

Ragged Robin's "summer" cruise 2010: in search of Flemish Art and Architecture

We had not visited Belgium seriously for over 30 years, and the prospect of exploring mast-up routes to Bruges and Ghent as well as Antwerp sounded enticing.

As usual for us, the "summer" did not coincide with our cruising dates and was well over before we could start in the middle of July. Even then, the start had to be aborted four days because of gales. Eventually, on evening of 17th July we had a forecast of south-westerly 5 - 6 becoming 3 - 4 for Thames, ideal for our passage across to Zeebrugge from the Walton Backwaters.

Next morning, an 0315 start saw us enjoy a beautiful sun-rise under full sail near the North East Gunfleet. Entering the shipping lanes, the wind piped up and we hove-to to put in a reef, shaken out approaching the Thornton Bank. By 2130 local time, we entered Zeebrugge after an 85 M passage. On the way in, we saw a 6-T Hillyard - Whyoming - looking in a very sorry state on the shore boatyard.

The next day, we locked through the smaller Vissersluis - now operating - in front of two large barges. After 5 M of tree-lined canal we reached the outskirts of Bruges and the new pontoons of the very new Brugse Yacht Club. Fortunately, a club member was working on his boat and he gave us the code to the showers. The club is a 35 minute brisk walk to the historic centre of Bruges. Although the club is very modern and friendly, during the week it is relatively unattended. Even armed with the shower code, the lighting switches were inaccessible unless the bar was open!

Bruges captivated us for the next day: the Begijnhof, the Belfort (366 steps), the Hanseatic Quarter, Place de Bourg. What marred the town, however, was a gigantic pop concert, including the famous Markt, with stage and noisy "music" and precluding access in the evening to the square. We could even hear the "music" when we reached the boat. Unfortunately, this was drowned out by a private party which had booked the club - the first booking of the year. Their outdoor "music" went on to past 0100...



Pop concert in full "swing" in Bruges Markt.

Next day was a national holiday, but the larger Van Dammersluis lock and the two bridges along the canal were operating. We were able to visit the Maritime seafront Museum and submarine in the old Fish Sheds of Zeebrugge.

Next morning saw us reaching up the Scheldt to Terneuzen and straight into the lock for the Ghent canal. This is much more industrial and longer than the Bruges canal. The nearest mooring (mast up) to Ghent is the Royal YC Ghent at Langerbrugge about 15 minutes from the Ghent centre by the number 55 bus coming from Zelgate.

This we took next morning to visit the excellent Fine Art Museum. The pinnacle of the town centre architecture - the Graslei- was hideously spoilt by Ghent's pop festival with its ghastly entertainment booths lining both sides of the canal. We did not spend any longer than a day.

Back up the canal under genoa, through the lock and into the East Harbour of the Terneuzen marina complex for the least expensive mooring of the trip (€9), but a very warm welcome from the harbour master.

A six-hour motor sail up the Scheldt next day saw us entering the Royersluis and after a short wait, the Siberia and Londen bridges into the Villemdok of Antwerp, met and berthed by the harbour master in his launch. Though expensive, the facilities were excellent, including a washing machine.

Next day was Monday, and inevitably the museums were shut. However, the cathedral was not, and housed an excellent free exhibition of painted altarpieces by Rubens, Jordaens *et al* in addition to the three permanent and magnificent Rubens altar triptychs. St Paul's Church was Likewise worth visiting; St Jacobs, not.

Next day the museums were open and these were visited: the Art Museum, the Rockox House Museum, the Ruben house and the Meyer Van der Burgh museum: most accepting "pensionists" gratis. If we had stayed the following day - the last Wednesday of the month - it would have been a free museums day.

We left Antwerp at the first lock out the following day with the 0630 bridge opening and an 0700 lockout, engine-sailing down the Scheldt by 0730. However, by now, we were both getting very tired of the industrialisation of the Belgian waterways in contrast to the Dutch. One of the questions down the Scheldt was: where was the border for changing courtesy flags? We needn't have consulted the charts - put up the Dutch courtesy flag when the Belgian oil refineries finish. So we peeled off at Handsweert as we lost the ebb and negotiated the canal into the Oosterschelde and the locks into the



Ragged Robin alongside the free staging on the Veersemeer.

Volkerak as far as Dintelmonde. There we had an excellent meal in in new Marina restaurant, charmingly served by enthusiastic staff. An excellent overnight stay.

Back through the Volkerak and Oosterschelde into the Veersemeer, mooring on one of the many convenient and peaceful island staging moorings (Schelphoek Plaat) for the night (free). Then into Veere for shopping and Middelburg (Binnenhaven) for the night where we encountered the first red ensigns on the trip.

With a reef in the main, a short sail took us across from Vlissingen into Breskens to be met by pouring rain while touring the shops.

Next day we were able to shake out the reef and enjoy a good sail until headed by the wind past Zeebrugge and Blankenburg into Ostend and the Mercator Dock where we were jammed between towering mega cruisers.

The next day was of course Monday! So the museums were shut. However, the James Ensor Huus and the Mercator tall ship offered suitable diversions. Tuesday gave us just time to visit the art museum with its excellent exhibition of Ensor works before locking out and enjoying a fine reach to Nieuwport Royal YC.

Here the weather deteriorated and a familiar disparity between the Met Office (W/NW 4 - 5 becoming 6-7) and the local forecast posted by the harbour master (SSW - WSW 4) began. A trial sail to the harbour entrance recording 30 knots on the nose settled the uncertainty!

The next morning saw the usual collection of forecasts from the Met Office, Meteo, Internet etc until a consistent WNW 3 - 4 was obtained. 1 reef in, out of the harbour and: F4 - on the nose! Into Dunkirk East and the YCMN Marina. The next morning we had time to visit the excellent Musee de Portuaire with its very vivid account of Operation Dynamo. Later in the afternoon, we took the tide down channel to Gravelines entering at the earliest opportunity over the bar but to our relief, having three metres under the keel all the long way to the harbour. The gate into Bassin Vauban was already open (3.6 m over the sill). The Visitors Pontoon nearest the gate has the most water in the harbour but at low water we were immovable (but upright) in the soft mud.



Why ever do we go away?

The following day allowed us to walk around this pleasant town and walk the old walls of the Bastion as well as having a good meal at the Marina Brasserie. Next day, as soon as the Bassin gates were (manually) opened and the bridge swung, we were out and, with a reef in, engine-sailed at first with the inevitable wind on the nose to the Dyck buoy and then across the shipping lanes to the East Goodwin. We changed our minds about Ramsgate (as it was Ramsgate week and we had had dire warnings about lack of pontoons) and headed instead

for the East Swale via the inshore channels along the Kent coast, finally ghosting into a Harty Ferry for a magical evening as night fell.

Next day, a phone call confirmed that the King's Ferry Lift Bridge would open at 1045. By 1300 we had locked into Chatham Marina. This gave us the opportunity to visit the new exhibition in the newly opened Number One Smithery. This we found rather disappointing - unless you are into ship models - but the exhibition of Stanley Spencer paintings made up for it.

The next day saw us back down the Medway to pick up a buoy in Queenborough - the only one occupied. Where ever we had been, locals complained of lack of visitors - something to do with the weather or the economy?

An early start next day saw us up the Maplin Channel, through the Spitway and into the Walton Backwaters for a lovely sunset on anchor in the Walton Channel. This was the high point of the whole trip of 480 M.

Why ever do we go away?

Ted and Diana Evans