

All Ashore in Boulogne

John Harrison: circa 1966

It would have been a good day for sailing and there I was sitting behind my desk on this spring morning wondering about my new boat. The 'phone rang and my blood chilled slightly with a premonition of something fairly traumatic about to happen. After some preliminary Gallic nattering and familiar voice filled my right ear-hole: "Zhojnn? Thees is Neek. Plees zhou must elp me!"

Probably through some quirk of his early up-bringing as a Hungarian aristocrat, Nick has a violent antipathy to the telephone and his normally quite tolerable accent needs an armour piercing bullet to get through it when he is talking down the pipe. He went on: "Vee arr twenty kilometers from Boulogne, zee trailer she is broke an' I haf no monee. Please you must 'elp mee!"

After making appropriately reassuring noises, I slowly replaced the handset with the beginning of a plan emerging from the black panic which had almost taken hold when I thought of my gorgeous Kim Holman designed North Sea 24 flattening some onion field in Brittany under her massive 71/2 tons of good, honest wood-built displacement.

Here, perhaps I should re-cap a bit to set the scene of events leading up to this caper: through a chain of coincidences which sometimes affect one's life I had met Nick Kenyeres shortly after he had founded his Carabela S.L. yard near Barcelona. Although obviously short of experience in building offshore racers, his enormous enthusiasm was infectious and after consultation with my friend and racing skipper Kim Holman, I decided to take the plunge and order a boat from Nick, only the second of the North Sea 24s to be built.

Several visits to Barcelona later and in a space of time which would have had the foreman of a typical British yard sucking his teeth, the boat was finished; a glittering master-piece of white paint with hand crafted joinery which would have had Chippendale looking to his laurels. Then came a problem with which we had not reckoned. The English transport contractor had had trouble with his rig and wouldn't be able to make it. No-one else could be found to take the job on at short notice. In those days yachts weren't toted across Europe overland as a matter of course and although restrictions were few, suitable boat-humping outfits were fewer.

Nick's Hungarian flair for improvisation made nothing of this dilemma. He would knock up a trailer and with his Spanish Army surplus Land Rover do the transport job himself. It was obviously the sort of challenge which, to a man who had knocked umpteen I-16's and Ratas out of the sky over the Russian Front when flying a Messerschmit 109-G as leader of Hungarian air-force fighter group, was meet and drink. Either it was the St Miguel or the Sangria, but I accepted this plan happily enough and climbed aboard the next Vanguard back to Heathrow. At least, it should have been Heathrow but turned out to be Palma-de-Majorca. But that's another story!

And so back to me sitting moodily at my desk that Saturday morning not knowing what had happened to my new boat. When in trouble it is nice to have friends. A call to Dick Davidson got me a V.I.P. passage to Boulogne with 'Dover', Captain Blaxland, British rail's new flagship on the run. Some concentrated motoring got me to Dover in a space of time about which the Essex and Kent constabulary would have cared for not at all!

The passage to Boulogne on 'Dover's' bridge was an interesting insight into the problems of the Channel packets and I was impressed by the very 'pusser' lines on which the ship was run. In comparison with today, the Straits were relatively traffic free and it is no wonder that there is now a high incidence of stomach ulcers amongst watch-keeping officers on the cross-channel packets.

I had been wondering about how I was going to find Nick, but that Hungarian charm had risen to the occasion and he had conned a French garage owner into fixing the wheel-bearings of the trailer and accompanying him to Boulogne to collect his reward (which included numerous slugs of Cognac) from his English friend and client. This of course was before the cementing of the Anglo-French friendship and co-operation through the E.E.C. So, there we were at the ferry terminal in Boulogne with the straight-forward chore of putting the whole outfit aboard ship and so across the dreaded Manche to good old Angleterre.

It must have been the state of euphoria induced by the fact that all had gone so well that caused me to fail to query the incredibly low ferry rate charged by the French ticket officer after his minion had been dispatched to check the overall dimension's of Nick's massive towing rig; but it was this oversight which was to be the beginning of the horrific chain of events which were now to be welded. The minion had returned with the correct overall length of the 18 metres entered on his docket, but this, unknown to me, had been altered to 8 metres by the dispenser of tickets who obviously just did not believe his original figure; boat, trailer and Land Rover being outside his line of vision.

