

In the Wake of Evgenia and Arthur Ransome

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As members of the Arthur Ransome Society, we rightly concentrate on Arthur himself. But how often do we pay more than a passing thought to the most important person in his life - his second wife, Evgenia (Fig.1)?

As owners of their penultimate boat *Lottie Blossom 1*, my wife and I have reason to be grateful to Evgenia. But how important was she to Arthur's work?

We need to recap some history. As a young man, Arthur hated school, dropped out of college, and abandoned his parent's choice of career in science to become a writer and bohemian in London. He had a lowly job in a publishing house. In short, he was in many ways a lost soul, as he admitted in his autobiography.

One consequence of his state of mind was that he proposed to every pretty girl he met. As he wrote,

"I had acquired a very bad habit of beginning the day's work by writing a love letter to some real or imaginary person. What was worse, if the letter was a good one, I sometimes, to my shame, put it in the pillar-box. I can see no excuse for this. Not all my correspondents were as quick and witty as Sylvia Dryhirst who replied 'very nice but you should do it in person. Come along tomorrow afternoon and propose at 4, sharp and then we'll have tea'. Another time, horrified at what I had done, I had to pursue the letter to the banks of the Clyde."

Unfortunately one of the pretty girls - Ivy Walker - accepted. She was histrionic, theatrical, unstable. Arthur claimed that he had married Ivy to save her from her dysfunctional parents. Unfortunately the genes were too strong. After a few years, Arthur couldn't stand it and fled to Russia. There he learnt Russian and translated Russian children's stories into English,



Figure 1: Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina

published in *Old Peter's Russian Tales*. He became a correspondent for the *Daily News* and the then *Manchester Guardian* and observed and reported on the events of the Russian Revolution from the windows of his flat overlooking the Maryinsky theatre, now the Kirov.

He got to know the leaders of the Bolshevik movement including Trotsky in the Smolny Institute in St. Petersburg. To reach Trotsky he had to get past Trotsky's Secretary, Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina. The courtship continued in spite of the turmoil around them until it became too dangerous to remain in Moscow. They escaped to Estonia. Arthur brokered a peace deal between the Bolsheviks and Estonia and they settled in Reval, now Tallinn; later they moved to Riga in Latvia.

Sailing had been one of Arthur's passions since Lake District days and he became the Cruising Association Honorary Local Representative for Riga. During this period he owned three boats: first *Slug* named because of its absence of speed. He wrote: "The boat leaked like a sieve and it says much for Evgenia that after their first eventful spills and sinkings, she was still enthusiastic." Their next boat was *Kittiwake* which was so unstable that Arthur claimed that she heeled one way or the other depending on which side of his mouth his pipe was positioned. Their third boat, *Racundra* they had built and they had several extraordinary voyages in her with Arthur as Master and owner, Evgenia the Cook and Capt Sehmel, (drawn on by AR in *Peter Duck*), as the Ancient Mariner.

All this was Evgenia's first introduction to long-distance cruising, and she was literally dumped in at the deep end. Fortunately she took to it like a duck to water. During a gale described in *Racundra's First Cruise* Arthur wrote,

"Then the Cook struggled up the companion way with a sandwich. She asked with real inquiry 'are we going to be drowned before morning?' I leaned forward from the steering well and shouted 'why?' 'because I have two thermos flasks full of hot coffee. If we are, we might as well drink them both. If not, I'll keep one till tomorrow.' We kept one. We drank the hot coffee from the other and ate a huge quantity of sandwiches. The more we ate the better things seemed. We grew accustomed even to the din. Douses of spray merely made it seem worthwhile to have put on oilskins. The howling of the wind and the recurrent crashing of the waters became monotonous. The Cook, who had been doing her work as calmly as *Racundra* and like *Racundra* was enjoying it, fell asleep in the middle of a laugh".

Not many sailing wives can cope with that!

Their long engagement was largely very happy, although Evgenia's exasperation sometimes surfaced. As Arthur wrote in his diary

"the Cook says there is no point in living in *Racundra* and that only children are glad to live in a ship, that there is nothing to see, nothing to write about, that she's sick of wind and rain and living in a small cabin; that I grow worse with age, and that proper authors live at home and write books out of their heads."



Figure 2: *Lottie Blossom 1* in 1952



Figure 3: Now *Ragged Robin III* in 2003.

