

My Seagoing Dinghy, by Roger Barnes

Roger Barnes describes Avel Dro, his French Ilur class dinghy, successor to the little Tideway Baggywrinkle

Alan Glanville did warn me. He said if I bought a yacht I would stop using my cruising dinghy. I thought I knew better. Yet he was proved right: I should have listened to this experienced Dinghy Cruising Association member. For four years I concentrated on sailing a 26-foot Harrison Butler cutter called *Caracole*, and when I was not sailing her I spent every minute of my spare time maintaining her elderly hull and rig. Meanwhile my old Tideway dinghy languished ashore in a friend's barn, covered in straw. *Baggywrinkle's* varnish dulled, her mahogany planking dried out and her seams opened up.

It was not all bad: I got lots of deepwater sailing in. *Caracole's* superb sea kindliness and passage-making ability enabled me to make serious sea passages to France, the Isle of Man and Northern Ireland. But eventually a change of jobs and home twice in under two years forced the sale of *Caracole*, and left a large emotional hole in my life. A boat can really get under your skin. After a bittersweet final passage down the west coast of England from Fleetwood to Watchet in the spring of 2003, delivering *Caracole* to her new home berth, I desperately needed some dinghy sailing therapy. So I rescued *Baggywrinkle* from the barn, brushed the straw off her and took her straight to the second Semaine du Golfe maritime festival in southern Brittany.

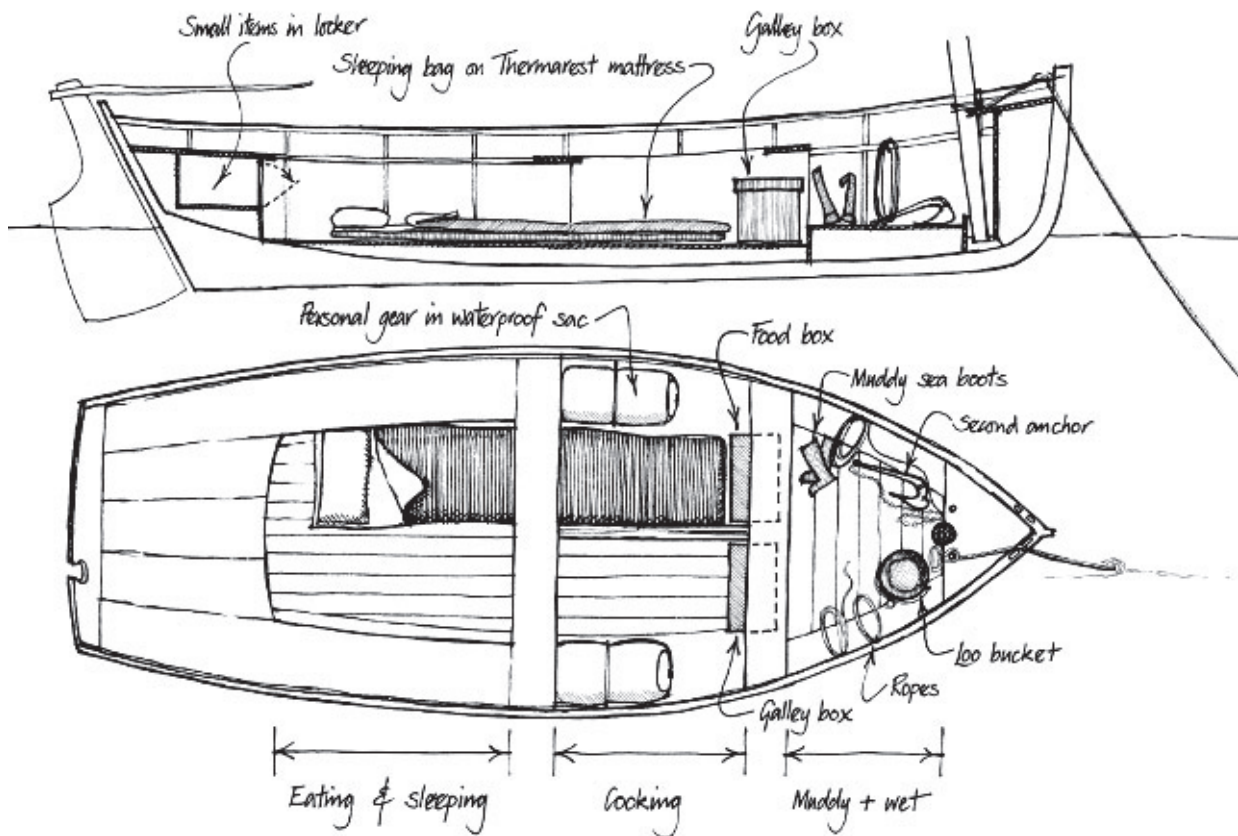
It was very strange to be back afloat in my old cruising dinghy after my years in a four-berth yacht. She felt comfortably familiar, but also extremely small. And after her years ashore she also required almost constant pumping out, which gets really depressing after a while. But even in a leaky dinghy, the Semaine du Golfe festival was utterly marvellous. Some 800 boats took part in this awesome event, grouped into eight flotillas of broadly similar vessels. Streams of boats merged and diverged, and at times the water would be dark with sails as far as the eye could see. It was striking to rediscover how much more sociable dinghy cruising is than yachting. A yacht is such self-sufficient little world, that her crew are insulated from their surroundings. Yachts are a bit smug. Whereas there is nothing like cleaning your teeth over the stern of a dinghy in full view of someone to break the ice.

