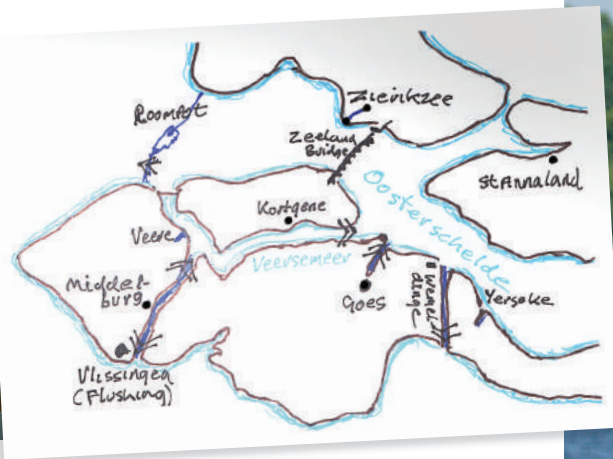


We did mean to go to Zeeland

To celebrate a multiple anniversary, Arthur Ransome's *Nancy Blackett* retraced his (and his fictional *Goblin's*) wake across the North Sea to Flushing – and stayed to explore the local waterways, by Peter Willis



PETER WILLIS



On the first of June 1936, Arthur Ransome headed out of Harwich Harbour in his recently-acquired yacht, which he'd renamed *Nancy Blackett*, and set sail for Holland. The results of this voyage appeared about 18 months later, in November 1937, with the publication of his classic book *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*.

This summer, to mark the book's 80th anniversary, *Nancy Blackett* again set sail for the Netherlands, from upriver, at Woolverstone, and with an accompanying flotilla, arranged by the Royal Harwich YC, of around 40 yachts, plus the Sailing Barge *Thistle*.

All but one of the flotilla had dropped away by the time *Nancy* passed out to sea at the Beach End buoy. The sole remaining boat was *Wild Cat*, a Nauticat 33 owned by the current chairman of the Nancy Blackett Trust, Roger Sturge, which accompanied *Nancy* across the North Sea and into the Zeeland waterways.

Ransome – as his log shows – had acquired an unenthusiastic mate to crew him across, who evidently hadn't understood the purpose

of the voyage: "June 1. Started from Shotley under power 12.30. Bar 29.8 steady. Wind variable. Headed us getting out. Beating against it Felixstowe to Landguard. Stopped engine. Comfortable under full main & jib. Mate urged Brightlingsea!!!! & jettisoning the plan of going to Holland!"

Later: "At Sunk, Mate again urged Brightlingsea. Cork bore 345° 2.3pm. Passed Sunk LV 4.15. Decided to go on. Course SExE1/2E. Streamed log 4.30"

And then: "Passed Galloper [light vessel] 7.35pm. Log 131/2. Asked them what sort of night they would give us. They replied light westerlies. Mate then said: 'If she was mine I'd put about now. We ought to be making for the coast Yarmouth or Lowestoft way.'"

No such mutinous dithering among the crew of the *Nancy Blackett* this summer. They meant to go to sea, and they did mean to make Vlissingen, or as Ransome knew it in its anglicised form, Flushing. This was where he was headed, and where the four children in the book, who drift out to sea without skipper, engine, nav lights and charts, end up. Their boat, the *Goblin*, was identical to the

Above left: Zierikzee with traditional Dutch boat. Right, Nancy Blackett on the Veersemeer, with Sophie Neville (formerly Titty in the 1973 *Swallows and Amazons* film, and now president of the Arthur Ransome Society) on the Foredeck

VERONICA FRENKS





NANCY BLACKETT IN THE NETHERLANDS

Nancy Blackett, not surprisingly, since she had inspired the book.

Nancy Blackett is now owned and cared for by the Nancy Blackett Trust, itself celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. She's been sailed across the North Sea by Trust members several times, but this year – coincidentally marking the 50th anniversary of Ransome's death – seemed the right time for another crossing, and the plan quickly evolved into the idea of having *Nancy* spend some time – initially a month, then, in response to demand, six weeks, then two months – over there to enable members to experience and enjoy sailing in the inland waters of Zeeland, in the hinterland of Vlissingen.