Again, two months before they were married, Arthur wrote from London after visiting the Boat Show:-

"My dearest old top..." (short for Topsy: her large size - she was 6 ft 3 in height - added to the instability of *Kittiwake*). "My dearest old top, it is a whole month today since I left you and I miss your ugly mug and even your horrid temper... I spent a whole day at the Boat Show... we are jolly lucky to have got such a stout lump of a boat as *Racundra* so cheap. Not one of the boats shown, though some of them were much bigger, had anything like her cabin. I wouldn't care to live in any one of them unless alone, certainly not with anything less than an angel as a sailor and an Archangel as a cook. Anybody with stiff white feet would make one of those boats impossible in five minutes

while in *Racundra* one can rub along for weeks with storms inside as well as out.

Plenty of room for cyclone and anticyclone".

The divorce from Ivy came through in April 1924 and they were married in May 1924 at the British consulate in Tallinn under the Cruising Association flag. They moved to England and settled in the



Figure 4: *Ragged Robin* since 2004, cutter-rigged

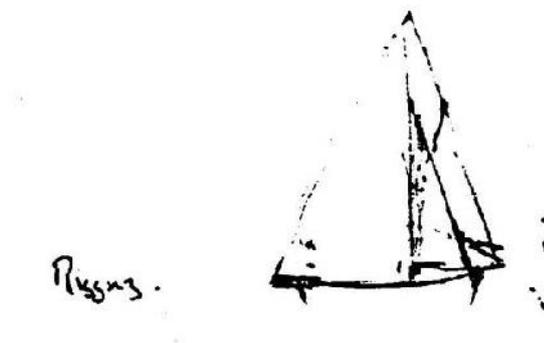


Figure 5: AR had thought of cutter-rigging *Lottie Blossom* first! (Entry in diary)

Lake District in Low Ludderburn. The conditions were very primitive: no running water or electricity. In spite of these, Evgenia provided Arthur with the infrastructure - stability and peace - he needed to unlock his creativity on the first five Swallows and Amazons books. As royalties came in, Evgenia understandably grew tired of the poverty and cold and damp and wanted to move to somewhere warmer and drier. Where was the obvious place? Suffolk! There he bought a second-hand Hillyard seven-tonner and named her *Nancy Blackett*. BUT Evgenia took against it from the start, and it's not surprising when you look at the catering arrangements, drawn completely accurately in *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea*. How could Evgenia be the Cook in those conditions as she had been in *Racundra*? However, Arthur liked *Nancy*, even if Evgenia didn't, and made a voyage to Flushing with a paid hand on which *WD* is based. On return from another voyage in her, he was greeted by Evgenia's frank report on the MS of *WD*: "...had a good skeleton but was dead, flat, nowhere amusing, no dialogue, no characters, and not interesting. I asked were there any good spots and was told No. But next day she had remembered two paragraphs that were fit to pass." Hugh Brogan's biography makes clear that Evgenia's criticisms of the first drafts of AR's children's books were often merciless. Maybe the first drafts were indeed awful, and she spurred Arthur on to his great heights. On occasion, she contributed - the names for Dick and Dorothea, for example. One wonders, though, as Brogan suggests, whether Evgenia's criticism eventually led to Arthur's creativity drying up after *Great Northern*. We will return to this later.

Evgenia, however, was instrumental in getting Arthur to have *Selina King* built at Harry Kings Yard in Pin Mill. *Selina* was undoubtedly the classiest yacht the Ransomes ever owned. Evgenia liked her. BUT the war intervened and after his sailing her up to Lowestoft as the war broke out, she was lost: Arthur was told to give up sailing on doctor's orders.

