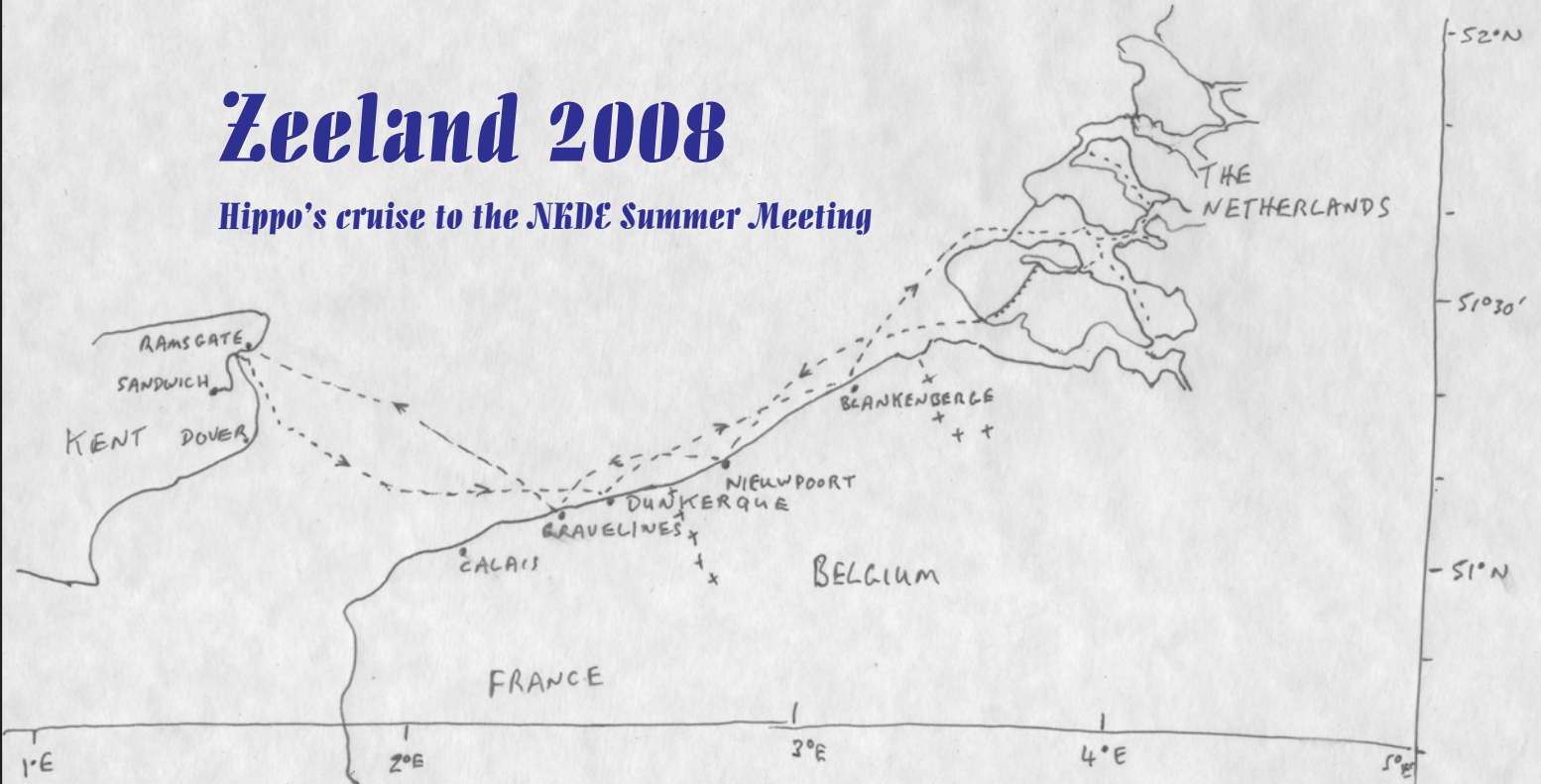


Zeeland 2008

Hippo's cruise to the NKDE Summer Meeting



Jim Hopwood describes his trip to join the NKDE Summer meeting in the Grevelingenmeer and confesses to a little carelessness on the way home.

