



The happy return

Story and photographs by Tom Cunliffe



The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from France in the summer of 1940 was one of the most critical events in World War II. Surrounded on three sides, but fighting tooth and nail in the rear guard, the BEF and a substantial number of French infantry fell back on Dunkirk. From there they hoped to be ferried to England.

Troop carriers, destroyers, and other large ships could not approach the beaches or the mole from which most of the soldiers had to be transported. Vessels of shoal draft and high maneuverability were required. The "Little Ships" came in droves from all the creeks and rivers in southeast England. There were yachts, lifeboats, fishing craft, barges, and pleasure boats. Some volunteered; others were requisitioned in their owner's absence. Some powered across in style. A few sailed, and many limped or were towed. Between May 29 and June 4 a total of 338,226 Allied troops were successfully evacuated. The smaller boats ferried men out to ships waiting in the offing, while some of the more able vessels made several trips across the 40 miles or so to Dover and Ramsgate.

Of the 600 Little Ships that are believed to have returned home safely in 1940, many have survived the men they saved. Seventy-seven of them met at Dover in May to reenact the crossing on its fiftieth anniversary.

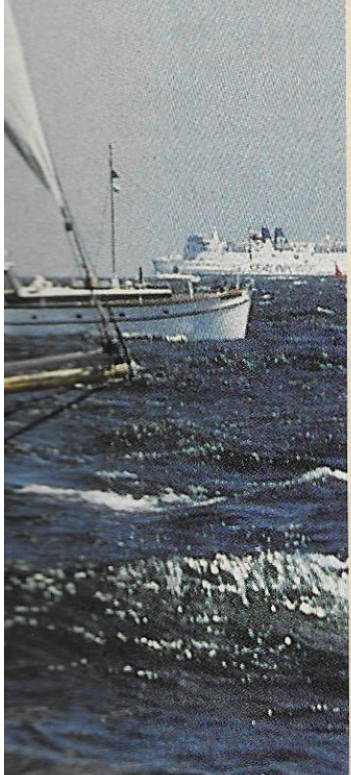
I arrived in the late evening at Wellington Dock in Dover's inner harbor. The white cliffs were glimmering in

the twilight, and the castle stood out against the skyline. The Little Ships were tied up along 1,200 feet of dock in rafts of four. They were all motor vessels except for three Thames sailing barges, which towered over the town itself, and a group of sailboats clustered at the far end. The 38-foot cutter *Providence* was immediately distinguishable by her elegant topmast. Designed by Warrington-Smyth in 1935, she had been comparatively new in 1940. Although she is now 55 years old, it would be hard to surpass her beauty of line or seakindliness. Restored by my friend and skipper, Jonathan Minns of the British Engineering, she looks as fine today as she must have when new.

Outside us was a classic prewar ketch called *Windsong*. Beyond her lay a Leigh cockle-bawley bearing the pertinent name *Resolute*. With a coachroof and small ketch rig, she wasn't easily recognizable as what she had originally been, but there was a defiant air about her.

The boat on the seaward end of our group had such low freeboard that

The ketch *Windsong* experiences a rougher crossing than in 1940



only her mast and halyards were visible. These looked thoroughly businesslike and revealed her to be another gaff cutter. I guessed she must be *Cachalot*, built in 1897 as a yard speculation and commissioned in 1900. She has been owned for many years by Jenny Kiloh, who sails her as well as any boat you'll see in a long summer's day. Thinking of *Cachalot*, I mused on the irony that saw her ex-owner, Sir Lancelot Elphinstone, taken prisoner at Dunkirk, while his old yacht sailed on and off the beaches, skippered by a civilian.