I returned to Nick who, with his gorgeous daughter Eva and his soft-eyed Catalan foreman Pobeida who had formed back-up personnel for the safari across Europe, were catching up with a little sustenance in the buffet, triumphantly displaying the tickets and explaining that all we now had to do was to drive the rig aboard the car-ferry and be swiftly and efficiently transported to Dover. The practise proved rather different.

By now a column of mostly English mums and dads, reddened by the unaccustomed Mediterranean sun and needled by the whining of tired children were sitting in their assorted (at that time 98% British manufactured) motors obviously dying for the moment when they could get aboard and so be that bit nearer to rolling ashore, home at last to that proper cup of English Rosie. To our surprise we were directed to join this column by the dispatcher; the surprise being engendered by the nature of the approach ramp to the ferry loading area which even at a distance looked inadequate to cope with our Land Rover dwarfed by its load of a 31'-6" offshore racer of massive displacement. Our protests were talked down by the dispatcher who, with true Gallic fervour urged us towards the ramp with encouraging waving of arms and piercing blasts on a whistle.

Nick let in the clutch like there was no tomorrow, shouting at the same time that “vee must ‘ave speed to make zee uphill” and the poor short wheelbase Land Rover vibrated in agony as we charged the narrow ramp’s entrance. As the bonnet rose to cut the sky-line my stomach chilled as I realised the blasted ramp thing (which was fenced either side by six-foot ship-lap) tightened into a spiral which diminished beyond any turning circle it was possible for Nick’s rig to achieve. The result was inevitable. There we were trapped for all the world like Pooh Bear half-way up his rabbit hole!

Silence descended as the over-stressed Rover engine, after gallantly spinning the front wheels, finally stalled and Nick stepped out of the cab rather like the entrance of the Demon King in pantomime – shrouded in a cloud of smoke and accompanied by a strong smell of burning from the clutch. He surveyed the carnage with a wonderfully expressive Hungarian shrug of the shoulders and flexing of the palms. Pobeida fussed around the trailer for possible damage and Eva remained coolly and attractively aloof in the back of the Land rover; her heavily plastered right ankle, the result of a skiing incident, lending further drama to the situation.

After some minutes and whilst we were still recovering from a state of semi-shock, a pair of hands appeared clasping the top of the fence to be followed by a porter’s type cap which slowly rose between them. Eyes appeared below the peek of the cap, the total resemblance to one of the many faces of Chad holding me like a chicken confronted by a serpent. The eyes looked at us, switched to the near inextricably jammed towing rig and the eye-brows vanished under the peak of the cap like a rocket getting off the pad at Cape Canaveral to the accompaniment of a fervent sigh of “ Mon Dieu!”

The apparition disappeared rather more rapidly than it had materialised, only to re-appear in the company of Chad 2, distinctive by an abundance of scrambled egg adorning the hat peak. The two pairs of eyes appraised the scene with obvious and mounting agitation, then vanished downwards one after the other like a pike float and its pilot at the end of a good ‘run’. A pause ensued during which we began assessing the engineering niceties of extricating the boat and land Rover from their positions locked across the ramp and the fences.

By this time the column of homeward bound cars had edged forward up the ramp behind us and a small delegation which included Chads 1 & 7 “ plus a heavily built tweed suited gentleman with an ‘en brosse’ hair style advanced through the melee. This proved to be British Rail’s senior port officer who, despite the haircut, turned out to be a Gallicised Yorkshireman with all that race’s aptitude for choleric expression. Having relieved himself of what he thought of us, the boat and yachtsman in general whilst turning aside any suggestions of inefficiency on the part of his staff, he summoned by walkie-talkie a large posse of well-built Boulogne ‘dockies’ to assist with the slow and precarious task of jacking up a trailer and boat, blocking it over and slowly manoeuvring the whole outfit down the ramp.

