

In the Wake of Arthur and Evgenia Ransome: Cruising in Lottie Blossom 1 from Littlehampton to Yarmouth, IOW 1952 and 2003

In this half-hour, we aim to recount our attempt to follow in Arthur and Evgenia Ransome's wake in their penultimate boat - Lottie Blossom - during the year 1952. This was carried out in the same boat - now named Ragged Robin - during our summer cruise on the south coast last year. We are indebted to the Brotherton Library in the University of Leeds for access to the Ransome diaries, logs and photographs from 1951-53, and most of AR's photographs you will see have not been previously published.

To put things in context, Arthur and Evgenia Ransome changed boats as often as they changed homes! In Arthur's Russian phase of life, they had three boats: Slug, Kittiwake and most famously Racundra in which they had their honeymoon cruise in 1924.

When Arthur and Evgenia moved to England, they had five more boats: Nancy Blackett, (which Evgenia disliked), Selina King, probably their most elegant boat (enjoyment of which was curtailed by the War) and Peter Duck (which they both disliked) before they had Lottie Blossom built by David Hillyard in 1952. Here she is in Arthur's photograph alongside one taken last year, showing that she has barely changed in the intervening 50 years. She's a Bermudian classic, here under full sail and here approaching Wolverstone Marina during last year's AGM.

She was designed and built by David Hillyard at his boatyard on the river Arun in Littlehampton. The boatyard has changed little if at all since 1952!

Lottie Blossom is 29 ft long, a twin-ender with centre cockpit, and was a standard Hillyard 6 tonner with two berths in the main saloon which Arthur and Evgenia used, and two in the aft cabin which we use for sleeping. Compared with almost all of the preceding boats, Lottie Blossom was a boat they both enjoyed and in which began to recapture some of the pleasures they had had in Racundra 30 years before. Why?

Arthur's Diary gives a number of clues. In 1951, they visited Hillyard's yard and noticed similar boats - then called five-and-a-half tonners - and decided that one of these would do. Almost immediately Evgenia named the boat Lottie Blossom after the rather flighty character in PG Woodhouse's *the Luck Of The Bodkins*. Shortly afterwards Evgenia was declaring that the new boat would be a summer annex to which to escape from their noisy London flat.

They went for a test sail in one of these boats called Norvad (now lying up in Ipswich) and Evgenia declared that "if she will stand this she'll stand anything we shall put her into" after rather a blustery sail from Portsmouth into Chichester Harbour. And so on 27th August they agreed to buy the boat Hillyard was exhibiting at the Motor Show (which was then the fledgling Boat Show). Importantly, in September they chartered another Hillyard in the Walton Backwaters and in spite of the rain and the leaks, enjoyed the boat!

The entry in Arthur's diary on November the 8th significantly notes that Genia was settling the internal arrangements. And maybe this was the secret of the success of this purchase in that Evgenia seemed to be leading the way. Notice at the bottom of the page the stark entry

"hospital admission February 3rd- 22". Arthur's 1952, health-wise, was a fairly miserable year with several hospital admissions and the loss of a good deal of the sailing season (May – July) through illness.

Another significant factor in their acceptance of Lottie Blossom is on this diary page, where on March 28th Lottie's mast had been stepped and Arthur records that they were very pleased with her. Hillyard had kept his promise: the boat would be ready on April 1st in time for Evgenia's birthday! Arthur used to comment that the only boat builder who built on time was Noah! - having had innumerable disappointing experiences, including most notably with Racundra.

So all the omens were good. We like Lottie Blossom (now Ragged Robin) probably for the same reasons that they did. An enclosed central cockpit giving great security, a very spacious saloon for living in with an excellent galley laid out by Evgenia - compared for instance with the miserable concoction in Nancy Blackett (one of the reasons why Evgenia took against Nancy). And nice touches - almost certainly due to Evgenia - like the toiletry cupboard in the heads (the loo compartment) and the exchange of shelves in the saloon for a second high cupboard so that the 6 ft plus Ransomes could stretch out their legs on their bunks!

This is a view from the saloon looking back with Evgenia in her favourite position peeling potatoes and the view today - practically unchanged.

This is the roomy rear cabin where AR kept his charts and where we sleep.

Where is Littlehampton? It is in West Sussex and marked the starting point of Arthur's voyages in Lottie Blossom in 1952.

Here we have Arthur contentedly writing up his diary through the fore-hatch with and without his famous hat. Note the give-away wharfs opposite.

Littlehampton is on the river Arun and the location of the photograph is confirmed by the original wharfs opposite shown in more detail on the right; the buildings on them have been replaced by modern flats.