Ambitious plans to sail from Ashlett were abandoned in view of the strong winds forecast and I gate-crashed the Poole rally instead. Having survived the trip back in a forecast 4 or 5 which turned into a recorded 6 gusting 7, and with an improving forecast, I felt ready to face the North Sea. But where to start? Ramsgate would be ideal but the launching fees at the marina are so outrageous (£31 each way!!) I decided on Sandwich instead. This is a much more Drascomby kind of place. The narrow slipway gives access to a muddy river fringed with reeds and it's free – but only useable 2 hours either side of high water.

I launched in the evening and left as early as possible in the morning. Apart from the shiny new Pfizer drugs factory, the river banks are mostly derelict with various abandoned quays, old sea walls and the occasional wreck. The rudder bounced over a few solid objects even in midstream with the echo sounder showing 5 or 6 feet. However, the lower river is very attractive with a large group of impassive seals, a huge flock of oystercatchers, many other birds and acres of marshes and golden sand.

From Ramsgate the plan would have been to take the last of the flood tide south, inside the Goodwins, then the ebb east along the French coast. But my tight-fisted attitude cost me dear. Getting out of the river took longer than expected,



so the tide turned long before I was clear of the sands adding to the delay. By the time I got to the straights, half the favourable tide had gone so I faced a contrary tide on the French coast too, and by the time I reached my intended destination, it was too late to get in so I pressed on to Dunkerque - not quite *La Belle France* one dreams about! The marina is down wind of the stealworks and 20 minutes walk from the town, but it is accessible at any time.

In the end it took 11½ hours, all but 3 of them against the tide, instead of the intended 8. Still I had crossed the Channel without any nasty frights and after a slow start had a great sail. I started motor-sailing due to lack of wind, turned the engine off late morning, reefed during the afternoon and finished up surfing past Dunkerque Oest under jib and mizzen. Lest I should feel proud of my achievement, the Coast Guard had been announcing that several cross channel swimming attempts were in progress and asking ships to “keep a sharp lookout”; and I worry that a Drascombe might be difficult to see!

The next day the wind was very light and I motored virtually all the way to Blankenberge. There are 4 separate marinas operated by various sailing clubs. I was taken in hand and found a very convenient berth by the friendly boatman from De Vrije Noordzeezeilers - The Free North Sea Sailors – which seemed quite appropriate. Leaving at 0915 and arriving at 1545 was a bit more civilised too and gave me time to explore the thriving seaside resort and to find, eventually, what seemed to be the only cash machine in town.

Saturday was warm and sunny with a light easterly wind but poor visibility. Crossing the Schelde estuary felt a little hairy as ships did not appear until already quite close. Fortunately the channel is narrow and well buoyed so their behaviour was quite predictable. Starting across I could see two ships leaving and calculated I would pass comfortably astern of both. However by the time I got there a smudge behind them was turning into a very large empty bulk carrier, showing about 15 feet of antifouling and approaching fast. Tacking to let him by I noticed another smudge coming in – and of course I was already 2/3rds of the way across the in-bound track, so tacked quickly back to cross close astern of the bulk carrier and head for the safety of the shallows.

Close hauled I could not quite lay the course but the tide flooding into the Schelde helped and after 4 hours we arrived spot on the narrow gap in the banks off Westkapelle just as the tide turned to carry me round the headland. There are two deep channels here separated by a narrow bank. The water seemed unexpectedly lumpy till a glance at the echo sounder revealed that I was over the bank not in the channel despite being between the parallel rows of red and green buoys. Presumably the other halves of the expected pairs are not needed because the inner edge of one channel is a steep-to beach and the outer edge of the other is defined by cardinal marks -the colours were clear enough though! A strange looking ship was virtually on the beach, discharging a great arc of water – apparently a sort of reverse dredging, depositing sand on the beach to protect the dunes.