This took literally hours. The mums and dads were by now in a ferment. The sun was low in the West and still the whole car-loading facility at Boulogne remained firmly stoppered with ferries beginning to queue to get into the wharf. Children cried, cars honked in the distance unaware of the First

Blockade of Boulogne since World War II and I think it is quite on the cards that fisherman who were interested spectators to the proceedings remembered the incident when staging their own version years later!

At last we could drive the rig away from the loading area with a parting admonition from the Port officer of: "Take t'bloody thing to Dunkirk, they'll load you down there, but whatever you do don't let me see you back here!" We drove around the back of a building giving cover from view, parked the outfit and adjourned to the nearest bar for an unwinding session involving a few beers while we also held a council of war. The conclusions were that there was nothing else we could do but take the advice hurled after us and make for the train-ferry loading wharves at Dunkirk or Calais.

By the time we were ready for the road shadows were very long and the Boulogne street lights beginning to come on. As we pulled away from the docks it became clear that the Land Rover's much abused clutch was not going to stand much more and ominous 'blowing' sounds from the engine indicated that the head gasket wasn't happy either. The road ahead began to slope upwards and as the incline increased I realised we hadn't a hope of making it to the top. I urged Nick to pull into the side and stop suggesting that we found a cammion which could be bribed to give us an assisting tow. Nick was having none of this and with the remaining way we still had on, turned hard right into a side road saying "Vee vill go aroun' and down to zee bottom again". This theory might have worked but for the fact that the road quickly narrowed into an alley which palpably was not going to accept the ten foot plus beam of the trailer!

The French at that time were no way into the offshore scene like they are now, but the sight of a land-borne offshore racer was obviously attractive, for the small crowd of onlookers which had gathered began to swell to unmanageable proportions. By now Nick seemed to have been seized with a sort of Magyar frenzy and wasn't listening to reason. I retreated to the fringes of the crowd to get my breath back and assess the situation at a safer distance. To my horror, the rig came rocketing astern, Nick having apparently decided to get plenty of steam up before attempting to reverse up across the hill and so get the whole shebang pointing to the bottom again.

In company with the crowd I got out of the way, running back to the junction of the side-road with the hill in time to see the North Sea 24, now half-way across the slope, rock gently side-ways as the uphill wheels of the trailer left the ground! Showing either extreme fearlessness or a lack of appreciation of the forces of gravity, the crowd surged around the trailer as it came to a halt, returned to all four wheels and began to move inexorably down the hill, jack-knifing the Land rover as it gathered momentum. "This is it" I thought, "any moment now we're going to see fifty squashed Frenchman, a pile of match-wood and 2.4 tons of iron down at the bottom of the hill!"

Fortunately, before any real momentum had built up, the Land Rover, still jack-knifed, bumped up the pavement and wedged firmly sideways against a shop-front, boat and trailer coming at last to a standstill after another heart-stopping teeter onto two wheels. Nick climbed slowly from the driving seat with the light of battle slowly fading from his pale-blue eyes and a mood of common-sense

returning. "Vat do vee do now?" he said. I had been busy asking myself the same question for some time. It was now dark. Flashes from the cameras of local reporters played over the crowd which had collected. A crowd which was undoubtedly friendly, sympathetic and dying to help. My French was nowhere near up to the occasion. Nick had burned himself out and a state of impasse seemed to have arrived. A black Citroen 'traction avant' with two gendarmes aboard stopped on the outskirts of the big crowd. Its occupants silently surveyed the scene....got back in and drove away.

I think it was Napoleon who said something about 'the situation producing the man' and he certainly knew his onions. A blast of twin air-horns announced the arrival of a huge Renault cammion which was obviously looking for a way through the ruck. Failing to do so, it came to a halt. The driver's door swung open and a monumental figure stepped out into the light of the roadside lamps. It stood there, calmly surveying the scene and looking like a giant version of Jean Gabin, striped vest, beret and all. A hand the size of (this was some time ago!) a leg of New Zealand lamb reached inside the cab and the air-horns blasted with a stridency that silenced the crowd and caused their heads to turn.