The first passage that Arthur and Evgenia made in Lottie was in many ways the most difficult: from Littlehampton to Chichester Harbour. It is a difficult passage for several reasons: firstly because both Littlehampton and Chichester have nasty entrances guarded by sand bars so that entry and departure can only be attempted on the top half of the tide. Secondly, the passage passes around the notorious Selsey Bill with its clusters of shallows and rocks extending seven miles out. The safe passage is round the Outer Owers; but given Lottie Blossom's modest speed, there is not time to go the long safe way round and get into Chichester Harbour before the tide has dropped below half tide. Arthur and we therefore took the potentially dangerous inshore passage. This goes round and close to the Nixon Beacon and through a narrow gap in the shallows marked by the Boulder and Street buoys.

Here are the two routes compared. Curiously, Arthur treated this passage much more casually than we did. The only passage planning that I could find, is in his log, but not included in Roger Wardale's *Notes from the Chart-table*. I've added in red his actual passage. It indicates that he made six and a half knots through the water largely on engine alone which is amazing for a little eight horse-power Stuart-Turner. We took nearly an hour longer!

The passage was recorded best in a letter to his friend Lt Colonel Busk with the significant remarks that the Mixon rocks were not showing but the Mixon Beacon "stood up out of the

water like a large scale Nass" – the beacon on the Blackwater estuary on the East Coast - "occasional horrible stripes of heavy oil on the water".

On entering Chichester Harbour, Arthur and Evgenia hurried on to Itchenor while we anchored for lunch and a rest at one of their favourite anchorages at East Head.

This shows an enlarged plan of Chichester Harbour. Here is the East Head anchorage and here Itchenor where they and we finally picked up a buoy for the night. This is a modern chart and seems to show relatively little water anywhere but all of the yellow areas are covered at most states of the tide. The Emsworth channel offers marvellous sailing with very little in the way of moored craft whereas the other channels particularly up to the beautiful village of Bosham are tightly packed with moored boats.

Here is the view from our buoy off Itchenor looking at the harbour Office, which is probably very near where Arthur and Evgenia were moored.

This is a view of lovely Bosham from the line of moorings, and

This shows Arthur and ourselves tacking down the Emsworth Channel towards the harbour entrance. There is Evgenia's head behind the wheel, although Arthur is probably doing the helming!

From Itchenor, Arthur and Evgenia frequently went into Birdham Pool which was one of the first if not the first ever marina in the UK. Entry is by this Lock.

The pool is an offshoot from the Channel running up to Dell Quay, that now contains the enormous Chichester Marina.

Here is Ragged Robin moored between the posts in Birdham pool and here is Lottie Blossom with Evgenia feeding swans in virtually the same position. Notice the same house in the background!

Here is another picture of an Imperial Evgenia showing off their lettered Life-buoy.

Here is Lottie Blossom on another occasion in a different position in Birdham Pool and below it is the same view but without Ragged Robin. Note the Tidemill in the background. Birdham Pool was the tide pool, as at Woodbridge. Lottie Blossom spent many weeks in Birdham Pool while Arthur was recovering from a prostate operation in King's College Hospital in the months of May to July.

Their next passage, on August 15th, was from Chichester Harbour into the east Solent up Southampton Water and up the River Hamble to Bursledon. This is relatively straightforward apart from getting the tides right and especially if you wish - as Arthur always did - to take the short cut through the inshore channel marked in red. This takes you through a gap in the dashed line which is a sub-marine barrier erected during second world war and which is still a substantial hazard to boats large and small. There is a small gap in the centre which is the only way through.

This shows the marks on either side of the channel through the submerged submarine barrier with a yacht in the middle.

And this shows the beacons marking the extent of the barrier curving away to Horse Sand Fort marking the entry to the Solent for big ships.

In Bursledon at the head of the Hamble, Arthur was able to anchor in the middle of the fairway as shown in this picture taken by Arthur high up from the bridge over the railway line. Our picture from exactly the same spot shows how impossible it is now to anchor because the River Hamble is absolutely chock-full off marinas and moorings. It's the boat park equivalent of the M 25!

This is Arthur's picture of Lottie at anchor, the vantage point of the last picture being hidden in the overgrown trees. You can just see the same windows of the same house in our photograph from roughly the same position.

The Jolly Sailor was much visited by Arthur and Evgenia and ourselves!

The next passage they made from was from Bursledon along the beginnings of the West Solent to one the most beautiful rivers on the South Coast - the Beaulieu River. Beautiful, I suspect, because it is managed not commercially but by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu as part of his estate!