I spent my first night in the Golfe moored to a quayside near to a French traditional gaffer. Her crew were also sleeping on board under canvas, like myself. They invited me over for evening drinks under their boat tent. This boozy evening, hunkered down between the thwarts of the goemonier *Reine de la Mer*, was the beginning of a long friendship with her owner, François Breton, which thrives to this day. And that is just one of many friendships that have had their beginnings from cruising in a dinghy. I lost track of the times I have been invited into peoples' houses for drinks or offered a bed for the night. A dinghy cruiser soon has friends in every port.

Just before I went to the Semaine du Golfe, I was invited to start writing a monthly cruising column in a new yachting magazine. I had no expectation that this would last very long, but six years later, and despite going into administration at one point, Dinghy Sailing Magazine is still on the newsagents' racks, and I am still writing the column. In order to have something to write about each month for the magazine's ever-hungry maw, I decided to buy a new dinghy, which would hopefully generate lots of articles about adapting it to an effective coastal cruiser. Also, I was keen to put into practice what I had learnt over my many years of sailing *Baggywrinkle*, starting again with a blank slate.

Initially I had decided to buy an Iain Oughtred designed Ness Yawl, like Alan Glanville's, but while I was in France I became reacquainted with the small boat designs of François Vivier, ubiquitous in Brittany, and in particular with his 'Ilur' design: a beamy and capacious fifteen-footer, with an unstayed mast stepped right in the bows, leaving lots of unencumbered space for dinghy cruising. The Ilur had the air of an admirably practical and seaworthy design and, most importantly, had a nice wide flat floor for sleeping on. I was rather worried about the rig – a single lugsail with very traditional gear – and wondered how practical it would be for serious cruising, compared to the much more conventional gunter rig of the Tideway. But surely generations of Breton fishermen could not be wrong?

Through the French Voile Aviron Yahoo Group, I found an Ilur on sale in Saumur on the Loire, and a local sailor volunteered to go and look at it for me. His report was so positive that shortly afterwards I took the ferry over to France to buy the boat. Unlike many Ilurs, which are home-made from plans, to a variable standard, *Avel Dro* (Breton for *Whirlwind*) had been professionally built by 'Les Charpentiers Reunis' of Cancale. Even though her owner had recently made a number of rough and ready changes to her rudder and transom to accommodate a large outboard motor, and she had a terribly drippy paint job, I could see that she was a decent, well-found boat. Reader, I bought her.



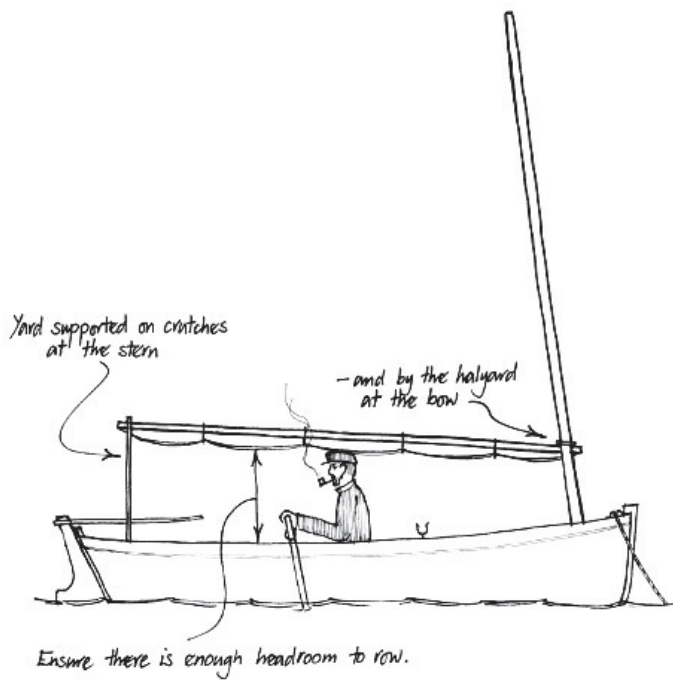
Avel Dro's first boat tent was home made from polythene tarpaulin material, and took the form of a simple ridge tent, using the yard as the ridge, which is hooked onto the traveller and hauled up the mast to head height and supported by a pair of wooden crutches at the stern. For a quick lashup it was surprisingly successful, and I continued to use this tent for many years, until it was eventually replaced with a purpose made canvas cover from The Canvas Windmill in Oxfordshire.

