps a little of your favourite bubble bath additive. For filling, ours can be connected to the hot/cold water system. Alternatively use water from the kettle, instant gas heater or black bag left out in the sun if there should be sufficient. Switch on the circulating pump, discard the first gush of water since it may have been static in the feed pipe and shower rose for some time. Test water temperature and adjust if necessary. Step under and enjoy your shower. *Consider sharing it with a friend!* It will gradually cool off in use but a little extra hot may be added from time to time to maintain the temperature. You may use the shower continuously until you feel the need to rinse off, at which point the water is discarded down either sink or loo by pointing the shower head that way. Replenish with fresh water and rinse off you may off course repeat the cycle if you wish. When finished pull the drain plug and switch on the bilge pump. Clean out the sump, filter and shower rose ready for the next time.



The system is effective, invigorating and economical on water. I do not claim credit for the idea as it may be found detailed in the "Marine Electronics Bible" by John C. Payne. I merely write from first hand experience.

I will detail how we made our main double berth very comfortable indeed without sacrificing foot room! As I have become a little older I am now much less tolerant of lack of good quality sleep. Very high on our list of priorities was as comfortable a berth as possible.

AKU-AKUs original main mattress was still in remarkably good condition.

We wanted to increase its thickness to improve comfort but realised that this would tend to reduce footroom in the trotter box. Something we had noticed seemed better in the 9 than the 8mtr boats. I have big feet, and lack of footroom would undoubtedly cause sleep sapping discomfort and was therefore to be avoided. I also find that I cannot sleep properly head down and feet up, hence our ongoing use of the lead line when drying out overnight. We tried all sorts of ideas including an inflatable mattress under the original. Our berth is standard double size so we contemplated a conventional domestic mattress but reasoned that its springs probably would not last long in a salt atmosphere. It would also undoubtedly reduce footroom and why dispose of the original when it was in such good condition? Eventually I had an idea which has subsequently proved a winner as far as we are concerned. We purchased a suitable density block of fire retardent foam measuring 4 ft x 6ft x 6ins. We had it cut into two wedge shaped pieces. One half 5ins. tapering down to 3ins. the remainder was therefore 3ins. tapering down to 1 ins. By butt joining the two 3inch faces back to back a block measuring 4ft wide 6ft long x 5ins thick one end and inch at the other was created. This was placed under the original mattress thick end at the head, thin end under feet. The result, absolute bliss! Probably the most comfortable berth I have ever slept on. It also cost half of what a full size replacement would have been.

We had come across others who had discarded their original foam in favour of a replacement only to hear them complaining a few months later because the new stuff had not lasted long. Under the mattresses is a layer of loft type insulative foam which further reduces the effects of cold air passing under our bridge deck.

We have both suffered our share of back problems over the years. The comfort of the berth combined with our change of lifestyle seems to have dramatically reduced such problems and aches and pains in general!

Back at Dell Quay we worked away at the perpetual list. Soon we decided to go off on more trials. Aku- Aku had earlier belonged to Jim Andrews who wrote Catamarans for Cruising. We were anxious to find out if his enthusiasm was well founded. Even now we sometimes find we are asked if our boat is THE Aku-Aku? As always when clearing Chichester Bar we found the wind to be on the nose, or noses in our case but the tide was favourable and we made credible headway in a westerly direction beating into wind as always. It took some time to learn to put her about, and I found balancing the sails to achieve a decent track somewhat more tricky than I was accustomed to.

The Rotostay furling played up and I was obliged to treat the genoa as if it were hanked on, hauling it down into a sail bag instead of rolling it up away on its foil. I had fitted a new internal luff wire at the same time as renewing the standing rigging but I chose not to bother changing the plastic ball race in the "cotton reel" for the stainless steel update. Now I was paying the price of false economy. I knew I would be in for at least one trip up the stick to rectify that one.

We continued into ever increasing wind and noted gusts of 7-8. Aku -Aku did not seem much bothered by it but she did heel a trifle from time to time. We sailed down the main channel between the Forts, the GPS registering speeds across the ground which I had previously only experienced on an old Fiver Tri which I brought back from Brightlingsea.

Cowes loomed up in what seemed like very little time. We downed the sails and motored in. Nothing dramatic ever changes here, prominent corporate names come and go it seems but not much else.

The local Pirates are as active as ever with dory, out stretched hand and ticket punch!

