

ASTER at La Fête de la Batellerie et Le Pardon des Mariniers

Aster played a starring role over the weekend of 14th and 15th June in Saint-John-de-Losne. The weekend of the Fete de la Batellerie is a celebration for boats, boaters and those that love the waterways. Large crowds gathered during a sunny, breezy weekend to enjoy the stalls, rides, restaurants and official ceremonies.

Aster was centre stage and the focus of a great deal of attention. People could see the lines and scale of the last wooden peniche in France, but her frailties were also on show. We showed literally hundreds of people around the ship. They were interested in the extraordinary propulsion system (where the propeller is mounted on the rudder), the old Baudouin 3-cylinder engine and fore-rudder. Many were surprised how tidy and well-constructed the interior and lower hull were, in contrast to the fore, rear and side-decks whose condition is poor in places and outright dangerous in others. They could see that although much restoration work is required, there is also a very solid platform from which to re-create a really fine vessel.

Mr Jacques Barberet, Grand Maitre of the Avalons Navieurs and Gerard Dantreque, member of the Batellerie were two distinguished guests who came aboard early on Saturday. This set the tone for many other local dignitaries and members of the general public who showed an interest, in some cases, a passionate interest, in Aster and her workings. We learned more about the boat and it's history from current and retired bargees, some of whom (and their forebears) have lived and worked on similar vessels. For example, there would have been a stable for two horses on board, during the ships early days. One current bargee told me that his father and others of his era used to sleep in the rear cabin (now the engine room). Wooden boats do take on water and they had a manual bilge pump. The captain would sleep with his hand dangling over the side of the bed into the bilge. When his hand became wet as the water seeped in, he would get out of bed and pump out!

France 3 TV came to record events (as they have done previously, thank you!) and a number of print journalists attended (including Philippe Menager, Fluvial Magazine, who has visited and cruised with us on a number of occasions). We also commissioned our own film and would like express our sincere thanks to Cedrick Porcher, a young film-maker from Dijon, who gave his time for free to support our project. The resultant film will be probably be run in the museum and on board Aster during functions. Much has happened since we left St Leger de Vignes two weeks ago and the project has taken on a life of it's own, consequently, we have had to take advantage of both the voyage and the weekend to promote Aster before her restoration. We would like to offer everyone who has supported our efforts a heart-felt thank you for your generosity.

Funds will be required and again we must thank everyone who bought T-shirts and caps before their tour of the boat. Every Euro will make a difference. The manual work will be done by volunteers but we will need to buy raw materials (wood!) and construct both a permanent basin and weather-proof cover for when Aster becomes one the the brightest stars in the Museum's fascinating collection.

Along with many other boats, Aster was blessed during le Pardon des Mariniers ceremony. We hope that both Aster and all the others in attendance are favoured in the years to come.

The parade of boats took place in the early evening. It was a wonderful sight and a real pleasure to be involved. We left the quay (in a bit of a tangle!) and made three passes as spectators waved and cheered. For us it was a memorable occasion – a worthy celebration of Aster's history on the Canal du Nivernais, the current efforts to save her and the promise of a bright future.

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