In my Tideway I slept at thwart level by raising the especially reinforced floorboards to create a bed platform. This is a really neat set up in a leaky dinghy, as it keeps you well above the bilge water, but the disadvantage is that it means moving every item of gear from its sailing location when in camping mode, and then moving it back again every morning before starting sailing again. This may seem a small matter, but the constant packing and repacking really gets to you after a while. It seems absurd to have to allow a whole hour between waking up and starting sailing. Two, if I also wanted breakfast.

So the grand plan was to make *Avel Dro* a streamlined and efficient cruising dinghy. The interior of the boat would be divided into zones for different purposes, based on the traditional hierarchy of a wooden man o' war: from the squalid 'heads' in the bows to the plush officers' quarters in the stern. On *Avel Dro* this would have to be compressed into fifteen feet, but the same hierarchy would be discernable. Muddy and smelly stuff would be kept right forward. This would be where seaboots, muddy anchors and the 'chuckit' bucket would live. Amidships there would be the galley area, and astern of that a salubrious zone for lounging and sleeping in, into which no squalor would ever penetrate. This at least was the plan.

The galley arrangement on *Baggywrinkle* was transferred almost unchanged to *Avel Dro*. I made two new plywood boxes to fit under the forward thwart, either side of the centreboard case, one to become the 'larder box', and the other the 'galley box', which would contain the cooker and pans. But unlike on *Baggywrinkle*, where the cooking stove was moved onto the stern seat each time I needed to cook, on *Avel Dro* the galley box was designed to stay in the same place, and designed so the stove could be cooked on *in situ*. I bought a new stove for the purpose, an Origo alcohol stove, complete with fiddles designed for yacht use. The galley box was designed around it, with an opening flap to get at the cooker control, and a slot to the side for cutlery and mugs, etc. This has been very successful.

Astern of the galley and larder boxes are formed two opening sections in the bottom boards. Beneath here is the deepest part of *Avel Dro's* bilge, and this was clearly the best place to add ballast. Ilurs are designed to take five adults, and during my initial sea trials of the boat, I had found her to be seriously under-ballasted when sailed by one or two people, even with full camping gear on board. Other dinghy sailors have added



lead ballast to their boats, but I had a different idea. During my yacht sailing years I had learnt the benefit of all-chain anchor rodes, and the security they give when anchoring over night. Compared to a nylon warp, chain really settles down a boat at anchor, reducing the tendency to sheer about, and also self-stows when it is hauled in, without needing to flake it down. So one of the two lockers contains 30 metres of anchor chain, which serves as ballast when sailing, and this helps to keep the dinghy stuck solidly to the bottom when the anchor is down.

The other locker contains a 30-metre nylon warp for the kedge anchor, with five metres of chain between anchor and warp. Both my anchors are the same weight, 5 kg (10 lbs). The all-chain rode is shackled to a plough anchor, which is kept up in the bows, with the chain draped over the side of the bow thwart, leading aft to the chain locker. The kedge anchor is a fisherman's pattern, which is folded down and lashed to the side of the centreboard case when out of use. The anchors can be swapped