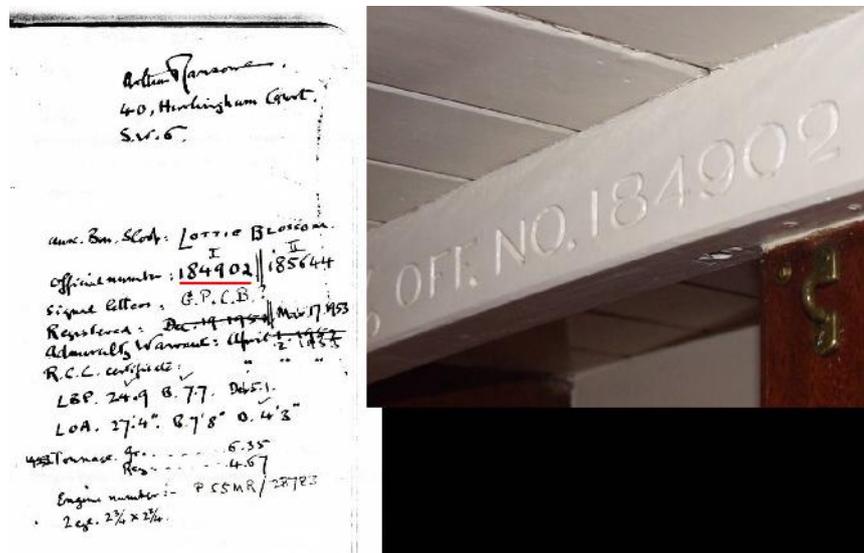


Figure 6: Official Number 184902 in AR's diary and Ragged Robin's deckbeam

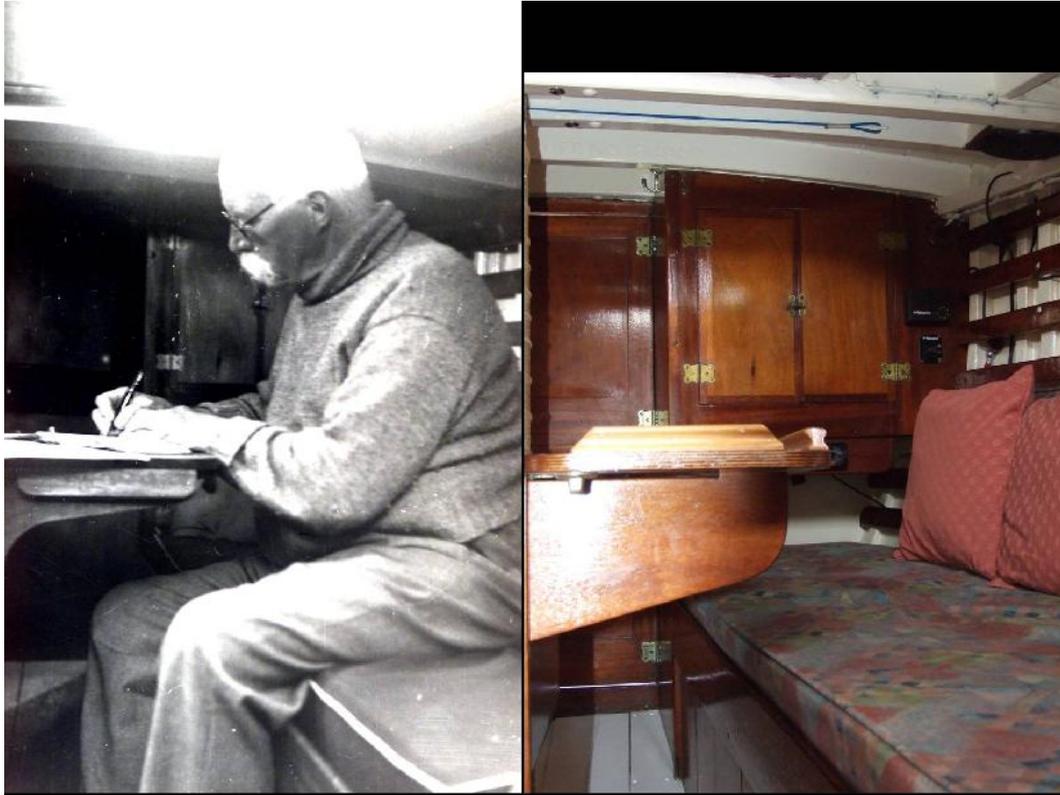


Figure 7: (Left) AR at work in Lottie's main cabin; (Right) same view today

After the war it wasn't long before Arthur thought of a marine "bath-chair" to be designed by one of the best designers of the day - Laurent Giles. BUT both Arthur and Evgenia hated her from the drawing-board onwards. Evgenia wrote that under sail "she looks ridiculous". She leaked, and they had difficulty in getting her to go about and heave-to readily. They got rid of Peter Duck in 1949 and it is interesting that none of the subsequent owners had the same difficulties that they reported. Indeed, Peter Duck was the forerunner of a very successful class - the Peter Duck Class - and something like 40 were built - many of which are still sailing.



Figure 8: (Left) Evgenia at work sitting on the lowered door flap into the rear cabin; (Right) same view today

By 1951, Arthur was hankering after yet another boat. He went down to Littlehampton to visit David Hillyard - the designer and builder of Nancy Blackett - and they selected a Hillyard 6 tonner. Fig. 2 is Arthur's photograph of her in 1952 and Fig. 3 our photograph of her in 2003 shortly after we bought her, now named *Ragged Robin III*. Since 2004, we have cutter-rigged her (Fig. 4), following AR's own idea we found in his diary (Fig. 5), in order to correct the sailing balance of the boat.