Although I knew that the barrier across the Oosterschelde is a tidal surge barrier rather than a dam, I was surprised by the strength of the tide running out; after a few tacks I gave up and motored in to the lock at Roompotsluis. After the gates shut, one of the other boats cast off and motored forward to the front of the lock – not as I first thought shameless queue jumping but out of concern that their mast might not fit under the fixed bridge (18.5 metres clearance according to Reeds) when the water level was raised. As it only came up about 6 inches, this seemed a bit too close for comfort. Rather than punch the tide for another 2 hours I went to the Roompot marina, a huge soulless place attached to a large bungalow park and holiday centre. After four countries in three days, I was ready for a holiday!

The next day, in hot sun and hardly any wind, I caught up with the NKDE fleet and we all lowered our masts to slip under two bridges and between the towers of the fort into the old harbour at Zierikzee. Here we moored alongside the exhibits in the maritime museum and were invited for a drink, which turned into a lavish meal, in a beautifully restored old house used as home and art gallery by Victoria and her longboat owning companion, Klaas.



After an excellent breakfast and getting my washing done, courtesy of Victoria, and exploring the town we left about 3pm and took the tide up to Rattekaai, Rat Quay, a large area of marsh and drying mud in a remote corner approached over acres and acres of mussel beds, marked by many withies and worked by surprisingly large boats, despite the shallow water. We had to leave there early in the morning or wait till the evening, so we arrived at our next port, Stavenisse by 10am. It rained on and off all day so an evening meal in the harbour café was a popular suggestion. Even on a fine day it would be a quiet place – harbour dues are put in an honesty box on the pontoon. The next day we had a lively sail up the Krabenkreek for another night dried out on the mud surrounded by marshes, birds and seals.



In the morning, tacking down the river at low tide gave good views of the flats and wildlife but the Drascombes all seemed to be going off in different directions! Crossing the Mastgat / Zijpe feels a bit like cycling on the M1 as a constant stream of barges hurry between Antwerp and Rotterdam. I carried on through the Bruinisse lock into the salt water, but non-tidal Grevelingenmeer and stopped at a tiny island for lunch. Typical of these carefully man-made 'natural' areas, it had two small harbours perfect for Drascombes. In the evening, several of us anchored in the lee of woods on Veermansplaat island. This involved a long approach across very shallow water and I was surprised and delighted to find that, with both plate and rudder up, *Hippo* steered perfectly just by trimming the jib and mizzen sheets.



These islands, the tops of sandbanks revealed when the water level was lowered after this arm of the delta was dammed, are mostly nature reserves closed to the public but the following day I stopped for lunch at the Hempelvoet which is open after 15 August and enjoyed a walk on paths cut through dense scrub and a riot of blackberries and other autumn fruits.

In the evening I joined Klaas Hoogerwerf in Scharendijke, where the harbour master found us a sheltered corner together beside his own beautifully maintained traditional wooden boat, and scrounged a lift to the meal at the rally base at the Surf Centre on Kabellaarsbank. This was the end of the feeder cruise: I found the mix of remote anchorages one day alternating with small harbours in pretty old towns with access to showers and shops the next ideal for a Drascombe cruise. The area is perfect. The warm welcome and good company was great too. Thanks to Michel for organising it and Franz and Margot for leading us to attractive hidden corners.



On Saturday morning the the rally proper started with a morning 'palaver' to decide on the day's programme. With the sea (lake seems too tame a word) covered in white caps and wind surfers screaming past the windows there was little enthusiasm for a long outing. In the end most boats found their way to a sheltered beach at the other end of Hempelvoet. As they had to leave early for a family birthday on Sunday I had the two Maartens brothers with me in *Hippo*. They seemed impressed when the log reached 7.5 knots and I foolishly said that the record was 8.1. Much tweaking of sheets followed until Anton got her up to 8.1 but that is still the record. Must leave the dinghy behind next time! The night was spent in the shelter of a beautifully designed 'natural' creek behind the Centre.