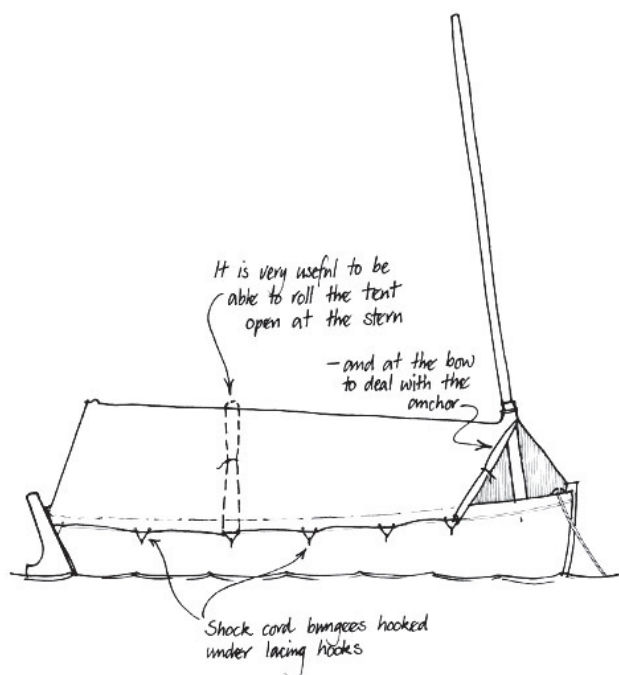
over from rode to rode if necessary, and for deeper water the two rodes can be connected together. I also carry an additional 30-metre length of warp, as 90 metres of rode would be required if I ever had to spend a tide at anchor out in the full 15 metre range of the Bristol Channel, which is my home patch.

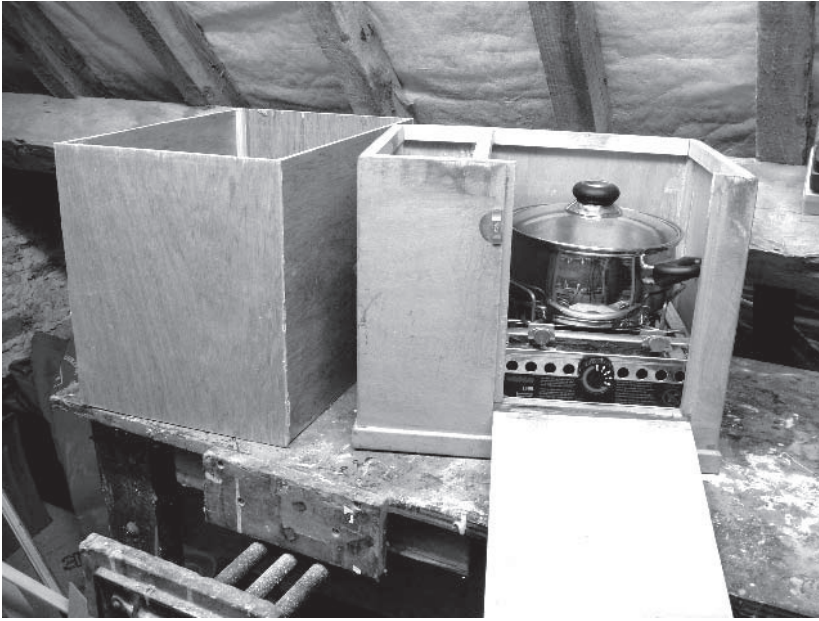
The two different types of anchor give me the ability to match the anchor to the type of bottom, the plough for mud and the fisherman for rock or kelp. But this is an accident, as I already had both anchors. Were I to buy brand new anchors for a cruising dinghy, I would go for two fisherman's pattern anchors, as I believe this is still the best pattern of anchor for all-round use, as long as it is heavy enough. (It is no accident that they are used on RNLI lifeboats). It is particularly nice the way you can sail along with them hooked over the gunwale of the boat to wash the mud off.

Avel Dro came with built-in buoyancy to comply with French regulations, which means she will stay afloat with the weight of the whole 5-man crew aboard, but I have added additional buoyancy in the form of two large fenders, lashed down on each side of the boat, amidships. Although I carry smaller fenders too, these big blighters can be brought out and used as fendering in stressful situations, when lying alongside rough stone quaysides or rusty fishing trawlers. They have proved to be well worth the space they take up.

Aft of the second rowing thwart, we enter the 'saloon' area of the boat: the plush officer's quarters. At night, two Thermarest mattresses are laid out on the bottom boards, extending forward under the thwart as far as the larder and galley boxes, to form the beds for the crew, but during the day this area is completely clear for the business of sailing. Under the side seats, which extend along both sides of this area, there is space for four waterproof bags of clothes and bedding, two for each member of the crew. These bags are lashed in place, to act as additional buoyancy if the boat were to be swamped.