On an earlier visit we were had been accosted at the Folly Inn with a demand for the princely sum £6, for what would have been a visit of an hour at most.

Our crime was that of going alongside the pontoon at 2200hrs with the idea of imbibing some refreshment. We declined the offer at the time and went on to an anchorage beyond the moorings.

Again we put down our hook, put up the anchor light, struck the Ensign and settled down for a quiet evening reflecting on Aku – Aku's characteristics. Night fell, the flood tide settled into slack, peace, yet we could hear the sound of a small boat approaching. There came a knock on the hull. I switched on the deck light and shot thought the door expecting a discussion. There was none I was merely asked to move a little closer in towards the bank as the 'Gravel Boat' was on her way up the channel. On the slack we had drifted towards the main channel and I was glad of the advice. We weighed and did as advised none too soon as we were soon aware of the vessel in question making rapid progress towards her berth up river.

*Now at last all was quiet. We slept that sound sleep that only tired mariners know!*

It occurs to me that a word on the subject of cooling water strainers may not come amiss at this point. Readers will I hope have noted our enthusiasm for the remote or inboard Strainer rather than the more traditional type which is incorporated into the skin fitting. We have had occasion to experiment with various types and have concluded that Vetus undoubtedly make the best and most efficient one. This type has a water entry and exit tube set in the base of the filter housing with corresponding holes on the bottom of the debris catchment basket. There are alternatives available where the entry point is central, and incorporated into the transparent inspection lid securing pillar. The exit which feeds water to the pump is set in the side. It has been our experience that this type tends to choke up at the point where water should spew out into the separator basket. It has to be said that it is only the common green floating seaweed which does this, but it is of course this weed which largely causes the very problem which we need to eliminate. By contrast the Vetus water Strainer, which is of course the more expensive ( does this sound familiar?), dumps the weed neatly into the collector basket without impeding water flow! The other types tend to restrict entry flow leading to overheating which again is precisely what we are trying to avoid. The cooling water entry skin fitting need have no Strainer or grille, the theory being that it is better to allow foreign objects to reach the inboard strainer where they can easily be deported! "- Back to the story:- In the morning we decided to go further up the Medina towards Newport. By the riverside I noted a large but obviously deceased tree. I put the hook down opposite and went astern towards the tree. Going ashore, we took a warp from an aft cleat, around the trunk and back to the remaining aft cleat. Using the lead, we sampled and sounded the bottom. It was as expected, mud, with a gentle slope down towards the middle of the river. There is little actual tidal flow this far up, so lying abeam was not a problem. We dried comfortably and level in the shelter of tall trees.

Ashore was a picnic area, a path, a cycleway and a main road some one hundred yards away. The edge of the river was shingle so going ashore required no more than the descent of our aft ladder. We keep two mountain bikes on board. We find them much more fun to use than gimmicky yotie folding types. Have you ever experienced the form of pain resulting from an involuntary fold up whilst pedalling? Well I can assure readers that it is both eye watering and arrestive of progress. The same is true of Sturmey Archer epicyclic gears when out of adjustment through folding. By contrast, on mountain bikes, we can carry significant loads, general shopping, large gas bottles, beer, wine, and other essentials. Fair distances can be covered with ease. It provides jolly fine exercise not to mention an excellent way of exploring ashore. It is well known that crew legs do not usually get sufficient exercise aboard boats. The Navy invented the Hornpipe by way of solving this problem but we find cycling a quite adequate substitute.

A mountain bike can be dismantled and stowed away almost as conveniently as a folder . However for local cruising we lash ours to the pulpit rail. They cause very little nuisance stowed here, but obviously are completely out of the way when stowed in the cockpit lockers. Because of our midships engine, our lockers are fully available for stowage and two derigged bikes are easily swallowed up.

The engine alternator drive belt had failed and I had fitted our spare during our stay at the anchorage near the Folly. I needed to acquire at least another by way of insurance, until such time as I could ascertain the reason for the breakdown and remedy it. On going ashore we were approached by a local gentleman who, to my surprise, remarked on how nice he thought it was to see a boat moored at that particular spot. It was apparently usually ignored in favour of the town quay pontoons at Newport some half a mile further upstream. On hearing of our problem, he directed us to the nearest spares supplier and even telephoned them on his mobile to check availability of the belt we needed! How kind! We pedalled into Newport, collected our spare belt, explored the town and marvelled at local property prices displayed in the estate agencies, on average less than one half of southern mainland costs!