How do we know that it is the same boat? After all, very many six tonners have been built, all looking virtually identical. The answer lies in the Official Ship's Registration Number carved into the deck beam: it corresponds with the number in Arthur's Diary for *Lottie Blossom 1*: 184902 (Fig. 6).

By this time, Arthur had his head screwed on and significantly he allowed Evgenia to do two things in the new boat. First of all, he allowed her to name the boat. She chose the name *Lottie Blossom* after the rather flighty actress character in P G Woodhouse's book *Luck of the Bodkins*. Secondly, Arthur writes "Evgenia settling the internal arrangements". Hillyards pioneered series boat-building of wooden boats in standard classes: two-and-a-half tons, 4 tons, 6 tons, 9 tons, 11 tons, 13 tons and so on. They built the boats as hulls and then asked the prospective owners how they wanted the superstructure and interiors arranged. This was Evgenia's role and we benefit from Evgenia's internal layout. The saloon, focs'l - which has a corner cupboard, thanks to Evgenia - and the sizeable galley. Likewise, she insisted on long berths in the saloon with 'trotter-boxes' - space for their feet underneath the cupboards (there would normally be shelves) - so that each berth is 7 ft. That accommodated Arthur's 6 foot 5 inches and Evgenia's 6 ft 3. Also the rear cabin, in which we sleep, is very roomy. It has a fold-down door, which doubles as a seat, chart table and dining table for eating in the well.



Figure 9: Arthur and Evgenia on the foredeck of Lottie Blossom1 in Littlehampton

Fig. 7 shows Arthur at work in the saloon and alongside I've added today's view. The table may be different but everything else is the same - even the hinges on the cupboards at the end of the bunks. Fig. 8 is my favourite picture of Evgenia at work peeling spuds, sitting on the fold-down rear cabin door. Everything we see in the picture is as it is now.

They sailed her through most of 1952 interrupted by a great deal of ill-health on Arthur's part including a prostatectomy at the end of April, losing them the whole of May and June. In spite of this they sailed her from Littlehampton to Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight via Chichester, the Hamble and Beaulieu and back.

We have repeated their passages as closely as we could according to their logs and diaries, which we have researched in the Brotherton Library.

The first passage was a difficult one from Littlehampton to Chichester Harbour. This involves rounding Selsey Bill which can be very dangerous in bad weather particularly as it is encumbered by shoals, notably the notorious Owers. You have a choice of two passages: a safer one outside the shoals and a tricky inner one past the Mixon beacon. They and we chose the the inner one so that you can do the passage on a single tide. Both Littlehampton and Chichester Harbour have nasty bars at the entrances, which mean that you cannot enter near low water. They and we did it on one tide leaving an hour or two before high water and entering Chichester Harbour an hour or two after high water. Arthur wrote that the Mixon "beacon stood up out of the water like a large scale Nass" - the Nass beacon that we have on



Figure 10: Arthur (in skull cap) at the wheel of Lottie Blossom1 in Emsworth Channel, Chichester Harbour.

the East Coast. This is taken from Arthur's letter to Busk - Col Busk whose boat *Lapwing* was the mission ship in SW.

Inside Chichester Harbour they anchored at East Head and picked up a buoy at Itchenor. Arthur wrote after a particularly good sail (Figs. 10, 11):

"Lottie can sail and sail very well - she is not a 50/50 boat but a 75/75.

We thought her 75 per cent motorboat on coming round from Littlehampton but after yesterday's good sail thought her at least 75 per cent sailing boat." "(75/75)".

Beyond Itchenor is the entrance to Birdham Pool where *Lottie Blossom* was kept during a Arthur's bouts of hospitalisation. Fig. 12 shows *Lottie Blossom* with Evgenia feeding the swans and Fig. 13, *Ragged Robin* in virtually the same place. Arthur wrote that they

"shared a lock with *Fiona* a very small motor cruiser skippered by a charming elderly dame who gave us a very sweet smile, no doubt telling herself that we were also old enough to know better".

Arthur was 68, Evgenia 58. Although their first passage was made on April 19th they lost the whole of May and June because of Arthur's prostatectomy in King's College Hospital on April 29th, so *Lottie Blossom* spent most of the time in Birdham Pool with Evgenia largely in charge.

