

## The Boats

by Brian J Goggin



**I Frances** at Banagher. Note the keel (photo Des Byrne)

Irish inland boaters are often scornful about the ability of the English narrowboat to cope with conditions here, especially on the large lakes. The **I Frances** copes well — but then she's not your average narrowboat, although she is designed to fit on the English canals.

Bryan Crutcher is a retired lecturer in Naval Architecture (Memorial University of Newfoundland). He decided to visit Moscow, and to do so by boat, using the inland waterways as far as possible. As the English canals are the narrowest he is likely to encounter, he designed his boat to fit them, and built it with his students. Unfortunately there are no canals between Canada and Europe — so he decided to sail across the Atlantic in his narrowboat.

### **I Frances**

Length: 17.3m

Breadth: 2.0m

Depth: 2.0m

Draft: 0.6m

Displacement: 10 tonnes

Ballast: 2 tonnes of concrete in box keel

Construction: steel plate over longitudinal frames with large webs every 2.0m

Hull shape: rectangular in cross section with a 300mm deep box keel full length; parallel sided except for the last 2 m fore and aft. Stern is pointed with an outboard rudder

Engine: Yanmar single cylinder 8hp diesel, driving the vessel at about 5 knots in calm weather.  
40 litre diesel tank aft of engine

## The boat

The boat has a cockpit 2.5m long, which was decked over for the transatlantic voyage with exterior grade plywood. The forward cabin has two beds; next aft is the head to starboard and the shower to port; then another two-berth cabin; then the galley, the dining-table, with water tanks beneath it, and the saloon. The rear cockpit, 2.9m long, has the engine under it; it was decked over to about 600mm below the cabin top and had safety lines rigged.

All the windows were sheeted over, but one in each space had a plexiglass insert to admit some light. The forward and rear doors were replaced by plywood, with access to the cabin through the hatches. Safety equipment included a six-person life-raft, lifejackets, immersion suits, safety harnesses, VHF and a sea anchor.

The boat was fitted with a heavy 10m mast, about 2m forward of midships, supported by wire stays. It carried a yard and a square sail 5m wide by 9m high. Bryan's calculations showed that the boat would right herself from an angle of about 120 degrees.

Trials showed that the boat would sail at 6 knots — and it would have to sail: it could not carry enough fuel to cross the Atlantic. It could sail at about 90 degrees to the wind but not any closer; Bryan reckoned that that was close to the performance of older square-rigged sailing ships.

## The crew

Bryan and his cousin Eric Playjar-Brown were both experienced sailors, but had not tackled the Atlantic before. They recruited the rest of the crew on the Internet, offering free food and equipment but no transport:

- Helena Allaway, from England, experienced ocean sailor and a very good cook
- Jay Warren, 20, also Canadian, described as "biker and mechanic"
- Anna Bereuter, Austrian, with no experience
- Anna's 11-year-old son Theo.

## The Atlantic

Bryan planned to take a Great Circle route, ENE from Newfoundland to Loop Head. He reckoned that the voyage could take anything from two to six weeks, depending on the strength and direction of the wind. He hoped to make it in three weeks, but provisioned for six. That was just as well, because the weather was bad pretty well all the way and the trip took five weeks and two days.

**I Frances** left from Holyrood at 9.00am on Thursday 8 July 1999. She started under sail but had to use the engine for a short while when the wind died. That evening, the crew were enjoying the sight of the whales and dolphins, but a combination of light winds and strong swell caused sea-sickness. The following morning strong winds made the motion easier but required a change to a smaller triangular mainsail. Further strengthening over the following day required them to change to just a small jib, and seasickness devastated the watch system, with only Helena, Eric and Bryan able to stand their watches.

The weather worsened. Bryan wrote in the log

*Gale force winds from the south. The sails are all down and we have left the boat to lie broadside to the waves with the tiller lashed. This was a very scary night for all of us, but the boat rode it out marvelously. There was no solid water on deck and we never rolled beyond 45 degrees. The crew did less well; sickness all around except for Helena and Eric.*



Bryan expected south-westerly winds of about 10–15 knots, which were about the only type that didn't appear. There were many nights when the boat lay under bare poles as the winds rose to 40 knots and above.