A friend of ours had recently moved to the Island and bought a house in Godshill not far from Sandown airfield where he kept his aeroplane. We enquired for directions. The locals seemed amazed at our intention to cycle there. Well there were a few hills on the way! ! We enjoyed a convivial evening with our friends who were very happy with their move to I.O.W. We cheated on our return journey, gladly accepting a lift back in their camper van. It was raining stair rods " by then and we were quite glad to be in the dry!

AKU -AKU lay quietly at her Med. style mooring. We clambered aboard and fell into our pit totally exhausted.

They all turned up in the morning;- Mr. and Mrs Swan with eight cygnets, Mother Duck and Drake with innumerable ducklings. Cormorants spread their wings on perches, at least one Egret and a Grey Heron ventured close. Fish jumped and splashed clear of the water and the birds sang their finest dawn chorus.

We felt pleased with this fine little unspoilt spot and pitied others who, by dint of draught and keel, were obliged to go alongside the town quay where a heavy charge is levied. The small Marina opposite actually charges less than the town quay which will not accept fin keel boats!

We are not responsible for any loss or damage caused by any alterations or modifications from your boats original design .  
All mods that appear in this news letter are done by owners who may or may not be qualified marine engineers.

### *The Fridge, Friend, Foe, or just plain "F" word?*

#### *A Practical disaster.*

*By Dave Thomas CL 9.07 AKU - AKU*

During our extensive refit, we somehow acquired, two three way top loading refrigerators. They both worked perfectly on mains or gas, but clearly required a good deal of amperage when 12 volt operation was called for. We thus decided to research the subject of refrigeration before building something more comprehensive into the boat. Everything we read stressed the importance of efficient insulation. We visited several companies who supplied suitable components and insulative materials. One thing became quite clear, it was going to cost a good deal of money, time and effort.

An entire locker space below a pilot berth was sacrificed for the project. By so doing we were able to construct a box surrounded by five inches of closed cell foil faced insulation. It was made top loading and sealed off by a large ex mdge door with extra insulation added to the inner face. Below this were two horizontal sliding clear perspex panels which would *help* first see into the interior and then retain cold air whilst delving into the contents. It offered a capacity of 80ltrs, being within the claimed operating capacity of the cooling unit, The interior was neatly finished with cold room lining material and great care was taken in the construction of a duct leading from the cooler unit air intake to a bilge which contained the water pressure accumulator and several water way junctions. We thought this would give the cooler unit a head start as it seemed to be about the coldest space available in the many bilges to be found in our 9mtr. Catalac AKU-AKU. The finished item looked rather like a scaled down chest freezer.

The instructions and diagrams supplied with the Supercool unit from Sweden were followed to the letter. The project took five weeks to complete. It included a very impressive looking remote control panel with flashing L.E.Ds. Adjacent we fitted an electronic thermometer, its sensor having been inserted into the fridge below the cooler unit.

Shoreside boatyard pundits, meantime, having learned of the works in progress, made derisory comments and had nothing good to say about "Peltior effect" cooling systems suggesting that no more than a five degree difference from ambient temperature could be achieved. This characteristic coupled with appalling consumption of amp/hrs would ensure gloom doom and despondency they said. Undeterred we pressed on preferring to believe manufacturers claims.

Having completed the project we switched on and waited. It worked perfectly, it was quiet and the internal temperature fell to the preset Butter, milk, meat, wine beer etc, were all swallowed by our fabulous fridge. We felt it unlikely we would ever have need of dry ice or ice cubes placed in the bottom as an alternative means of operation. Our battery charger connected to shoreside mains showed no signs off lagging and an seemed well.

Sea trials in the Solent and around I. O .W. came next. A combination of our Rutland wind generator and two solar panels seemed to keep the battery bank up to scratch. Inevitably there came a few days of little sunshine and no wind. The need for careful monitoring of the battery state began to rear its ugly head. It was not long before a larger alternator and a Sterling regulator were deemed necessary thus again delaying our sailing date. There had been so many delays that we often wondered if we were ever going to escape. So did many friends

and relatives and we are sure they were quite shocked when we finally sailed. Meantime our other two fridges had made good value on the second hand market. We felt quite smug about it and indeed bragged that it had virtually paid for the super de-luxe installation we now had.