On Sunday heavy rain was added to the strong wind and the morning palaver dragged on till lunch time, after which people started to haul out and head for home. I was still unsure what my plans were but the 5 day forecast suggested a spell of good weather was on its way so late in the afternoon I made the short trip round to Brouwershaven, getting soaked in the process. Here I caught up with Frank and Elsa and we had a very pleasant evening exploring the narrow streets, old houses and huge church of the old town.

In the morning we went back out into tidal waters for a long beat to the lock leading into another non-tidal arm, the Veerse Meer. The day started with strong wind and more heavy rain but gradually improved. In mid-afternoon I changed to the large mainsail and by evening the weather was beautiful. The Veerse Meer also has many islands but most of them are public with landing stages in sheltered coves. They say it gets crowded in summer but in the first week of September we had it to ourselves, apart from large numbers of birds. We moored in a delightful, reed fringed mere enclosed by two small islands. The background roar suggested we were not far from heavy industry but, as in most places we had visited, there was remarkably little light pollution leaving the Milky Way clearly visible in the night sky.

It would be well worth spending a few days in the Veerse Meer, which is ideal for small boat exploring, and visiting the old town of Veere itself, but the forecast suggested the weather window would not last more than 3 days so I had to move on quickly and enjoyed a misty dawn on the way to enter the Walcheren canal to Vlissingen. The canal is wide and deep with grazing cattle on one bank and a nature reserve on the other. Pheasants, urgently shepherding their chicks into hidey holes as I passed, were added to the long list of birds seen so far, then just as we entered an industrial stretch near Middelberg, with scrapyards and a steel stockist on one bank, the bright flash of a kingfisher lit up the other.

There are two bridges in Middelberg which are supposed to open in sequence but a large British motor yacht barged through the first one without waiting for the green light, so the bridge keeper kept us waiting for forty minutes until the first bridge had opened and closed a second time before opening the second bridge. No wonder the Dutch are so polite and well behaved! If only we had a similar way to get back at ill-mannered gin-palaces at home!



Michel Maartens had offered to crew for me on the way home so I picked him up in Vlissingen before we went through the last lock into the Westerschelde and the sea proper, on schedule at 1130. The promised south east wind sped us on our way. We started under full sail, put the first reef in at 1400 and second at 1600. Apart from a short tack to give way to a ferry leaving Oostende it was all plain sailing, arriving at Nieuwpoort at 1830. Having failed to raise anyone on the radio we parked on the back of the harbour master's pontoon at the Royal Nieuwpoort Yacht Club and walked into town for a meal.

Tidal strategy now dictated a rather gentlemanly schedule: after a leisurely breakfast a walk into town for a little shopping and coffee and cake in a café before setting off about midday. However the wind had gone round to south west and we seemed to get little help from the tide. We were sailing quite fast, in fact we had a reef in till 1615, but making little progress. There was enough south in the wind to make port tack seem attractive but it took us further and further off-shore. After 5 hours we still had half the distance to go so gave up and motored, directly up wind into a surprisingly lumpy sea. With the great benefit of hindsight we should have stayed close to the beach and motored earlier in smoother water. We found Gravelines in the dark and motored up the long approach channel to the Basin Vauban where we were amazed to find the harbour master still on duty at 2130.



In the morning we walked round the pretty old town and its massive fortifications then I stocked up from the Lidl supermarket just across the street from our pontoon. The wine on offer ranged from £1.20 to £2.00 per bottle but seems very drinkable!

My plan was to reverse my route out – take the flood westwards, cross the shipping lanes at the narrowest point, then take the ebb up inside the Goodwins to Ramsgate. But with a good southwest breeze and excellent visibility, a more direct course looked a lot easier. My reluctance to use this direct route was because the shipping lanes are wider here and begin to divide making it more difficult to predict ships' courses. In practice we found they tended to stay close to one edge of the lane, were widely spaced and easy to avoid. Apart from this bulk carrier, leaving



Dunkerque, the only close encounter came after we had crossed all three lanes when we met a small container ship taking a short cut. It is difficult to hold your course and speed when close hauled in a fickle wind so at times it seemed we might pass ahead, at others not. Eventually he altered course, to pass clear ahead of us. I had expected him to go astern of us and did briefly wonder if the Drascombe scheme's £3 million would cover pushing a container ship onto the Goodwin Sands!