*Miserable weather. Winds 40 to 50 knots, the strongest yet. Most of the day we are battered down with the tiller lashed. Spirits are at a very low ebb. A few waves are breaking over the cabin top and splashing around the hatch seals onto Eric's bunk.*

The boat withstood seas of 4–5m crashing against her as she lay broadside, heeling to 45 degrees and throwing the crew out of bed.

There were constant changes between the main square sail, the triangular mainsail and a small jib. There were calms. Visibility was poor. And, towards the end of the voyage, there was a frustrating period of several days when the wind blew constantly from the east and only the current slowed the boat's return to Newfoundland.

There were other difficulties too. The holding-tank was unable to discharge to the water. Bryan's planned method of emptying it did not work so, twice a week, in calm weather, he had to pump into buckets, carry them through the cabin and empty them overside. Towards the end of the voyage the toilet paper ran out and paper towel had to be used.

There was a problem with the engine, which was being used to generate electricity: it was discovered to be out of oil, for no obvious reason, and supplies were low. Bryan restricted its use to once every four days, so electricity use had to be cut too. At one stage a wire to a solenoid on the gas supply broke so there was no hot food for days: access to the propane tanks meant leaning over the side, which could be done only in a calm. On another day Bryan had to get into the water to clear a rope from the propellor.

But it wasn't all misery: there were dolphins and killer whales, birds and phosphorescence. There were days and nights of good sailing. Helena and Anna provided excellent meals, and onboard poets commemorated the voyage.

## Reaching Ireland

At 11.00am on 15 August they saw Mount Brandon. At lunchtime an Irish naval vessel gave them tidal and weather information and passed on news of their arrival to the Irish and thence to the Canadian Coast Guard. They waited for the tide to turn that night:

*We sailed into the broad mouth of the Shannon in the dark with the tide behind us. It was a thrilling sail for Eric, Helena and I. As dawn came up we were entering the narrows in the river mouth where the chart predicted currents of 4 knots. The tide was rising so this current was going our way. There were several buoys at this point and the current swirling past them had to be seen to be believed. It was 4 knots + + I would say. Our speed shot up and with the current and fair wind we went zipping through. All things of course are relative and zipping was probably less than 8 knots.*

*Through the narrows the river broadened out into a wide estuary*



Liam McElligott (Chairman of Shannon Development, in red jacket) with the crew of **I Frances** on her arrival in Kilrush: Bryan Crutcher, Eric Playjar-Brown, Anna and Theo Bereuter, Helena Allaway and Jay Warren (photo courtesy of John Hehir, Kilrush marina)



several miles across. We headed for the north shore so as to find Kilrush before we were swept past it on the rising tide. I did not relish the thought of having to go back against the current or having to wait for the tide to change again, if we were so foolish as to miss Kilrush on the first pass. We spotted the masts of sail boats in Kilrush Creek which our chart said was a tidal flat. We contacted the Marina on the VHF radio at 8:00am and were given instructions about how to approach the entrance lock. Just then we were hit by a heavy rain shower and lost sight of where we were going. The shower lasted only a few minutes and we motored into the entrance lock and on into the modern marina. They were pleased to see us and had space to spare.



**I Frances** near Limerick Docks (photo courtesy Pat Lysaght)

Bryan's celebrated the event:

*There was an old man from St. John's  
Who thought he could sail cross this pond  
So he built him a boat  
And sailed cross this moat  
And now he's in Limerick, by God.*

## Up the Shannon and off again

Bryan left **I Frances** at Kilrush over the winter, with her mast down. The following year, when he wanted to go up the Shannon, he found that the navigation through Limerick had been closed by the construction works for the drainage and navigation improvement, but a little obstacle like that wasn't going to stop someone who'd sailed the Atlantic to get that far. He found someone working on the project who had worked in St John's, Newfoundland; through him he was put in touch with Pat Lysaght. Pat took careful measurements and decided that the **I Frances** could be brought up over the Curragour Falls. She made it with three inches to spare.

**I Frances** has been on the Shannon since then. When I spoke to Bryan he had covered all of the river except Lough Allen and had been to Lough Key and Enniskillen. He plans to visit Waterford via the Barrow, then to go back upstream, head right at Lowtown and depart through Dublin for Preston. After that, he plans to spend some years on the English canals before crossing the Channel to Holland, Belgium, France and Germany, then heading east to Moscow.



Three inches to spare at Thomond Weir (photo courtesy Pat Lysaght)