

# 70M - Adventure on the Irish Sea - 1998

30 September 2009

Last Updated 03 April 2011

Â

I suppose that at sometime in his life everyone says to himself "What in God's name am I doing here?" And it was those words, which were going through my mind at about 0430 hours on Saturday the 29th of August 1998, as in pitch darkness, I coned the canal boat 70M out of Dun Laoghaire Harbour and headed South, bound for Waterford Harbour and the estuary of the River Barrow. I can only assume that Peter Gray and Aongus O'Brien who were standing beside me in the wheelhouse were muttering something similar.

## Background

So, how did we come to be there? It's a separate story but we brought 70M to Ringsend to do a re-conversion job on her in 1994. The next four years were spent contentedly enough working away in Ringsend. With the approach of Spring 1998, we realised that our labours were nearly at an end and it would shortly be time to be on the move again. The Dublin branch of the IWAI organise a rally to Ringsend in May of each year and Waterways who are responsible for the maintenance of the canals usually make a special effort to have everything in tip top order for this. Accordingly we decided to leave Ringsend and head west along the canal as the rally returned. But it was not to be. At a critical moment the engineers of D&C has discovered a structural problem with the Ninth Lock at Clondalkin and while the rally boats could be craned over the obstruction, with an overall length in excess of sixty feet and weighing more than thirty tons, this was not an option for us. For the rest of the summer (such as it was) we amused ourselves finishing off odd jobs and pottering around the canal basin and the Liffey Estuary, even making a quick dart across Dublin Bay to pay a visit to the Royal St. George Yacht Club on Regatta Day. By August, with no sign of the canal being repaired, and one short sea voyage under our belt, restlessness was setting in and an alternative plan began to evolve.

The problem with taking a barge to sea is that it is not designed for it. Our "type" of Irish Canal Boat was built in Ringsend in the 1930s by the Dublin Dockyard Company (an offshoot of Vickers) for the sole purpose of carrying substantial cargoes on the Grand Canal, the Barrow Navigation and the Shannon Waterway. They are approximately 60 feet long by 13 feet wide and are constructed of steel sheets riveted together over frames. The rigidity of the structure, such as it is, is provided by the steel deck which forms the lid of the box, but even this is compromised by the large hole giving access to the cargo hold or in our case defining the parameters of the coach roof. Our first major concern was that there is no longitudinal stiffening of any kind in the structure so that in a seaway there is danger of the entire hull flexing and rivets popping out with disastrous consequences. Another concern was that the hull is completely flat-bottomed so that even on the lakes of the Shannon a barge can develop a very quick and uncomfortable roll. What would it be like off the Arklow Banks? Finally, all the joinery work and systems such as water tanks and copper cylinders which we had installed during the past four years had been designed with ditch crawling in mind. Would they survive a coastal passage? It was obvious that if we were to go to sea, a forecast of seriously settled weather was essential.

To my astonishment, one night during the last week of August, the weather man on RTE actually made such a forecast. For the first time during the summer of 1998, there was high pressure building over Ireland and a promise of light easterly winds at least until the end of the week. The 70M is quite uninsurable for an open sea passage, but a quick phone call to Geoff confirmed that he was prepared to take the risk and hasty preparations were put in hand. Geoff made a final phone call to D&C which clinched the decision. No work had started on the Ninth Lock, nobody knew when it might start but it seemed possible that it would not re-open before March of the following year. If we could reach Waterford Harbour by open sea, we could travel Northwards up the Barrow at our leisure and rejoin the Grand Canal near Lowtown, thus bypassing Clondalkin and the Ninth Lock altogether. Other preparations included recruiting Peter and Aongus, who between them have great experience of offshore voyaging and barge handling, borrowing a life raft, flares and a GPS (there was no time to swing a steering compass), checking the tides and researching access to the various harbours of refuge along the way. We were also delighted to accept the offer of Frank Purcell to act as mother ship in his fine twin-engined motor vessel Tarifda. A final call to the Met office advised us that the high pressure would last until Saturday but would start to break up on Sunday, so it was now or never.

## The Journey

On Friday the 28th Geoff brought the 70M through the sea lock at Ringsend Basin for the last time and with the help of Theo Harris piloted her across Dublin Bay to the new pontoon at the Royal St George Yacht Club where we took on fuel and water. The Club's end of season race was scheduled for that evening and soon the pontoon was filled up with all sorts of sleek racing craft which made the presence of the 70M seem even more incongruous. The post-race party in the Clubhouse was another obstacle to be overcome, but when the alarm went off at 04.00 hours skipper and crew were all present (if not correct) and we cast off our lines.

