

The plan had been to sail to Gravelines/Dunkirk, on to Ostend/Nieuwpoort and then home, but reports were coming in of yachts being boarded by Belgian Customs and Excise and fined if found to have traces of red diesel. So Belgium was out and the 'hop' from Dunkirk to Holland looked like meaning a long passage involving 6 hours of not going very far in the middle. In the event, the weather decided us against these grander plans anyway.

Meanwhile, back in Dover, a one-tide crossing to Gravelines looked like a tall order, but it could be done from Calais, so we determined to sail for Calais on Saturday. Should have put the sails up inside Dover Harbour because, outside, I now know, the tide creates a fearful rip just off the entrance western entrance. This, combined with a stiff breeze, had us on our beam ends and the view from the mast was of Dover moving around like a cork. No, wait a minute...

A quick reassessment, and the thought that we had one complete rookie and the remaining two crew with no sea-legs as yet, led to a return to Dover with our tails between our legs and back to Wetherspoons for dinner.

A day gone and Sunday dawned completely calm. A Channel crossing under motor didn't appeal so we made for Ramsgate, on which was based my original passage plan (it being more cross-tide makes Gravelines more attainable). Outside the eastern entrance to Dover (ferry-free, incredibly) there was still a fairly steep chop as the tide whipped past the groynes. I think I see, now, why they ask you to stay 1 mile off when passing Dover - it isn't only to make shipping avoidance safer. (I've been past Dover numerous times, but this was the first time I'd ever been inside on a small boat.)

We can recommend the Greek restaurant in Ramsgate - good food and cheerful staff. I, unfortunately, eventually got the courage (from a bottle, of course) to try to use some of my 25 year-old Greek. It didn't end well, but they seemed happy to let me make a fool of myself.

Monday came with very little wind, but a forecast that promised things would pick up, and so it came to pass. We motored out but caught a breeze before we reached Goodwin Knoll at the north end of the sands. Across the separation schemes with a tide setting us SW (from memory), we reached the other side just as the tide turned to take us up to the entrance to Gravelines. A beautifully clear day allowed for easy spotting of landmarks, though it would be a grim day when you couldn't see the World's Biggest Nuclear Power Station (well, it is pretty big) just to the east of Gravelines. Eventually, we could see the stripy lighthouse near Gravelines, although we didn't immediately appreciate that it was half way up the entrance channel, so some course adjustment was needed once the long breakwaters were spotted. (Now then, if you were building a couple of fairly substantial lights to mark

the entrance to your port, what colour would you make them? Well, I'll tell you the French answer - make them exactly the same colour as the beach. It's modern-day wrecking is what it is.)

Up the 'shallow' entrance channel - never less than 2m under the keel - radio the port de plaisance (marina). They speak English, thank goodness. Somewhat chastened by the Greek experience, neither I nor the others fancied speaking French on a radio.

The 'drying' marina isn't. Plenty of water under us at all times. The marina restaurant wasn't the best we've known. We spent Tuesday largely keeping out of the sun and drinking beer. Wednesday, we left at around high tide, because you have to, picked through the sandbanks, across the separation schemes and headed for the Long Sand two-way route. By then the tide had turned foul, and we staggered up and past Rough's Tower, reaching Cork Sand just as the tide turned again. Er, foul again, because we're now in the grip of the river. 3 hours it took to get to SYH, although we did get to see a huuuge container ship attended by busy tugs. For a while, it was pointing straight at us and we discussed whether the river mud would stop it before it got to us. We never found out, you'll be glad to know. The winds had built all day, and we spent time with 3 reefs in while still managing 6 knots with the wind on the quarter.

Tied to a buoy outside SYH for the night then went inside on a breezy morning and Two days in the marina and then home.

Pictures will be posted on the website, so check them out.

John Davie.