I decided to experiment with 12-volt power aboard *Avel Dro*, so I could run an all-round masthead white light as an anchor or navigation light, keep a proper GPS going the whole time, as well as recharge handheld VHF sets, mobile phones, and run other electronic equipment. Power comes from a small Vetus 12V yacht battery, which is contained in a





third wooden box mounted immediately in front of the bow thwart. This box has a lid that clamps down onto a neoprene gasket, so it would withstand a swamping without wiping out the electronics. Initially I used to carry a battery charger, to recharge the battery in the middle of a long trip, but I have found that there is ample power in the battery to keep *Avel Dro* going for over a fortnight. In any case, it is likely that I would be able to borrow a battery charger from whosoever was providing the socket to plug it in to.

The pace of electronic change is so rapid that *Avel Dro's* electrical gear has already been completely renewed once since it was first fitted,

and much of it is probably out of date once again. The electronic gear presently carried is as follows:

- Garmin 128 fixed GPS.
- ACR Rapidfix 406 EPIRB, (interfaced to the fixed GPS).
- Icom M71 waterproof handheld VHF.
- Standard Horizon HX500E waterproof handheld VHF.
- Garmin 72 handheld GPS, (as back up).
- All round white light with photocell (can be hauled up the mast at night instead of the burgee).

At any one time, one of the VHF sets is kept out ready for use, while the other is kept in the battery case on charge. Each of the VHF's has its own charging holder in the battery case.

It would probably have been prudent to have test-sailed an Ilur setting a traditional Breton single lugsail before I went out and bought one, but this did not happen. So it was with a great deal of trepidation that I took the boat out for the first time. The sail is very large, equivalent to the full rig of a Wayfarer, (12 sq metres or 130 square feet). All the power is led to a single sheet with a 2-part purchase. This is hooked onto one of the quarters at the stern, and it has to be unhooked and taken across to the other quarter each time the boat is tacked. This process takes some getting used to – but at least going about is a fairly leisurely process. Gybing by contrast, is much more frantic. You have only a split second to pass the sheet across before the sail fills with wind and rips the sheet out of your hand.

It would be possible to modify the rig by fitting a horse to the sheet, but this would have numerous knock-on effects on the boat, including the necessity for a completely new rudder arrangement, and generally add a lot of complexity to what is at present an admirably robust and simple set up. Amazingly, there are only three pieces of rigging on the boat, no shackles whatsoever and only three blocks, two of which are on the tack downhaul. Before altering the rig from François Vivier's

Mark 1 Tent



Avel Dro at Ile Molene (See colour pages for further photographs of the boat)



original design, I was determined to see if I could get used to sailing it as it was.

It was months before I could tack the boat with confidence, and nearly a year before I had learnt to gybe her. But I now find a great deal of pleasure in getting the best out of the boat, and take a particular pride in gybing her smartly: sheeting the sail in tight, bringing the rudder over, waiting for the pressure on the sheet to drop as the sail begins to feather into the wind, then rapidly unhooking the sheet and flicking it quickly across onto the wooden hook on the other quarter, and paying it out at the run as the sail suddenly fills with wind.

Although I have got very fond of the rig, I am not sure I would recommend it to someone else. It would not suit everyone. Its great advantage is a robust simplicity and efficiency. If not as close-winded as a decent Bermudan dinghy, (a well set up Wayfarer will walk away from *Avel Dro* to windward), the rig is surprisingly efficient, and *Avel Dro* can keep pace with most DCA-type boats. The sail cannot be reefed when hoisted though. It has to be lowered into the boat, the reef points tied down, and then rehoisted, and this requires a reasonable amount of sea room to leeward while you tie down all the reef knots. But this type of traditional reefing means that the sail always sets well, (as long as you reefed it neatly), and the efficiency

of a well-set lugsail often surprises onlookers. On a reach *Avel Dro* leaves most boats standing, (including Wayfarers). Another advantage of the rig is the way that the lowered sail can be cleared right out of the way, leaving the whole of the boat clear for other business.

One of the nicest things about the boat is how easy she is to propel with a single oar over the stern: 'à la godille,' as the French would say. Indeed I tend to sail with an oar permanently in the sculling notch in the transom, its blade sticking out over the stern, so the oar is constantly ready for use. Only if I need to propel the boat a good distance, is it worth clearing out the other oar and sitting down to row conventionally.

So all in all I am very happy with my choice of dinghy and the way that the boat is now set up. There is always a list of jobs to do on any boat of course, and improvements to be made, but *Avel Dro* has already proved a good and trusted friend in a number of sticky situations, and I know that I can rely on her. I am not planning to change her for anything else at the moment, not even another yacht. **RB**