Then a miracle happened. A voice rivalling the air-horns boomed out from the barrel-chest and the crowd fell completely silent. Concise instructions issued with an easy sense of command followed and from being a rabble the crowd formed itself into two parties and swarmed around the trailer and Land Rover, near fights breaking out in the eagerness to obtain a sound hand-hold. The voice went into the equivalent of the Navy's 'two-six heave'. Incredibly and inch by inch, or to give them their due, centimetre by centimetre, the two parties grunted the whole rig back up the hill, the Land Rover was de-jack-knifed and set back on the road and the miracle was completed. Without damage to anything or anybody we were back in business – but pointing whence we had come.

Nick had by now recovered his composure. My feeling of complete helplessness had begun to fade, and we looked around for some means of rewarding our benefactor, Napoleon. Nick unearthed a case of Barcelona brewed St Miguel from the depths of the Land Rover and our benefactor accepted this with a grave smile and swung back up into the lofty cab after much hand-pumping and good wishes from both sides. We watched his tail-lights fading as the big truck ground on up the hill in low gear. I found myself wondering how the French managed to get over-run by Hitler with characters like that around?

With the poor Land Rover now cooled off and its composure, like Nick's, recovered, we had no trouble returning back down the hill where we renewed our patronage of the bar we had left hours before and planned our next move over a few more beers. I decided that no harm would be done by following that old military adage of "Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted". Donning my 'oily' top and rather self-consciously adding my yachtie type hat as a disguise, I returned to the ferry terminal where the last of the back-log of tired and disgruntled holiday-makers were being shunted aboard. To my relief, I discovered that the whole day shift including our angry Yorkshiremen had gone off and his replacement was an extremely nice young Frenchman who, joy of joys, was also a dedicated offshore racer! His English was without flaw and he listened sympathetically whilst I unfolded the whole grim saga. As I finished the story, he slowly shook his head expressing incredulity

and disbelief. "the imbeciles", he said. "There was no need for them to make you attempt the ramp. There," he pointed to a road leading past the beginning of the dreaded ramp. "There is the way to the commercial loading quay where we have one of the train-ferries coming for especially big loads!"

And that was the end of our troubles. The ferry arrived. Nick drove the rig decorously down the lifting ramp and into the ample empty train deck with Pobeida checking widths, angles, functioning of lights and generally returning to the part of efficient co-driver. I became aware that, like myself, he must have stood back for a bit when the drama of the hill was at its height! Eva remained coolly beautiful and unmoved by it all. I think that episodes of this nature must have been part of her life for years. Nick was right back on form and delighted to find some compatriots aboard the ship. Two drivers en route from Budapest to London, their big trucks stuffed with Hungarian produce.

A chink of dawn was washing the white cliffs behind Dover with pale pink as the ship's stern door made contact with old England's soil. My bleary eyes registered that a final snag had to be overcome. The rig was facing the wrong way and there was no room to turn within the ship. I should have explained before that Nick's trailer was none of your close-coupled wheel jobs that everyone uses now but a monster with a huge wheel four-square at each corner. With 7 1/2 tons of boat on it, it was a bitch to manoeuvre. Fortunately, the ship's bo's'n had seen all this before. Falling in a squad of hefty matelots he directed them, with Pobeida's assistance, in un-coupling trailer from Land Rover and manually backing-and-filling the former until it was the right way round so that the Rover could be re-connected. So there we were at last, trundling up the ramp and into the Customs area where the officers on duty displayed their habitual cool politeness at first but rapidly became interested and tremendously helpful.

Many thousands of sailing miles later, I still cannot enter the port of Boulogne without a twinge of conscience coupled with fond memories of those relatively care-free days before yachts regularly became a major nuisance to port authorities and there was a certain novelty about the appearance of a biggish, modern yacht towed by an insignificant little Land Rover. Don't try anything like it these days chaps. You'd probably find yourself in the cooler, suffering under a mass of E.E.C paperwork!