

At this year's Sail Caledonia, Mike Hanyi, organiser of Raid Finland, had the chance to crew on the boat which had set the standard at his event and answer his own question.....

## How does *le Seil* sail?



I was first introduced to the French dayboat *le Seil* at the start of the 2002 Raid Finland; *le Seil* number 101, the 100th boat in the class, was christened in Finland and with it, the Raffelgeau family out-sailed and – mostly – out-rowed everyone to take home the cup. I was reminded that a *Seil* had won the Douro Raid in Portugal in 1997. In 2002, *le Seil*'s builder François Lelievre returned to Finland to take home to France the second prize. When I met François again – at the Klassieke Schepen traditional boat show in the Netherlands in November – he told me he wanted to 'Raid' the Scots at this year's Sail Caledonia and suggested that I join him.

On arrival in Fort William, I asked François about our strategy; his reply was: "No strategy! No tactics. Just row!" In fact, in the light winds of the beginning of the week, rowing hard was essential to stay near the top of the fleet rankings and it paid off. Eventually arriving at Fort Augustus at the lower end of Loch Ness was rewarded with better winds. François brought out a jib which pulled well downwind and with the wind on the beam. Any time we could sail faster than we could row we did; if we could benefit from rowing while sailing, we did; we had come to win! On our last day of sailing in Loch Ness, the winds brought over Force 5 yet we safely sailed with full canvas. We were quite confident in our lead when just at the finish, we were hit with a Force 7 gust which caught us by surprise, We ended up running off on a reach in the wrong direction and ended up losing our lead. Overall, we finished 1st in the

centreboard class and 2nd overall; Sigbjorn Windingstad's double-ended nordlandsbat – see W44 – with a 22' (6.7m) waterline and three feisty Norwegian rowers came 1st.

So what is this praan dinghy which went so well?

### Praam not pram

François Lelievre lives on the River Loire in a small fishing village at the entrance to the port of Nantes. The river is quite wide and since the 18th century, ships unloaded their cargoes there. From the mid-1800s, it was the venue for regattas – until 1980, when the pool began to silt up. In 1987, François was a member of an association which held an annual festival of sea shanties: "I told them 'Singing is OK but sailing and singing would be even better!'"

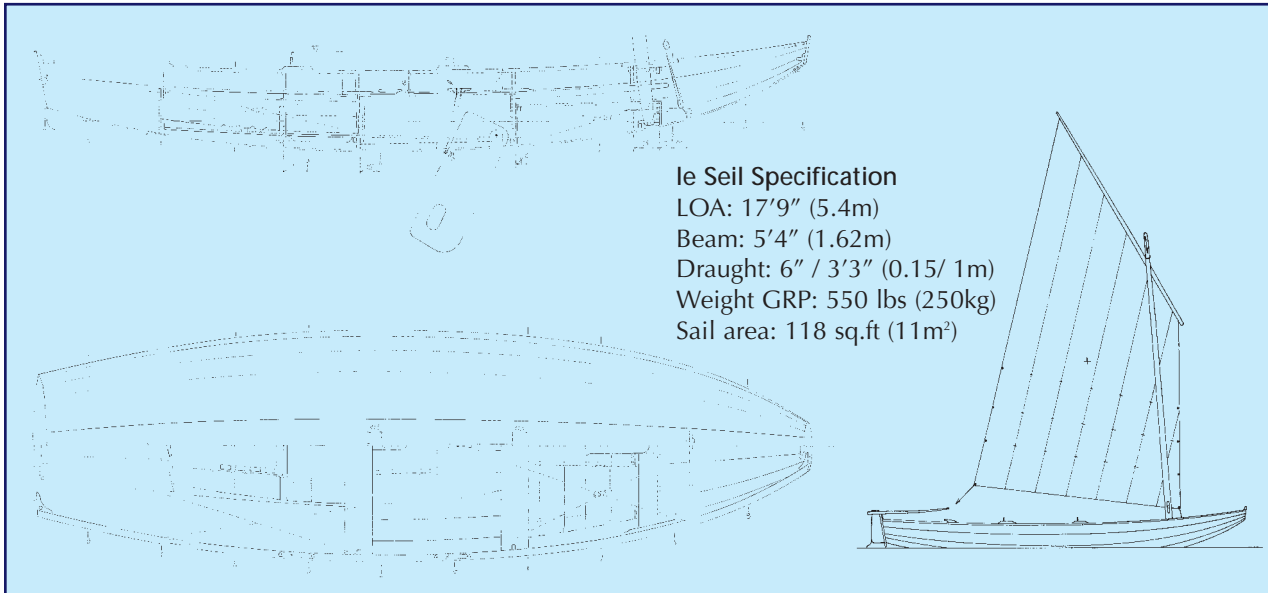
There were discussions on what would be the optimal boat to sail on the Loire river and the estuary. All agreed she should have a shallow draft to sail over the sandbars, she should be very stable and she had to be fast to be able to beat against the fast current – even 20,000 ton cargo ships must carefully plan their escape from the current when approaching the docks. It was also very clear from the beginning that the boat must perform well both under sail and oar. And, as she was to be a boat for club use, she also had to be large and safe enough for seven people.