IN AN IDEAL WORLD, THE FLEET WOULD have crossed the English Channel on the rhumb line to the channels that lead through the sands to Dunkirk, carrying a fair tide for all of the 38 miles. Unfortunately, the boats would have had to traverse the shipping lanes at an angle of 45 degrees, which is illegal. So dangerous has the density of heavy shipping on the Dover Strait become that neither the British nor the French coast guard is prepared to slacken the regulations, even in such a special case as this. Our fleet had therefore to steam directly across the lanes to the French side, then turn hard to port to make its easting in the inshore traffic zone. This made a run of almost 50 miles, which, at the 5-knot speed of the slowest vessels, doomed us all to run into a foul tidal stream somewhere off Gravelines. It was impossible to avoid this even by leaving early, on account of the necessary time restraints associated with the locks at Dover.

This was a hard pill for sailing-boat seamen to swallow, but it could be borne—so long as the weather forecast of light northeasterlies proved sound. The morning of the crossing dawned fresh and fair with perfect visibility and a stiff breeze out of the northeast. The wind snapped our St. George's cross "Dunkirk" flags as it whistled down onto the fleet from the heights by Dover Castle. When *Cachalot's* crew appeared on deck clad in full yellow foul-weather gear, hats, and harnesses, we aboard *Providence* began to wonder what we were in for; then we remembered that *Cachalot's* freeboard is very low.

The lockgates opened on time, and one after another the boats headed to sea. Our group was the last to leave. As we passed the pierhead, I was involved in hoisting sail on the

foredeck. Suddenly, a thin cheer went up from the wall. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw a large group of people waving flags. This in itself would be enough to touch a sailor's heart, but the really moving thing was that many of them were old enough to remember 1940.

To begin with, the fleet was just a number of dots with a few steadying sails on the horizon, but as the distance among us grew less, we could make out individual vessels plunging and rolling in the ever-building seas. The sun sparkled on the water, but the waves were steep as we took our station near *Amazone*. Unlike many of the smaller craft, this 72-foot

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motoryacht is an entirely seaworthy vessel that, our skipper, Jonathan assured us, now spends her time between outings in a climatically controlled shed.

Amazone wasn't always so pampered, however. She arrived off Dunkirk on May 31, 1940, with a young naval officer in command. Her crew consisted of a stoker, a petty officer, an RAF gunner on leave, and a "white-haired gentleman who normally took care of Nelson's flagship, *Victory*." On June 3, *Amazone* rounded off her efforts with a number of trips between Dunkirk harbor and the waiting ships, even though the Germans were actually entering the town. Her decks and wheelhouse were riddled with machine-gun bullets, and she was so crowded that

orders had to be shouted to the helmsman, who could not see through the press of bodies to steer her.

With the wind on the beam we sailors knew we were going to have a struggle to go slowly enough to stay with the powerboats. Aboard *Providence* we backed our staysail and eased the mainsheet until our speed fell to the required 5½ knots. *Resolute* was motorsailing for all she was worth to keep up and was pumping regularly. *Windsong* let off her jib until it flogged and then was unfortunate enough to lose a sheet. In the ensuing scuffle the sail blew out, but while the wind stayed abeam, she easily made the required speed without it.

The only sailboat with serious problems in maintaining station was *Cachalot*. She is the original "rocket ship." Her crew dropped the staysail, hauled their jib clew amidships, and, in the end, triced the tack of the already reefed mainsail almost up to the gaff jaws, but still she wouldn't do less than 6 knots. In the end, Jenny let her go, and we waved them good-bye for a while.

Shortly after that, *Providence* was rammed in a small way by a 50-footer that had apparently run amok from another group. The fleet was closing up now into a tight formation, and the sea was growing steeper as the wind rose to an unforecast Force 6. Radio calls started coming in. Three boats were forced to turn back to Dover under escort. Many of the others experienced problems with their power units. Most crews fixed problems themselves, a few required towing, but they made it to Dunkirk.

IN MID-CHANNEL WE WERE ENJOYING THE sight of the ketch *Windsong* cruising along to weather of us and speculating about how it must have been in her cockpit 50 years ago as she was receiving the undivided attention of a number of dive-bombers, when Jonathan glanced up to the northwest and silenced us with one word.

"Spitfire."

