

Heather Dennett, the Events Secretary of the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships reflects on her role in the 85th anniversary return through an organiser's eyes

When I was asked to contribute to this special Dunkirk edition, through the eyes of the Events Secretary, I thought not only about the 85th anniversary events, but also about what the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships is, and why it matters. For as long as I can remember, I've been part of the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships. As a child, I would watch the flotillas gather, the pageantry unfold, and the towns come alive with community spirit. Back then, it all seemed so effortless, as though the tide itself carried in the boats, the bunting, the receptions, and the cheering crowds.

Now, after serving as Events Secretary and seeing things through an organiser's eyes, I understand the sheer effort behind what once appeared to "just happen". It was, in truth, the result of a huge collective endeavour. Volunteers gave their time freely, and our friends in France worked alongside us with the same dedication. Ramsgate, too, played its part, with the town embracing the occasion and show-

ing great civic pride. For those efforts, and for the good humour shown even under pressure, I am very grateful.

This anniversary brought some challenges, as they all do. Bad weather meant that many of us remained in Dunkirk for five days longer than planned. At first, it felt like a setback. In fact, for me, I came to appreciate the town in ways I had not before.

Dunkirk still carries the marks of what it suffered in 1940. Much of the town was destroyed, many of its people were displaced, and those who stayed endured five years of occupation until the Canadians liberated it in 1945. To walk through the town with that history in mind will always be a sobering reminder of why the Little Ships still matter. On previous visits, time was tightly scheduled with ceremonies and commemorations. This time, while waiting for the storm to pass, there was room to look more closely at the town itself. I explored its deeper heritage, a town with roots reaching back to the 10th century, and its

maritime history is long and varied. Once a fishing and maritime stronghold, Dunkirk's long nautical past is perhaps most visible in the Mole. Now famous as the key evacuation point, it was originally constructed as protective jetties when the town was fortified by the French after being sold by Charles II for £320,000. It's staggering to think that the once-bustling port was nearly obliterated in 1940. The town has since rebuilt itself and continues to grow; however, the shrapnel marks and bullet holes still visible in the church walls stand as lasting scars, a permanent reminder of the past.



My main task in Dunkirk aside, like many, just getting there....was arranging our commemorative dinner at La Villa Blanche. The plan had been in place for months, but the weather again had its say. Boats due to leave stayed in port, while others slipped away, and the seating plan had to be reworked several times. Even in the final hours, tables were being adjusted and arrangements changed.

Yet somehow, with the help of friends and colleagues who never lost their good humour, it came together. Over 300 attended and we dined as one, the challenges of weather and logistics gave way to laughter and companionship, reminding me that the essence of these events lies not in perfection, but in perseverance.



And then... it was time to go home. The focus returns to the Little Ships, as once again Ramsgate came out to welcome an honoured

fleet back to its home waters. I was struck by the sense of relief and accomplishment, from my Little



Ship *Gay Venture*, who never missed a beat, to the Association and its supporters, the banners, the berths, the receptions, the toasts and speeches - none of which is automatic. It depends on commitment and goodwill, often from people who go unrecognised. Seeing that up close has left me both proud to be a part of this Association and grateful to all who contribute.

They survive thanks to their owners, both new and old, to the boat-builders and craftsmen who maintain them, and to the Association that keeps their story alive. The veterans who once came with us are now gone, but the legacy continues through family retellings and community efforts. Commemorating, educating, and celebrating.

The Little Ships are not only symbols of the extraordinary events of 1940, but also bridges between past

and present, volunteers working tirelessly behind the scenes, and towns and nations standing side by side.

And in that, perhaps, lies the truest spirit of Dunkirk.

Personal Thanks

I could not do my role without the incredible support around me. First and foremost, my husband Stephen; the committee; Kevin Finn (Commodore *Brown Owl*); Ian Gilbert (*Lady Lou*, Vice Admiral and a true rock of the Association); Howard Brooks (Treasurer and VC, *Maimonde*); Alain Lamens (*Breda*) whose help with cross-linguistic and international communication has been invaluable.

My thanks also go to Simon Palmer (*Hilfranor*), organiser of the last return dinner, for his advice and reassurance, and to the many, many friends whose unwavering support, with hugs, encouragement, and the occasional glass of wine, made this trip such a very special occasion.

Heather Dennett

(Photos provided by Heather on page 34)



Breda



View of the flotilla from Gay Venture



Ona II



Sunset over Ona II and another DLS boat



Mike Dennett relaxing onboard MB278



Heather, Stephen and crew