We left under full sail, put 2 reefs in, then took one out, put it back in, took them both out and finally started the engine as the wind died in the evening. Apart from a short tack to reach the Sandettié light float we had been close hauled on port tack all the way, constantly pinching to try to get a bit more to the west. When the wind unexpectedly backed more to the south, rather than the expected swing to the north, we could hardly believe our luck. It looked as if we might reach our destination without tacking after all. True this would take us close to the Goodwins but approaching high tide they would not really be a problem would they? About the same time it began to rain and started to get dark. The lights of Ramsgate looked very attractive!



After a while Michel's sharp eyes picked out an area of dry sand to the south. Well OK, our plan was to skirt round the north of the bank. A faint change in the surface of the water raised the stakes and I chose to head more to the north, still thinking the danger was to the south – exactly the wrong move, as more dry sand and breaking waves soon indicted. Hearts in mouths, and sheets and centreplate tackle in hand we nosed up to the line in the water watching an echo sounder in free fall – 100 feet to 60 to 20 to 10 to 4.5 then 4.6, 4.7, 4.8 and slowly back into the teens and safety. By this time we could see the buoys of the inner channel only a few hundred metres away so it seemed wise to turn on the navigation lights – when the echo sounder instantly went blank. It seemed there was enough life in the battery for one or the other but not both – obviously my engine charging had not been working. Studying the chart again in daylight it is clear I had blundered across between the two main banks of the notorious Goodwin Sands and got away with it – yet another advantage of sailing a Drascombe, but not something to be proud of!

Looking back, I suppose I made two mistakes:

My planning was based on the inshore route; I looked carefully at tidal stream timing but did not give any attention to depth. When the plan changed, knowing nothing about these sandbanks, I assumed they were like others I did know and those we had crossed the day before - i.e. that the yellow areas would only dry at low water springs. It never occurred to me they might be dry at high water neaps so I did not do the sums to check.

The bright lights of Ramsgate may have looked attractive but they make it very difficult to pick out the harbour entrance pier head lights which are pale by comparison. Our own lights, or rather light, was also pretty dim, leading to a nervous few minutes till we found our way through a suddenly busy entrance. Despite being well sheltered, the marina seems to have a continuous scend which keeps boats and pontoons moving restlessly all night.

In the morning we motored up to Sandwich at high tide. The seals had hauled themselves right up onto the grass but were just as unwilling to move in response to a boat passing by. The general air of decay, the 'project' boats in various stages of rebuilding and the unkempt nature of the banks fascinated Michel – so very unlike the, sometimes over-tidy, Netherlands.

There is another side to that coin though - Like Zierikzee and Gravelines, Sandwich was once an important fortified port that now lies well inland. Like them it has fine old buildings and guided walks for tourists but, like other English towns, seems to lack the energy and civic pride so evident in other countries.



Passage Summary

Date	Leg	HW Dover	Start	Finish	Duration	Miles	Av. Speed
28 Aug	Sandwich -Dunkerque	1108	0800	1930	11.5	45	3.9
29 Aug	Dunkerque -Blankenberge	1201	0910	1545	6.5	35	5.4
30 Aug	Blankenberge -Rooptot	1244	1000	1730	7.5	33	4.4
9 Sept	Vlissingen -Nieuwpoort	0741	1130	1830	7.0	39	5.6
10 Sep	Nieuwpoort -Gravelines	0901	1245	2045	8.0	25	3.1
11 Sep	Gravelines -Ramsgate	1011	1210	2110	9.0	33	3.7
	Total				49.5	210	4.25

Footnote: While getting the sail down in a hurry off Dunkerque on the way out I dropped a lot of salt water on my camera which has not worked since. Thanks to Michel Maartens, Ester Ten Hoop, Dirk Branbergen and Elsa de Haan for providing pictures for this report.