Their next passage was on August 15th. A beautiful day. That was from Chichester Harbour into the River Hamble. Arthur and Evgenia moored in Bursledon at the head of the navigable Hamble River.

On August 21st, they made their third passage from Bursledon to the lovely Beaulieu River. They sailed up the Beaulieu River and picked up a buoy above Bucklers Hard. Evgenia "went ashore to Beaulieu picking mushrooms on the way". They entertained another boat family for dinner in the evening. So Evgenia was back in her old role as the cook. They had regained the pleasure of cruising together that they had last had in *Racundra*.

Their fourth passage from Beaulieu River to Yarmouth Isle of Wight was carried out on August 23rd. Inside Yarmouth Harbour they tied up to the posts. They visited, as we did, the George Hotel. All we know is that they "fraternised with a



Figure 11: Ragged Robin beating down Emsworth Channel

cat on the sea wall of the George." We had our 40th wedding anniversary meal there in 2003.

They returned to Chichester Harbour the next day and Evgenia provided a good meal at the end of the day. Then they were off to Littlehampton on September 12th to discuss with David Hillyard a new boat! This was to have an identical hull to the first *Lottie Blossom* but tiller steering and a rear cockpit. The first *Lottie Blossom* has two cabins divided by a central well with wheel steering, which Arthur never could get used to - we love it! Also, Arthur dropped the mainsail, with Evgenia at the wheel, on her head, so *she* took against it! The new boat would be "a real single-hander which *Lottie Blossom* one can never be". Again, all the subsequent owners including ourselves have found no difficulty in single-handing the



Figure 12: *Lottie Blossom* in Birdham Pool

boat. Arthur again had the sense to let Evgenia do the internal arrangements. Fig. 11 shows her proudly demonstrating her ownership of the new boat. The long cabin with only two berths meant that they could sleep either way around - "no need to tuck your feet under the cupboards" - and they had two very successful seasons in *Lottie Blossom 2* in 1953 and 1954.

Why did they retain the name as they had done so with *Racundra*? The second owner of *Racundra* - Adlard Coles -

had to call her *Annette 2*. The second owner of *Lottie* had to rename her *Ragged Robin III*. During our researches in the Brotherton, looking through the diaries, we found the following entry for 25th April, 1952:

"A yacht is a pleasure boat, a boat that gives pleasure. This pleasure is given in so direct and personal away that the debt we feel discomfort unless we can thank the boat for the pleasure she gives, so that she must have a name. And this name, whatever it is, gathers to itself associations till it has a magical power of evocation, like the name of some scrubby human being, which for its mother has angelic attributes perhaps perceived by no one else."

Also looking through the diaries, we found an unusual entry for July 28th, 1953. The left-hand pages are in Evgenia's hand; the right-hand page a



Figure 13: *Ragged Robin III* in the same place

kind of translation of it later in Arthur's. Is this a sign of Evgenia taking over?

Certainly the logs have a good deal of evidence that things were not as they had been.

"Evgenia thought rightly that I ought to have had the engine going earlier and asked if she could start it, whereupon one of our helpful friends darted below and started it for her to her natural rage. We thus got, as she says in her log, 'in a mess as usual'."

"Evgenia was disgusted at my having had it - the engine -

stopped and would not either start it or take the tiller while I started it. In the end however with mixed difficulty and hatred she did start it at 2.17 and picked up a mooring very successfully at 2.42. By this time it was raining hard. The sails were already far too wet to stow and I idiotically said so which was unnecessary."

"A most consistently wretched sail in which I did one stupid thing after another." "Evgenia went to town cursing my stupidity to the last moment. None the less, I miss her very much".

"Evgenia again said she's not going to sail another year ".

Nevertheless they sailed to Cherbourg twice: in 1953 and in 1954! We've made the same passage in *Ragged Robin* from Poole in 2003 and from the Channel Islands in 2008. Arthur and Evgenia were frequent visitors to the Grand Hotel and its restaurant *Marcati* owned by Madame Marcat.

At the end of 1954 they finally swallowed the anchor on doctor's orders - this time it was for the last time - and they settled down to a very happy retirement.



Figure 14: Evgenia beside the stern of *Lottie Blossom 2*, ready to be launched

But this was not the end of the story. Arthur continued to write and wrote some superb introductions to the Mariners Series for Rupert Hart-Davis, his publisher of the *Swallows and Amazons* stories. Evgenia's ruthless criticism of the *Swallows and Amazons* drafts hadn't destroyed Arthur's writing ability in the end.