Nancy herself was in possibly the best condition of her 86-year life, following two winters of post-survey refurbishment, and a new mast and standing rigging. Down below, in her cabin and fo'c'sle, she has the *Goblin's* four blue bunks, a tiny galley with a two-burner stove and small sink – plus the never-mentioned heads in the forepeak. With her crew of four – all grown-ups this time – she set off at 12 noon on 4 June, and arrived, just as Ransome had, 25 hours later.

The new mast, and its better-tensioned setup certainly seem to have made some difference to *Nancy's* performance. Many reports from her weeks of inland sailing marvelled at the speeds she was achieving, and chairman Roger Sturge, who sailed alongside her across the North Sea, commented: "I'm amazed at how *Nancy* is performing. On the way out to Galloper *Wild Cat* had to motor sail to keep up."

Crewmember on the outbound trip Peter Horsley, who had come from Australia to take part in the voyage, commented: "Totally unforgettable trip. Some of the best and most varied sailing and navigational trips I've ever



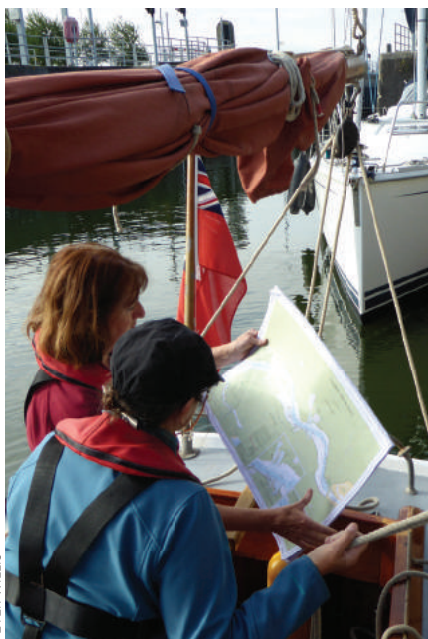
PETER WILLIS

Above right: John Holmes, Mate in Week Four, read in a 1930s yachting book that the appropriate garb for cruising was a grey flannel suit, 'as it doesn't show the mud, much'. Here he is at the helm on the foggy Oosterschelde.



SOPHIE NEVILLE

Right: In Middelberg, box-moored inside the Spijker Bridge



PETER WILLIS

Left: In the lock, taking a moment to check the chart

had... I really had NO IDEA of how she sailed. Superb sailing in good breezes and every point of sailing and motoring. Outstanding lifetime experience for me."

Ransome's own crossing was pretty uneventful, though hard work. He records "Pretty tired after steering nineteen hours out of twenty-five," much as John was to do in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (*WD* from now on). Ransome had started planning the book the previous January but didn't start writing it until the October. When the *Goblin* arrives in Flushing, she passes the ferry terminal, not there now, where the Harwich boat, with Daddy aboard, is about to leave, then picks up a buoy in the outer harbour, before passing through the huge lock into the inner harbour and the Middelburg Canal.

Ransome, in *Nancy*, did much the same, though unlike the *Goblin's* crew, he disdained the assistance of a Pilot. *Nancy* this year also passed straight into the canal, though on previous visits she has used the

former fishing harbour, now the Michiel de Ruijter marina which you come to first, on arrival. Ransome refers to it in *WD*: "They passed the mouth of a harbour. John saw the crowded masts of fishing boats." It's my own preferred option, well-run, nice restaurant with a view over the Schelde, and handy for the town. It's the same harbour where they find a café to eat with Daddy, though you'd be hard put to identify it now – there are about ten of them. Also a very good local maritime museum.

This is where we part company with the voyage of the *Goblin*. She immediately returned home, to Pin Mill and Mother. Ransome, in *Nancy*, motored up the canal to Middelburg and Veere. ("Walked around the little town where Herbert-Smith [the useless crewman] gallantly bought a tile for *Nancy*.") Then he returned to Flushing, sent Herbert-Smith home, and made the acquaintance of a pilot, E de Smit, who found him a more capable, Dutch crew. "Pilot de Smit



VERONICA FRENKIS

brought along a young Dutch mate who will ship for the passage @ £1 a day and his fare home. We had supper together and he seemed very pleasant, but inclined to imagine that he is wanted to 'take' us across. I explained that I wanted to 'take' myself. He was all right on that point."