The association took their ideas to François Vivier, the highly respected naval architect who had previously designed other small sail and oar craft including the Aber,



In September, 1994, François founded Canotage de France. Le Seil now offered in GRP started to turn heads and orders. Initially, the hull was fitted out with marine ply but in 1996 François invested in a mould for a GRP interior. Orders started coming from clubs, organisations, sailing schools and individuals. In 1995, the Saumur association on the Loire received three hulls for a boatbuilding programme with 16 unemployed young people. Today, half of the fleet of le Seils belongs to clubs and institutions. There is a very active owners' association which has an annual regatta. Much input has come from sailing schools, especially those of Nantes, to improve le Seil as a teaching craft: using borrowed rigs she becomes a schooner, allowing more children to be involved with the sailing of one boat. Similarly, she is popular with a handicapped youth group who find her flat decks allow them complete mobility.

Le Seils are now sailing in Greece, Italy, the UK, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Finland. In France, for the Rafflegeau family who live on an island in the Loire, le Seil is their only transport: Natalie rows her children and



#### le Seil Specification

LOA: 17'9" (5.4m)

Beam: 5'4" (1.62m)

Draught: 6" / 3'3" (0.15/ 1m)

Weight GRP: 550 lbs (250kg)

Sail area: 118 sq.ft (11m<sup>2</sup>)

Aven and Ilur – see W44. François Vivier was inspired by the Norwegian pram dinghies which had been a feature of the Seine since the end of the 19th century, when they figured in some famous French impressionist paintings. These are not the yachtsman's 8'-10' (2.4-3m) boxy pram dinghies of today; these are 17'-18' (5 - 5.5m) clinker built craft, slender of beam with a well-rockered keel, with transoms either end to make them capacious load carriers. It seems Norwegian ships visited the Seine regularly and many had such praams as ship's boats, which the French locals admired and accepted in settlement of the crews' bar bills.

François Vivier designed the Seil to be constructed easily from plywood and epoxy and the first was built by members of the Couturier family who provided valuable feedback towards perfecting the design. Soon afterwards, the local council of Reze funded a club to construct two more. In 1990, a new sailing club was established with François Lelievre as president and so the first sailing regatta in 10 years was held in Nantes. "But, by 1994, there had only been the 3 Seils built," says François "Then, one day, a man came to me looking for a place to build a Seil for himself... A deal was struck: I agreed to loan him my equipped workshop in exchange for taking a mould from his hull."

husband to shore every morning for work and school. Though only ten Seils have been built in plywood by amateurs, François has recently launched Seil number 120 and secondhand ones rarely come on the market. François hopes to restore *canotage*, the 'boating with small craft' immortalized by *fin de siecle* French writers and painters, as an ecologically-friendly and egalitarian leisure activity for the new century.

#### So how did she sail?

I previously owned a 15' (4.5m) Joel White designed Catspaw dinghy which taught me the simplicity of sailing a small lug-rigged craft – Step 1: Put mast in hole; Step 2: Haul up sail; Step 3: Relax and go sailing. Only after selling my Catspaw did I realise how I missed the days when I could genuinely go sailing for an hour and be back for supper.

Le Seil is not as small as she looks. With a length of 17' 9" (5.4m), her waterline promises speed and with a beam of just 5'7" (1.62m), she is the perfect width for 2 people to row, and row very easily and quickly at that. But why row when, with 118 sq.ft (11m<sup>2</sup>) of sail, she will gain steerage in only a breath of wind? When the wind drops completely, having a boomless lug-rig allows rowing with the rig up with no fear

of heads being 'boomed' when the wind returns. Equally, I can confirm from personal experience that fully reefed down, she has been sailed safely for some terrific over-canvased sleigh rides in winds touching Force 7.

Sailing her is so simple that in my opinion, le Seil is ideal both as a family boat and a beginner's boat. The layout and gear are easy enough for any non-sailor to learn quickly and so feel comfortable. She is anything but tender and not easily capsized. She is unsinkable, with plenty of reserve foam buoyancy hidden away under the sole and side decks. The centreboard and rudder are made from  $\frac{3}{8}$ " (10mm) aluminum plate.

She is also an excellent cruising dinghy. Her pine bottom boards are designed to be removed and re-fitted at thwart height to make a completely flat floor from mast-step to transom, large enough to sleep a family of four. Alternatively, the aft bottom boards can be mounted on a small trestle to create a table for very civilised al fresco dining. And there is an optional boom tent to end all boom tents turning le Seil into a wonderfully dry accommodation.



*Photo: Kathy Mansfield*

In the stern is a suitcase-sized compartment, big enough to hide away almost all of a week's kit for cruising.

If you are looking for a 16-18' (4.8-5.5m) trailable GRP boat which can safely take you and your family almost anywhere and at a good pace, before you commit to another craft I would encourage you to sail le Seil.

## CONTACTS

*le Seil in GRP ready to sail at €11,000 (approx £7,370):*  
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*le Seil plans for home building are available from the designer at €140 (approx £94) plus €10 postage in France, €14 (£2) Europe or €20 (£3) rest of the world.*  
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