

Project Aster

May 2014 - Pre-trip report and preparing Aster for her final voyage

A huge amount of preparation work was carried out by volunteers during 3 separate visits before Aster was able to begin her final cruise from Sain-Leger-des-Vignes to Saint-Jean de Losne (a journey of approximately 250 kilometres which took seven days including 78 locks). Departure date was set at Saturday 31st May 2014 allowing enough time for us to arrive in St. Jean for 'Le Pardon des Mariniers' ceremony during the weekend of 14th and 15th June.

On Monday 5th May a party of 12 carried out an inspection trip to Aster in St. Leger. Charles Gerard (who is the driving force behind Project Aster) and his team discovered that, although there were many obstacles to overcome, Aster was generally in surprisingly good condition despite lying idle for the previous 12 years. Detailed inspections were carried out on the engine, generator and compressor. The generator (Perkins engine) would supply electrical power to the ship when not connected to shore power and the compressor is needed to charge the air cylinder in order to start the main engine (a vintage Baudouin DB 3). None of the engines were started on this particular trip as spare parts, oil and other essentials would have to be brought on the next visit. However it was decided to remove the compressor (which is an old Bernard engine) and take it back to St. Jean for an overhaul performed by Paul Hayes, Rudie Kung and Christian.

We were met and helped on this, and subsequent visits by Mr Marc Cretier who had captained Aster during her years as a working passenger vessel on the Canal du Nivernais. He had succeeded his father who had died on the ship.

During a subsequent meeting it was decided that Aster needed to be dry-docked. Conveniently there was a dock not 50 metres from where she lay.

Over the next two weeks, the real work began and 2 working parties carried out the following work:

Aster was hauled into dry-dock

The hull was scraped, cleaned and painted with bitumen. Time was limited so four people tackled this, Matthew Morton, Glen and Pete Dallow and Peter Tresh.

A huge interior cleaning job was started in the saloon, bar area and galley – Aster was filthy. Nine crew-members would live on board and welcome some distinguished guests during our journey. This clean-up was a mucky, horrible task was carried out by Glen and Patricia Gerard.

A rudder support was manufactured and installed by Paul Hayes

The propulsion system was thoroughly checked (including rudder-mounted propeller, universal joint, connecting shaft and winch).

Caulking was applied to some of the worst cracks in the hull joints

The engine and generator were serviced, the compressor re-installed and all three engines were started for the first time on over a decade.

The electrical system was checked and commissioned by Steve Nel

The engine room and systems were a huge task.....

Vast quantities of grease, oil, filters, belts, pumps, many bits and pieces like starter cigarettes had to be traced and found and transported. Motor parts dismantled, repaired and reassembled. Tanks cleaned, pipes cleaned or replaced, injection pumps, injectors and air valves to be brought back to life, the compressor reconnected to air system, motor room to be cleaned. All oils to be changed on generator, compressor, compressor motor, main engine, two gearbox oils, grease on shafts and all other universal joints etc.

(Peter Tresh, Mathew Morton and Charles performed most of the 'greasy' tasks.)

We had to source anchors, ropes, tyre-fenders, navigation lights and fire extinguishers.

We organized a fuel delivery

The water tanks were filled (2000 litres). A challenge in itself! It was accomplished by running multiple hoses along the quay, up an access road, across a busy main road to a private house! We offered to pay our benefactor!

Throughout the preparations a publicity campaign was launched to make people aware of Asters predicament and the efforts being made to carry out crucial repairs so she could begin her journey. We tried to make everyone aware that this was probably Aster's last chance - we are desperate to save the last surviving original wooden penich in France. Hundreds of photographs were taken throughout by Pete and Glen – there is a wonderful photographic record of the work teams and subsequent voyage on the Museum's web site - <http://www.musee-saintjeandelosne.com>

Two days prior to departure an advance team of arrived on Thursday 29th May. The remaining four crew members arrived the following morning. There was still much to be done. Immediate tasks included:

Nailing roofing felt to areas of the the fore and aft decks to prevent rain water pouring in to damage the batteries and machinery at the rear and galley / bar area at the front. The small front and rear deck areas are original and in very poor condition. The remainder of the roof, constructed in 1972, is in fairly good condition but will require re-caulking in places.

We re-installed the bow-rudder. (There is a description of this in the 'Technical Problems' section).

The two toilets were repaired (not without difficulty) with the sewage pump and a make-shift shower installed for the crew. 'System Officer', Steve and his team, ensured our needs were met – including the checking of ovens and fridges.

Purchase of provisions had been completed over the previous couple of days (including a generous donation from a supporter) so these were carried on board and stowed. Everything necessary to keep 9 hard-working crew fed and watered for a week was brought with us including cutlery, plates, kettle, glasses, cups, pots and pans etc. etc. It was quite a logistical and organisational problem carried out by a team headed by Pete Dallow and Helen Baker.

Charles Gerard meanwhile had made sure our journey was covered legally. This included insurance, vignette, and a special permit to navigate. The license to navigate / vignette was only secured the day before departure. It was paid out of the own private pocket of Mr Papinutti the President of VNF (Voies Navigables de France) who congratulated and encouraged us.

What is fascinating looking back was the sheer number of things the team had to accomplish in a relative short space of time. There were seemingly limitless tasks. If we'd thought about it before-hand it would have almost been too daunting to start but once we were underway, the whole project gained a life of it's own and everything got done one way or another. Everybody pitched in – there was no room for passengers.

The eve of departure we had a brief trial run in the basin at the start of the Canal du Nivernais. Despite the engine stalling when changing from forward to reverse gear, we turned round and moored facing the first lock we would tackle the following morning.

Finally, Aster was decorated with flags and bunting. The crew were issued with 'uniforms' of yellow 'Aster' T-shirts and black caps and we were as ready as we ever would be.....

On Saturday 31st May, we started the engines, unhooked the shore electricity supply and we floated free. France 3 TV, journalists and many well-wishers gathered as Aster began her final voyage....

Sincere thanks.....

In addition to Mr Papunetti, President of VNF, I must also make a few very special mentions:

The VNF from Corbigny generously let us use the dry-dock in St. Leger and the VNF staff in general, who were kind, helpful and patient with our fragile old girl and her inexperienced pilots.

Our thanks also go to Mr CASTIONI from the Conseil General de La Nièvre who piloted the administrative side of the exchange.

Above all the former pilot for 2 generations, Mr Marc Cretier helped and advised us all the way along with the dry-docking and with the preparation of the motor and the rather complicated installation of the front rudder. We tried to follow Mr Cretier's advice and things went wrong when we failed to do so. He was generous with his time his advice and his help. On several occasions during the trip he was called and had valid advice to get us over a problem.

Project Aster is a major undertaking on a very limited budget and without the benevolence of the above and many other volunteers, supporters and advisers, it simply would not be possible. Thank you one and all.