For *Nancy* in 2017, the next six weeks became variations on the same theme, as succeeding crews, with a changeover every Saturday, discovered the delights of cruising Zeeland's Veersemeer and Oosterschelde. Most of the changeovers took place at Middelburg, halfway up the canal between Vlissingen and the Veersemeer. It's doubly convenient, being clear of all the bridges coming out of Vlissin-

gen, and having a handy railway station. It's also a fantastically nice and interesting place to wander round, with a spectacular 15th-century Town Hall, loads of twisty streets with ancient Dutch houses, and a supplementary canal system of its own. We, the Week Four crew, hired bikes (from the railway station) to explore it.

We found *Nancy* tied up to the waiting pontoon outside the lifting Spijker Bridge which leads to the Binnenhaven, with moorings. The harbour office is nearby and so is the 'Kamel' yachtclub for food, drink, showers and toilets.

Up the canal (Kanaal door Walcheren), which you can sail if the wind is right, is an-

other huge lock, leading into the Veersemeer. Just before it, on the right bank, is what looks like a huge abstract sculpture. It is in fact spare lock gates for this and the Vlissingen lock, standing ready for use if needed.

Through the lock and we turned right into the Veersmeer, a 22km long tideless salt-water lake shaped like a shallow V. Towards the far end there are a couple of marinas, opposite each other, Kortgene (pronounced something like Cortina) and Wolphaartsdijk, improbably home of the Royal Yacht Club of Belgium. We ignored both of them as our objective was Goes, on the Oosterschelde. This meant passing through another gigantic lock at Zandkreekdijk, and it was here that we first noticed the swallows nesting in the steel framework of the lock gates.

Goes presents a choice of small yacht harbours. We'd been recommended the De Werf, on the left immediately after passing under the road bridge (lifts on the hour). It's a charming, leafy site, ideal for boats

Above: Dutch inland waterways make a perfect playground for a sea-going yacht

"He seemed inclined to imagine that he was wanted to 'take' us across. I explained that I wanted to 'take' myself. He was all right on that point" Arthur Ransome, 1936

NANCY BLACKETT IN THE NETHERLANDS



VERONICA FRENKS

Right:
Motoring up
the Middel-
burg Canal

Left: Down in
the cabin

of *Nancy's* size (max 12m). With its small brick lighthouse, containing a toilet, and its honesty-box beer store under a trapdoor in the floor of the clubhouse, it's pleasingly informal, though you won't get a weather forecast from the harbourmaster. Some of *Nancy's* crews opted instead for the town centre moorings, among larger motor-yachts and a bit 'on show' though also picturesque in its way.

We gave a day to Goes, a medium-sized town, also blessed with a railway station – at least one other crew change took place there. We happened on market day (Tuesday) – a massive selection of good food stalls where we bought some delicious seven-year-old cheese (more a distant cousin to Parmesan than to Edam or Gouda).

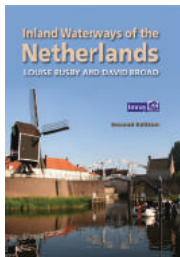
From Goes, we had our first taste of the Oosterschelde, a much larger, and livelier bit of water than the Veersemeer. It's tidal, tends to be a bit choppy, is dotted with sandbanks



VERONICA FRENKS

Cruising in the Netherlands

One of the good things we found about sailing on these Dutch inland waterways is that all the locks and lifting bridges were free of charge to boats. They generally operate at hourly or half-hourly intervals. Details, including VHF and phone numbers can be found in the *ANWB Watermanak* Part 2. It's in Dutch, but much of the information, being numerical, can be understood by English-speaking boaters. The companion volume, Part 1, contains the Dutch waterways regulations (again in Dutch), which it's a legal requirement to have on board. However these are now also available as a free App, *Binnenvaart Politie Reglement*.



We also carried on board *Inland Waterways of the Netherlands*, second edition 2016 (Imray £30) and the 2017 edition of Imray's 20130 Westerschelde and Oosterschelde Chart Atlas, in a spiral-bound folio.