This is not the end of *Lottie Blossom 1* either: Her third owner, Anthony Rushworth-Lund, another author, took her through the French canals through Paris to the Mediterranean and to Corsica and back, and wrote a lovely book *By Way Of The Golden Isles* on her in her new name *Ragged Robin III*. We have also taken her round Denmark and in 2008 to Brittany (Fig. 15) via the Scillies. The soul of Evgenia lives on!

So how do we view Evgenia? Undoubtedly, she gave Arthur the infrastructure and stability that he needed for his creativity. She rescued him from shipwreck and gave him the tranquility and peace to write the *Swallows and Amazons* stories and to recover the delights of sailing together they had first known in *Racundra*. But she became his severest critic, and may have destroyed his confidence in his writing as possibly in his sailing. Will we ever know? Perhaps, we should let Arthur have the last word:-

" I can look back on more than 50 years of unclouded happiness with my second wife. In all that time I have felt firm ground under my feet instead of quicksands. But for her I should have been dead and unable to write this book and but for her resolute courage in taking the risk of extreme poverty I should never have dared to take the step that gave me towards the end of my life the 20 years

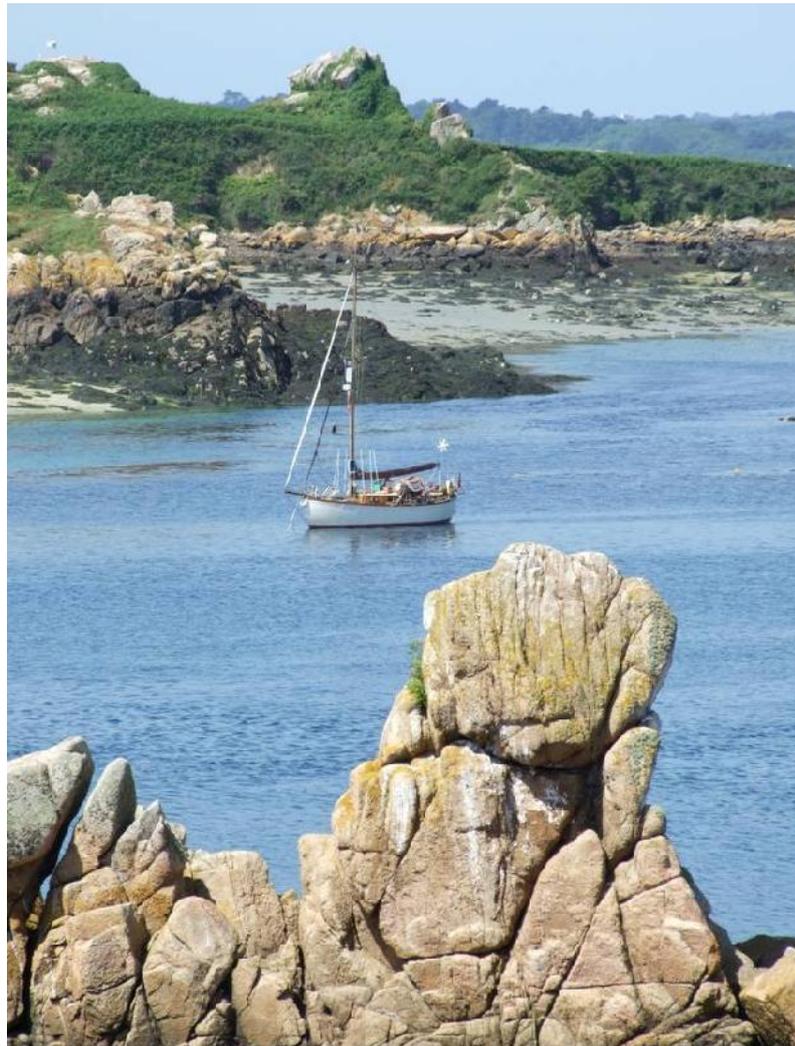


Figure 15: Ragged Robin at anchor in Brittany: Evgenia's creation lives on!

in which I have been able to write those books that may seem to some children an excuse for my existence. Further, but for her relentlessly honest criticism, they would be worse books than they are."

Acknowledgements

Our understanding of *Lottie Blossom 1 and 2* and their travels depends largely on Roger Wardale's *Ransome at Sea: Notes from The Chart Table*, plus our own researches in the Brotherton Library (particularly thanks to the help of Ann Farr). Further material came from Hugh Brogan's *Life of Arthur Ransome* and Brian Hammett's compilation of *Racundra's First Cruise*.