So we said our final goodbyes and left Chichester for the French canals via the Dover Calais route. Adventures began fairly early on and we were kept quite busy. The story of our journey through France would fill a book. The fridge became an accepted part of the ships gear, it worked well and gave no trouble. So much for the pundits we thought!

Arriving in France much later in the year than intended, we pressed on with the intention of getting as far south as possible. We coped with all sorts of incidents, negotiated awesome tunnels huge locks and amazing viaducts, rescued a stranded boat, waved happily at peniches, fishermen, ducks and other boats. It was all part of the adventure as we became used to yet another change in our way of life. We began to absorb some of the ambience of La Belle France and its people. We reached Beaucaire and were offered a fine berth alongside a pontoon with a limited supply of free electricity. All this time, the fridge gave no trouble. Nor did it throughout the winter.

Spring arrived, temperatures improved and we departed Beaucaire our intention being to take a leisurely cruise along Canal du Midi before rigging our stick and heading off for the Greek Islands. However we had grown accustomed to the leisurely way of life in France and so found ourselves in no hurry to move on from one mooring spot to another.

As the temperatures rose we found ourselves fighting a losing battle with the electrical supply demands of the fridge. Our natural energy sources were unable to cope, necessitating long engine running battery charging periods. Unfortunately it became imperative to charge in the evening to ensure that sufficient power was available overnight. Often it was necessary to run again first thing in the morning. We realised this was somewhat antisocial and found ourselves searching out secluded spots where we would trouble no one with our noise. However, for some reason our boat is a magnet, and wherever we moored, others would surround us. We do not regard ourselves or our boat as particularly attractive but it was a fact that we seemed to be something of a Pied Piper particularly to hire boats. One such skipper was once so anxious to moor closeby that he leapt ashore without his bow line. Unseen by us he watched helpless as his forty foot cruiser made off down wind. His wife, still aboard apparently could neither start the engine nor heave the mooring line. By the time he had knocked us up asking for assistance his vessel was in danger of careering over the weir which lay in wait downstream. We took him aboard, cast off and chased after his boat.

Coming along side we put him aboard and stood by. He made it to the conn., started his engine and shot off to the next lock without even a thank you!

It was not necessary to charge our battery after that escapade and the fridge made it through the night without shutting down for lack of volts. The battery charging problem was rapidly becoming worse as the year advanced and temperatures rose. We developed a real paranoia as the battle to maintain adequate amp/hrs became more desperate. Often, waking at six, the low battery warning light would be on, necessitating an immediate engine run or risk losing the entire contents of the fridge. The average internal temperature gradually rose until we began to wonder if the fridge was having any effect. We had already halved its capacity by inserting a spare block of insulation in the centre. Meat, milk, butter, escargots went to the end where the cooler unit was fitted, whilst things of lesser import such as beer and dog food went to the far end. Next we bought a brand new high capacity battery and by altering the wiring slightly, dedicated it to fridge supply and sole receipt of solar and wind generator charging. It made no appreciable difference. It was at about this stage that we realised that our once wonderful device had degenerated to having become the 'F' word. It had become our cat o' nine tails.

Following an unfortunate, unhappy and damaging encounter with a very large peniche, we were obliged to stay at Frontignan for somewhat longer than intended whilst effecting repairs. The local L.A.s who have been there years made it clear that we and our frequent engine runs were not welcome. We left under a cloud. "***Get yourself a gas fridge" they shouted,*** we had already started looking! Dammit how stupid had I been selling off the two we had in U.K. We went to chandlers, camping shops, car boots, flea markets, breakers yards etc. and the time behaving like a scurvy ship. *Why don't you use your 'genny' suggested one bright spark! Well, simple, it makes 20 amps, the engine makes 90!*

One Sunday morning we cycled from Agde to Marseillon Plage and walked all round the massive car boot sale which is held there weekly. Not a fridge to be seen. Just as we were leaving, a stall holder produced from his van, a large white box and set it down on his display table. Trying hard not to appear over interested we casually sidled over. It was exactly what we were looking for, top loading and clean as a whistle. It contained a stuffed polar bear and the Frenchman explained that he had been resident within for some years. ***Combien le prix sil vous plait M'sieur ? 200 Francs (£20). Il Marche tres bien nest pas? Oui oui, tres tres bien!*** There followed a deluge of French explaining everything to do with it's history. We smiled knowingly and passed over the money.