Marina fees are reasonable, around 20 for a boat of *Nancy's* size (8.6m plus 2m bowsprit). ★

and is traversed by long, low cargo ships. And it provided us with easily our best sail of the week. Even though the wind was only about F3-4, and we hadn't bothered to shake out the two reefs left in by the previous crew, we sped along at up to 5.8 knots, which is good going for *Nancy*, and with a comfortable motion, not overly pressed. Another crew recorded 6.2 knots under full sail, but I suspect for the extra 0.4 knot they were hanging on for dear life and things were falling off the shelves.

That was the day we ended up down the Krabbenkreek in St Annaland, which is mainly a large, featureless marina, but one with an excellent restaurant overlooking the creek, where we enjoyed the best meal of the

week – oysters followed by smoked eel in a delicious sauce, and served with samphire. We also had a grandstand view of the Wednesday evening racing.

Zierikzee, our next stop, is the other side of the Zeeland Bridge, a huge multi-arched main-road carrier that spans the Oosterschelde, so we'll need to go under it, if we're brave, or through the lifting section. Being unsure about the headroom we opt for the latter. Other crews face the same issues. One approached the fixed arch slowly, in reverse, in case they need to abort at the last minute. In fact there are designated routes, with headroom displayed over the arch, and *Nancy* can make it at some stages of the tide.

Zierikzee proves largely worth the effort, we moor up in the canal and celebrate our arrival at the clubhouse with our first glass of genever of the voyage

NANCY BLACKETT IN THE NETHERLANDS



NICK ARDAGH-WALTER

Top: Safely through the Zeeland Bridge

Middle: Entering the lock at Veere

Below: The small, friendly De Werf boat harbour at Goes



VERONICA FRENKS



ROBIN SADLER

Zierikzee proves largely worth the effort, we moor up in the canal and celebrate our arrival at its clubhouse with our first and only glass of genever of the voyage.

A long haul back on the last day, with a rest stop at Kortgene, where they have free bikes so we rode into the nearby village for yet another appiecake and coffee. Our aim was Veere, which I'd cunningly held back, in order to give us a lift on our last evening. On the way we encountered a 'pilot' of our own, Erik Frenks, Dutch OGA member (and actually a software engineer who programmed all the bridge and lock operations, so could open them from his phone if he chose) sailing his 18ft Woodbridge-built gaffer *Grace*.

Veere has three mooring options – some box moorings at the top of the canal; a very exposed pontoon facing the Veersemerse itself, and by far the best, and therefore most crowded, the picturesque town harbour. Erik nipped in to see if the harbourmaster – his friend, naturally – could find us a space, and

returned soon with the harbourmaster himself in his tiny rubber dinghy, who guided us to a convenient and prestigious position alongside the town wall. A jazz band was playing above us and it all felt very festive.

Veere is a little gem, a tiny and very historic place, with strong Scottish associations. One can see why Ransome's crewman was moved to buy a tile there. We lost no time in exploring it before adjourning to the Jachtclub for supper.

In the morning, our departure was marked by a triple-cannon salute from a party of historical re-enactors. With a following wind, we went down the canal under (stay) sail, and once back in Middelberg finally faced, and mastered, the art of entering a box mooring, backwards, because of the bowsprit.

Ransome returned from Holland via Zeebrugge, with his Dutch mate, who commented "Well I've never been into Zeebrugge before but I don't think I've missed much!" It added about 18 nM to his return passage.

The *Goblin* came home on a straight reverse bearing, helmed by Daddy. For her return voyage this year, *Nancy* slipped out to sea at Roompot, to save a day returning to Vlissingen and get away ahead of worsening weather. Even so, it was a choppy passage, mostly motor-sailing, and her skipper decided to opt for Lowestoft. Just as well, as the engine began to play up and eventually died altogether. She continued under sail but about three miles off accepted a tow from the Lifeboat, which the coastguard had sent out to stand by. ★

Peter Willis, founder of the Nancy Blackett Trust, is author of Good Little Ship: Arthur Ransome, Nancy Blackett and the Goblin, to be published by Lodestar in November