Here is Lottie (alias Ragged Robin) on one of the moorings very close to the one that Arthur and Evgenia picked up just above the main landing place at Bucklers Hard.

At the Southampton AGM, many of us visited Bucklers Hard, this beautifully preserved collection of mariners cottages and workshops and chapel at the end of which was the Master Builder's House, now converted into a pub and restaurant/hotel. This pub was again much visited by Arthur!

Alongside the Beaulieu River is a very pleasant walk which Evgenia must have made to Beaulieu village to obtain stores.

From Bucklers Hard on the Beaulieu River their last passage west was to Yarmouth Isle of Wight. Apart from getting the tides right leaving the Beaulieu River over its Bar, it is a straightforward passage, taking you along the west Solent towards the Needles.

This is our view of the Needles as we tacked across to Yarmouth, and below is Arthur's drawing made the next year from alongside the lighthouse – the angle of view suggesting it was sketched from the bridge of the new QM!

Approaching Yarmouth and between the Pier and the Ferry is the George Hotel with its splendidly proportioned garden. In subsequent years, Arthur and Evgenia had many expensive meals here - as did we on July 19th: our Ruby Wedding anniversary - but in 1952 the only record is that they played with a cat on the wall here.

In Yarmouth Harbour, they tied up to one of these piles and would then row to the shore for provisions. Unfortunately, they unwisely chose to be there over an August weekend when the whole harbour fills up with boats rafting five or six deep. "A perfect hell of a harbour" noted Arthur in his log. While we were there in July, they had to close the harbour, it became so full!

We tied up to a new Pontoon and then moved above the road bridge to a boatyard to escape the melee.

Opposite the Pontoon is Harold Hayles boatyard, still in use as it was in Arthur Ransome's day.

From hereon, Lottie Blossom and Ragged Robin's paths diverged. For Arthur and Evgenia, it was the end of the season and they hurried back to escape the packed Harbour in Yarmouth the following day for the relative peace of Chichester Harbour. And then early in September, they went back to Littlehampton.

Here, they were already thinking of a successor to Lottie Blossom: Lottie Minor or Lottie Blossom 2 as she appears elsewhere in Arthur's Diary. Throughout the year, they had not been able to get used to wheel steering and in fact we have replaced the original wheel with a larger one to make life a little easier. Furthermore, on one occasion, Arthur let down the mainsail on to Evgenia's head as she was steering, and she never forgave him for it!

So they went back to David Hillyard and asked for an identical hull but instead of a centre cockpit separating two cabins, an aft cockpit behind a larger single cabin as shown in this photograph of this virtually identical boat to Lottie Blossom 2. (Where Lottie Blossom 2 is, we don't know. She was last heard of languishing in a garden in Surrey).

They liked the second Lottie Blossom and had two very good seasons in her in 1953 and 54. On both of these occasions, they made a **major passage from the Solent to Cherbourg** and back and so we thought we ought to do the same.

Our weather deteriorated, however, and we had to wait for the weather to clear in Poole Harbour, which is one of the largest natural harbour harbours in the UK.

The waterfront has many fine buildings like the Customs House and St James' Church which is unique in having pine columns shipped over from Newfoundland with which Poole had strong trading links.

We stayed in Poole Yacht Club until we realised how expensive it was and then we repaired to Ridge Wharf up a very narrow and shallow river just like being on the Broads again!

From there we moved to a friends' mooring at Shipstal Point, a nature reserve; and it was like being in Scotland!

From there, still waiting for settled weather, we moved nearer to the entrance to the harbour to an anchorage in South deep where we could keep an eagle-eye on the weather for the next day.

The next day dawned bright and cheerful with a good forecast, and we made a splendid passage across from Poole Harbour to Cherbourg.

We arrived, as did Arthur and Evgenia in Lottie Blossom 2, via the west entrance to the outer harbour and took sails down as we travelled to the inner harbour where we've brought up in the relatively new Marina.

Arthur went further on a little, to anchor in the Avant Port - and here is Lottie Blossom 2 there in 1953.

The advantage of Arthur's mooring in the Avant Port was that it was a stone's throw from the Grand Hotel where Arthur and Evgenia lunched extensively in an annexe to the hotel that is now a stand-alone restaurant/grill. We also dined there as part of our research!

And so, our following of Arthur Ransome's wake ended. Whereas they sailed straight back to the Solent, we continued under the influence of Napoleon up the North French coast.

I'll leave you with an interesting question. Why did Arthur jealously guard the names of his boats Racundra and Lottie Blossom? He would not allow the new purchasers to retain the names. Why not? Maybe this entry in his diary opposite April 23rd, 1952, gives the clue!

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