Some how we loaded both fridge and an earlier purchased playpen onto the rear carrier of my bike and cycled precariously back to Agde where we had been hiding in the bank side for some weeks. Our puppy dog was not impressed with the playpen. well what else could it have been intended for. ? The fridge was turned upside down and encouraging gurglings were heard. Next day we cleaned its gas jet, checked its integrity in general and discovered from its serial number that it was probably very old. We fired it up in the cockpit and waited, Fifteen minutes passed before I could no longer resist the urge to inspect the interior. The resident polar bear soon found himself evicted, for oh what joy, it was cooling down! A few hours later we transferred the contents of the built in unit to our newly acquired gas fridge. We turned off the Peltior effect monster for the last time and felt greatly relieved. After a few days the gas fridge began to warm rather than cool its contents. The fault was quickly and easily remedied, It turned out the chimney tube insulation needed reorganisation. 'Thereafter it became super efficient. ice formed on its cooling unit and we thankfully stopped running our engine and feeling like lepers. I contemplated transferring the gas cooldown system to our built in fridge. Somehow I could not bring myself to dismantle our new acquisition, so well did it function, but it took up valuable space and should have been installed where the built in one was, It took only a few hours with a hammer chisel and scraper to destroy five weeks of work.

The vacant space thus created accommodated the fridge very neatly and left additional space adjacent for the storage of fruit, veg. and beer. We have not looked back since. To those pundits who decry gas systems aboard a boat I say **rubbish**, it will only be dangerous if you allow it to become so and you are in charge of that! We test our system frequently, we have an embarrassingly sensitive gas alarm and have no fear of gas aboard even though I have more than once seen the appalling results of explosions. I have never seen or heard of one which was not the result of carelessness. We do however shut it off overnight.

#### **Here is our simple leak test procedure:-**

*First turn on and use a gas ring. Then turn everything off including your supply cylinder. This isolates a charge of gas under pressure in the supply piping. After one hour, turn on your smallest gas burner whilst holding a match or lighter to it. Do not turn on the gas supply at the bottle. The burner should light and maintain a flame albeit briefly. If not, then the pressure in the system has leaked out somewhere. Find it by painting pipes and joints with soapy water . Repair or replacement can then be affected.*

*Solenoid operated shut off cocks are available for fitment at the bottle end. We do not have one preferring to keep electrics out of this compartment. Gas flow bubble telltales are also available for insertion into the supply. These are intended to warn where a gas flow is evident even though all gas appliances may be off. All these and other gas associated items are available from Southampton Gas Centre who have everything you could need over the counter. However, if dealing with this particular outfit beware their swingeing twenty percent returned goods charge if you find you have over ordered or purchased something unsuitable for the purpose for which it was intended.*

The fridge has increased gas consumption by around fifteen percent. Its efficiency its almost comparable with a freezer. During high ambient temperatures we run a computer fan attached to the cooling fins to ensure an adequate air flow here. Such fans are readily available from computer repair centres and have a negligible electrical appetite.

We fitted a small flue to the gas chimney otherwise condensation could be produced and potentially poisonous flue gasses could remain on board. We made the flue as short as possible and took it out through a proprietary skin fitting.

Well I think I'll just dig out a nice cold beer and install a bottle of wine for tonight's dinner. I will be careful not to leave them in overlong however as they could turn out too cold even for the South of France.



## **AKU-AKU ... Reflections on the French Canals!**

*By Dave Thomas CL 9.07*

**BANG!-----CRACK!** a sound like a rifle shot drew our startled attention to the parting of a 22mm polypropylene stern mooring warp. AKU -AKU our catamaran house and home was being sucked towards the massive black gunwales of "Valiant", the biggest commercial barge I have ever encountered outside the Rhone, We had seen her long sharp bow and high wheelhouse in the distance, knowing of her reputation for giving no quarter, we went astern to find a spot where we could moor safely and allow her to pass. But now, her massive displacement sucked us out and spun us around putting paid to our prudence and caution as our stern hit her side,

a davit was wiped off,  
we were then rammed against the sharp concrete canal side,  
first one bow and then the other as the spin continued.  
Away went the other davit,  
we were battered and bumped all the way down the side of the vessel.  
Next our bow line parted with another loud report  
our other bow was again rammed up the concrete as we were sucked and drawn right around  
through 180 degrees.  
Thankfully the barge was so heavily laden and low in the water that our mast, carried on crutches,  
miraculously cleared her decks. Time stood still. We were powerless to do anything until the horror  
passed. Then we were left bobbing helpless in the middle of the canal. We stared after the  
inappropriately named *Valiant* as she proceeded on her awful way as though nothing had happened!  
I scurried below and tore up deckboards. Incredibly we were not making water! I dived in to recover  
various items which had been knocked over the side We looked in disbelief at our parted mooring  
lines, recently purchased and easily adequate for the job so we had believed!