From over the green hills of England the airplane came across the sea like an arrow, at what seemed scarcely more than masthead height. For those of us too young to have heard the song of the Rolls-Royce Merlin before, the sound alone was worth coming for. Dressed in wartime camouflage, the

Spitfire made two low-level passes over the convoy, then soared effortlessly into the sun, half-rolled off the top of her climb, waggled her wings, and roared away in the direction of the white cliffs of Dover.

I glanced surreptitiously at my shipmates, a lump in my throat. There wasn't a dry eye aboard.

All around us the river launches, fire tenders, and motorboats wallowed unnaturally in the seaway for which they had never been designed, but they pressed on, decks streaming and crews seasick, determined to complete their self-appointed task. This was true "Dunkirk spirit," as defined by the Little Ships honorary archivist: "The willingness of ordinary people to do things they are not equipped to do, in order to help someone else."

HALFWAY THROUGH THE AFTERNOON THE fleet turned east along the French coast, and our worst tactical fears came to pass. There remained 2 hours of fair tide; we had 18 miles still to go and would lay the course only by motorsailing. Aboard *Providence* we fired up the diesel promptly and unashamedly, but *Cachalot's* tiny engine was of no avail. It didn't worry her crew, though. She hardened her sheets, put in a quick tack offshore, came about again, and sailed through everyone, close-hauled in Force 6, going as well to windward as she had on a reach. This was not a race, however, and we were consoled by the fact that we were only just thinking of putting on our foul-weather gear.

Soon the wind freed a point. We stopped our engine, but rather than risk falling to leeward by maintaining station and going too slowly, we gave *Providence* her head and surged away after *Cachalot*. Soon the two of us were ahead of the whole fleet except for the Thames barges. We entered the lock at Dunkirk as the sun set on a day none of us would forget.

The main event of the weekend was a service on the beach for veterans of 1940, during which the Little Ships maneuvered in the offing, but before this we had two rest days to make good our vessels and get to know one another's craft. Each boat had a story, but two stood out, one old, one new.

The old yarn came from the Thames barge *Ena*. After thrashing her way through 100 miles of the mine-strewn narrow seas of 1940, she finally ar-



In soldiers' uniforms, members of a historical reenactment group board the Little Ships at Dunkirk (above). A crew-member on *Providence* raises the ensign to the gaff peak (below)

rived off Dunkirk. For her trouble she was ordered to be beached near a second barge, the *Hac*. The Germans closed in, and the crews of both barges were rescued by a minesweeper. A short while later a contingent of the Duke of Wellington's regiment arrived on the scene. Hardly believing their luck, they took possession of the *Hac*, which the tide was about to refloat. At the same time *Ena* was boarded by a crew of gunners, who were soon joined by two Yorkshiremen who paddled out using shovels. By 0800 the barges were sailing for all they were worth. They crossed the Channel together under constant enemy bombardment until they were taken safely in tow off the Goodwin Sands. What is not recorded about this bizarre race is which barge was "first to the tug."

The modern story was that of a young man who had bought a Little Ship, *Nella*, in sad condition in South Wales. He put all his savings into making the tiny vessel sound enough for the fiftieth anniversary crossing because his father was a veteran and would be in Dunkirk. After a back-breaking voyage by sea and truck, *Nella* arrived in Dover. By sheer grittiness, her crew of three got across to Dunkirk, only to learn that because she was not "accredited" in the official register, she could not take part in the service.

For a time, we on *Providence* felt distinctly unhappy about this, for no one could seriously have doubted *Nella's* credentials, but when we saw her owner yarning with his dad on the quayside, the pride in the old man's face made it all right.

In 1940, the powers that be sent a great calm for the whole period of the "Miracle of Dunkirk." If the weather then had been the sort experienced 50 years later, all our lives could have been very different.



Seaman, writer, and long-distance cruiser Tom Cunliffe owns a 1911 Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, which wasn't—but is more than old enough to be—a Little Ship. The author is indebted to Christian Brann for his book, *The Little Ships of Dunkirk* (Collectors' Books Ltd.; tel. 011-44-285-770-239).