My principal recollections of the early part of the trip are of impenetrable darkness and the mirror-like sea. The equipment of the 70M does not include navigation lights and first we attempted to draw attention to ourselves by turning on all the interior lights. The effect of this was to destroy our night vision so that we couldn't even find Dalkey Island. The lights were quickly turned off again and as our sight was restored we picked our way through Dalkey Sound. In flat water and at cruising revs, the 125 horse power Perkins diesel which we had installed will push the 70M at about 5 knots and with the first of the ebb tide now helping us, we were soon off Bray Head. By 0600 hours we were off Greystones and the dawn was coming up on what was to prove a magnificent day. I had had some concerns that we might meet a lumpy sea

off the larger headlands but I neednâ€™t have worried. Wicklow Head came and went only marked by breakfast and we headed for Arklow. Drawing only three feet we could afford to go right inshore to get out of the worst of the flood tide and we passed through The Sluice and close to the beach at Cahore without incident. By now we were really enjoying ourselves. The sun was shining, the sea was flat and the old girl was making great progress. Menace or marvellous, mobile phones are now part of our lives, and the two phones on board rang regularly with enquiries from well-wishers as to where we were and how we were doing. Frank Purcell and Tarifda who had departed Dun Laoghaire later than us, caught us up off Cahore and having checked that all was well, headed on to Rosslare for provisions, though we remained in radio contact.

In the afternoon, an on-shore breeze picked up which produced sparkling spray over the bow but never posed a problem. At the planning stage we had considered that we would do well to reach Rosslare for the night, but we were making such good time and with the tide turning in our favour again, the decision was now made to head for Kilmore Quay. We laid a course due south between the Lucifer Bank and the Long Bank, dodged across the bow of a car-ferry bound for Rosslare, waved to the Tuskar Lighthouse which was bathed in evening sunlight and rounded Carnsore Point at 1800 hours. An hour and a half later, just as dusk was falling, we nosed our way through the marked channel over St. Patrickâ€™s Bridge and by 2000 hours, to the surprise of the superintendent who hadnâ€™t had a sixty foot canal barge at his marina before, we were snug alongside in Kilmore Quay. It had been a truly magical day.

From Kilmore Quay to the Hook Head Lighthouse is 13 nm approximately, and as soon as we emerged from the harbour at 0630 hours the following morning we knew that these miles were going to be as awkward as the 80 miles which we had covered on the previous day were delightful. The forecasters were absolutely correct. The high pressure was breaking up and the new wind from the South was beginning to build up a wave pattern at right angles to the westerly scend which always seems to be present along that coast. Furthermore, we were on our own. Tarifda which had followed us to Kilmore Quay, was now on her way North again. To cope with the sea we had to reduce speed and although we had the benefit of some west-going tide, compared with the previous day, our speed over the ground seemed painfully slow.

During this difficult passage Aongusâ€™ great skill and long experience of barge handling were amply demonstrated. He helmed for the entire period, judging each wave on its merits and, using a combination of rudder and throttle, luffed up when required. At the same time Peter busied himself with a series of GPS fixes to check our progress and I ran around below with armfuls of string and tea towels trying to still the cacophony of noise from the slamming and banging of drawers and cupboard doors which had not been built with this kind of seaway in mind.

In truth, the weather was not that bad. In a well-found yacht it would have been an exhilarating, fun sail, but in the 70M it was fairly nerve-racking and there was a collective sigh of relief when we eventually rounded the Hook and Aongus handed the helm to me to do the easy bit up the river. Shortly afterwards the phone rang and we were congratulated on our safe arrival. The distinctive shape of a canal barge had been spotted off the Hook by someone on the shore at Dunmore East and the news had travelled quickly.

Waterford Harbour and the lower reaches of the Barrow River are most attractive and we hope to return in the coming months to explore these in more detail, but our immediate destination was New Ross. We had agreed to meet my brother Geoff and his crew there at 1430 hours and their job was to carry on up river in search of a permanent berth. We enjoyed an excellent lunch during this final leg and the glasses of Irish coffee had just been raised as Geoff and company stepped aboard. It was a fitting end to a great adventure.

By way of footnote I should add that I understand that DÃ³chas subsequently discovered that the damage to the Ninth Lock was not as severe as previously thought and the canal was re-opened by December. If they had discovered this sooner, we might not have made our trip, but think of the fun we would have missed!

Â© Dick Lovegrove

The history of 70M, an ex Grand Canal Company boat, is described here [70M Lady Avalon](#)

Â

Â  
Â

Â  
Â

Â  
Â

À