We tenuously motored on to Frontignan, gradually recovering some of our wits on the way. Here we  
met a large Dutch steel barge that had been rammed onto rocks by the same vessel. She was looking  
for someone to assess the underwater damage. As it happens, I am a diver, but with regret I did not  
volunteer my services on this occasion, feeling far too shaken to undertake the task.

To repair the damage, we shored up using timbers alongside some steps in the quay thus lifting our  
bows well clear of water. We effected repairs by working from the bottom step and our dinghy, half  
inflated.

The residents at Frontignan advised us to report the accident to the Gendarmerie, (I felt disinclined  
to embroil ourselves with French bureaucracy having suffered "difficulties" in the past with the  
export of an aeroplane).

The incident with the inappropriately named *Valiant* occurred along a particularly narrow, cluttered  
and shallow stretch of the canal between Magalonne and Frontignan in the South of France. Some  
months later we had occasion to pass the same spot again and comprehensive dredging works were  
in progress. Huge spoil banks bore witness to the magnitude of the works and it seemed that  
perhaps there may have been a few more victims thus forcing V.N.F. to react.

**Lessons learned:** We shall never know what may have happened had we continued and attempted to  
pass *Valiant* port to port as is just.

It was undoubtedly shallow to starboard with a great many visible sharp obstructions poking up.  
Our forward viewing sonar showed it up well, its transponder being installed in the starboard hull!  
We have adopted a policy of securing at least four warps ashore when these monsters are about.

### ***To my amazement, they sometimes sail at night!***

We have found other similar huge barges grounded whilst negotiating locks, shifting their loads with  
an on board crane in an attempt to solve the problem.

***Incredibly the skipper and crew of one vessel appeared to be students on vocational work  
experience!***

Yet we must pass a **CEVNI** test before we are allowed into the canal network.

Moving on to this subject, a somewhat bizarre situation now exists here in the Euro inland  
waterways particularly in the French Canal du Midi which runs from Bordeaux to the South Coast  
where there are a number of exits to the Med. If you are British, and you wish to access the Med. via  
the canal system then you will be obliged to comply with certain Euro regulations governing your  
passage. If you have an R.Y.A. Helmsman's certificate of competence with a currently valid inland  
waterways endorsement then you will be able to navigate the waterways quite legally until such time  
as it comes up for renewal. At this point the R. Y.A. will see fit to disqualify you by removing your  
inland waterway endorsement. To regain this qualification you must pay to sit and pass a written  
CEVNI test/exam. and prove to the satisfaction of one of 'their accredited schools that you are  
capable of handling a boat If you happen to be already in the canal system at the time, you may well

find yourself forced to return to U.K. in order to achieve this. It was not the R. Y.A. who moved the qualification goal posts of course.

### ***The infamous Eurocrats were the culprits, well, what a surprise!***

Now let us look at another side of the coin which makes this situation seem ludicrous in the extreme.

If it should be that you wish to sample these canals and the French lifestyle you may decide to **hire a boat** here thus saving the time and trouble of a channel crossing. This being so, you may contact anyone of the many hire boat companies which operate in the waterways. Almost without exception they are British run. There are around 3,400 hire boats operating at anyone time within the confines of these waterways mostly in Canal du Midi.

Now here is the interesting bit.

A boat **HIRER** needs no qualifications whatsoever and can rent a motor cruiser such as the one in the photo which may be up to 45 ft in length. Such vessels are possessed of little water bite but carry a great deal of top hamper and obviously suffer unpredictable windage problems. It will not matter in the least however if in fact an aspirant to the conn has never set foot aboard a boat let alone steered one since the hire company will provide a "**sailing card**" which amongst other things, certifies that they have taught the hirer to handle the craft! (*see page 10 of Sailor's Guide Canal des Mers 2001 issued by Voies Navigable de France*). How said companies manage to carry out such instruction in the very little time available during turn rounds is something of a miracle" since maintenance and cleaning is also done at the same time. Staff must be hard pressed to get it all done. Maintenance and repair appear to be conducted during winter and or when something breaks. We heard of an engine that performed several somersaults in its bay. The bearers having been allowed to deteriorate so badly they simply disintegrated when throttle was applied.

Chaotic scenes, collisions" hornblasts, lock gate races, international gesticulations coupled with thunderous vocal suggestions are the order of the day.

The boats in question are aptly nicknamed "**Bumper boats**" for this is how they spend most of their time. They are armed with numerous dangling fenders and comprehensive rubber fendering capped with stainless steel strip. Needless to say this can be very unkind indeed to ones fibreglass when you suffer the inevitable contact For some reason hirers are mostly German. They arrive at hire centres in Mercs. and BMW s expecting a hire boat to behave in much the same way as their autobahn chariots. Often the crews are all male" and it appears almost obligatory for the boat to wear the **largest Skull and Crossbones** flag that can be found. Whilst many people find this deeply **offensive**, others feel it to be quite appropriate and should in fact be **mandatory** for it is normally used to mark a poisonous substance or a minefield!

The standard method of going alongside is both ingenious and reliable. A crew member is despatched to the forward deck armed with the bitter end of the bow line. The helmsman will then aim the bows at the canal bank at as near 90 degrees as can be managed. Full throttle is then applied so that the vessel hits the bank hard enough to ride up it and come to a halt. The crew member js thus catapulted through the air onto the bank hopefully takIng the bow line wjth him. Some other person aboard may then throw hammer and stake ashore possibly thus braining the advance bowlinesman. The latter, should he survive, will hammer in a stake and attach the **line**. Meanwhile the stern, having been left to its own devices will have proceeded downwind or downstream and *it* seems to come as a surprise to those aboard the boat that this happens. At this point a stem line is sometimes taken ashore and the situation brought under some form of control! Bumper boat hire companies ensure that bow and stern lines are no longer than the boat itself, there being less chance of a prop fouling that way. It means however that the flying bowlineman has no chance of simultaneously taking both lines ashore even if the idea entered his head!

In locks it is common for them to halt simply by fetching up on the stem of the preceding vessel or the lock gates, though this can earn severe rebuke from their keepers, who vary from the downright surly to the very patient and pleasantly helpful. Theirs is indeed an unusual way of life.

Wintering in the canals can be, to say the least, unpredictable. There are many stopovers and quays where limited facilities and electricity are provided f.o.c. Regrettably a certain flag is notorious for its abuse of such

amenities, the bypassing of supply meters and safety limit trips is commonplace as is the plugging in of two or more connections to feed one vessel. We have seen an industrial air compressor directly connected to the supply grid wiring, thus bypassing all electrical safety devices. The inevitable result is the total cut-off of such facilities and who can blame the authorities for so doing when there is such blatant abuse. It is not uncommon to find lamp posts tapped into. *Unfortunately for those resorting to this practice they have generally failed to find a way of fooling said lamp posts into providing electricity during daylight hours!* Should one be fortunate enough to find a legitimate working electrical supply, it is likely a sudden disconnection may occur. Investigation will likely find your plug drowned in the canal and another substituted. Stand up fisticuffs and worse have sometimes occurred. Often both electricity and water are fed from a common obelisk the resultant supply is unpredictable and may be literally shocking. It is well established that water and electricity do not make good bed fellows and it seems amazing that such ill conceived arrangements exist.

**Bodies** are fished out of the canals with alarming frequency particularly during the winter. Should you happen to collide with any, or perhaps discover one nudging against your hull, best ignore it. The reporting of such, may well find you accused of having been responsible for the deceased's demise. Since you found it dead, you may well have been the last to see it when still alive is the premise! Regretably theft takes its toll as Unfortunate victims have been relieved of trousers containing wallets, bikes, motor cycles, generators large and small even when chained and or bolted on deck Such thefts have some times taken place in broad daylight! Reporting such occurrences may cause you far more trouble than it is worth. Some times the canal makes a convenient dump after the odd shooting has occurred. One body was discovered immersed amidst an oil slick, still astride a motor cycle! The town of Agde alone chalked up three clients for the undertaker over the last Xmas holiday period. The local undertaker displays a large sign which reads. "PARKING reserve for clients".

But don't let any of this put you off life for survivors in these waterways is in fact mostly convivial, sociable and thoroughly enjoyable. It is a fact that many a once proud sailing vessel has become completely canalerised. Their owners have become addicted to the way of life and see no good reason for putting to sea again. Masts are sometimes cut up and literally scrapped. Bilge and fin keels are also often dispensed with not always with premeditation. Curious structures appear on some boats where once there was a cockpit. Some of them are U.P.V.C. with double glazed windows. It is not too difficult to understand why, for there is never a dull moment" always something different lurks around the next bend and tying up alongside the bank for a few days costs nothing. It is also unlikely that seasickness will occur! Many boaters have cars and somewhat amusingly hike or bike back along tow paths to recover them and catch up with their boats. Larger vessels crane their cars aboard usually onto the poop deck Shoreside general interest abounds.

Carnivals start at the beginning of February.

# Les Joutiers are a wonderful spectacle in their brightly painted cutters as they joust with lance and shield from platforms high on the stem. In the bows are musicians with fife and drum and stalwart oarsmen wear traditional white flannels and straw boaters. Inter town competitions lasting several hours involving a great many participants are fiercely contested in the South. Many beaches are easily reached from the canals, some are for naturists and there are good lifeguard patrols. Back in the canals bankside flashers and bridge top mooners provide their own unique brand of entertainment foc.

Here in the Camarge there are wild white horses, pink flamingos, kingfishers" brightly coloured bee eaters, watersnakes and terrapins. Often there is free entertainment, dancing and gastronomic delights including barbecues on bankside or cockpit. Historic architecture and pageantry is to found everywhere. Open air markets offer amazing produce at good prices. There is also Petanque, (**Boules to you**).

Further entertainment may be derived from **Autumn fly swat** competitions. Standard size and type of swat must be agreed. Scoring is based on how many victims large or small, participant competitors can kill in one day. Several, in one swat counts double score, whilst an unlikely total miss may put you back ten. Successive squadrons of mosquitoes and "no see urns" will devour some unfortunates whilst ignoring others. In common with vampires they are said to find garlic repugnant. Consumption of considerable quantities of it may help this problem whilst also serving to disguise your nationality which can be advantageous when dealing with shoreside traders.

Astronomers will love the clear undistorted skies and there is fishing everywhere. No wretched bailiff



will appear from nowhere intent on spoiling a fisher's enjoyment. Considerate boats slacken speed and avoid their tackle. It is obviously in everyone's best interest to do so. Most fishers acknowledge with a friendly wave.

If you perhaps would like a pet cat or dog, don't bother to go looking, for sooner or later at least one will be given you or will simply come aboard and make its self comfortable. Cats, whilst popular and supposedly little trouble, can be awkward. They both board and jump ship as and when it suits them or will scale a tree ashore, just before negotiation of a lock is imminent. ***Don't believe they keep mice and rats down. In fact they are notorious for bringing them aboard as prizes to share with their owners.*** Some clever victims sometimes escape leaving the hapless Skipper with the difficult task of extermination. Their nocturnal activities can be noisy and disturbing as they demolish insulation and wiring causing havoc with the electrics. The galley is obviously unlikely to escape their aspirations. We even know of a rat that followed the cats route aboard through the cat flap! The cat was totally disinterested in assisting with its capture. A great deal of time and effort was put into the catching of it. It was cornered and captured only to escape whilst the skipper was deciding on a method of dispatch. Either two had boarded this unfortunate vessel, or the creature chose to return, for the nocturnal disturbances continued. Once again and with even greater difficulty it was captured, but this time a swift and unceremonious knock on the head was administered. Obviously, if in fact a pair boarded there may be offspring left aboard! Only time will tell.

The cat has lost a great many Brownie points. Our small dog "Salty", by contrast, having been brought up aboard, fiercely guards our floating home against all invaders big or small!

All this coupled with dodging bumper boats. scraping under incredibly low archway bridges, avoiding submerged cars and barges all devoid of marker buoys adds further to the fun.

*French wine and beer whilst palatable are rubbish, for they share a remarkable ability to evaporate! However said beverages are ridiculously cheap and one does learn to tolerate this odd feature.* This, and the general low cost of living tends to make one resentful of British taxes and perhaps the idea of a return to U.K. may become unthinkable. However it may not be the place to come to avoid heart attacks. Seriously folks it's great, and the French are lovely. Generally, you don't get ripped off here.

***Vive la Belle France.***

PS. Do however keep a sharp lookout for le "***Crotte du Chien***" whilst on a run ashore!