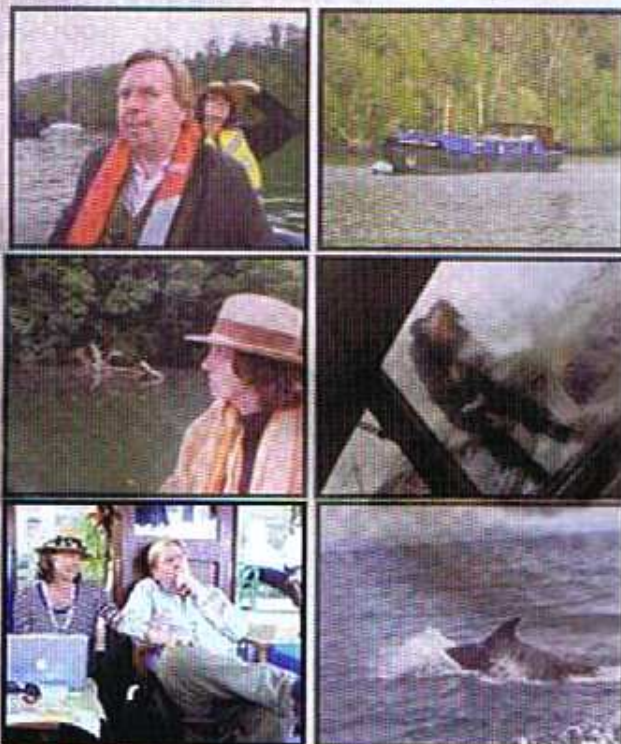


# ALL AT SEA WITH THE SPALLS



British actor Timothy Spall developed a love for sailing as he battled cancer in 1996. He promised his wife, Shane, that if he recovered the reward would be a boat. He did, and now he and Shane are circumnavigating the British Isles - slowly - in their Peter Nicolls-built barge, *The Princess Matilda*, filming a three-parter, 'Timothy Spall: Somewhere at Sea', for BBC4 (The first part was broadcast in early May). WILLIAM LEITH of the Daily Telegraph met the Spalls and their barge, *The Princess Matilda* in Milford Haven

When I catch up with him [Timothy Spall], Spall is standing on top of the barge. He is bobbing. It is a long way down.

He is trying to circumnavigate Britain, clockwise, in the barge. When we get inside, Timothy introduces me to Shane, his wife of 30 years. The barge is rocking back and forth, and sometimes bashes against the harbour wall. But Spall is used to this. He loves it.

He taught himself how to sail, using children's books. Then he progressed to charts. "I've been staring at charts till I'm blue in the face," he says. "You've got to work out the tides. But the thing is that my wife has absolute confidence in me. The other day, we were in an Atlantic swell of eight or 10 feet. It was terrifying. I said, 'Come here, Shane - I need you!' And she fell asleep.

I must be doing something right."

He has just filmed three episodes of 'Somewhere At Sea' (BBC4 - first episode broadcast 4 May 2010), a sort of video diary of his journey. It is supremely unpretentious. We see Spall in good and bad weather, piloting his bulky, belligerent craft through the waves. He swears a lot. Sometimes, when the weather's bad, he looks frightened.

"If I say I'm nervous, I'm scared, I mean it," he says. "I have massive - what's the term? - not panic attacks. Who would you call if you had a panic attack at sea? The doctor? Apprehensions - that's the word. My imagination makes me apprehensive. Just look at that."

He hands me a navigational chart illustrating the last leg of his journey, from Milford Haven to Fishguard - which, he says, was terrible. The chart shows lots of "arcas to be avoided".

"It's the rocks, and the ledges and the tides. If the wind's going one way, and the tide's going the other way, even on a calm day, it's whoosh! The water goes like that." He gestures with his hands. "Like Marilyn Monroe's skirt."

Spall and his wife show me around the barge. It's rather splendid, with wood paneling in a 1930s style, and elegant Victorian prints on the walls. There's a kitchen, a bath-

*Photographs by Timothy and Shane Spall*



room, a washing machine. It was built by a specialist boat-builder called Peter Nicholls. The whole thing would cost around £200,000. "About the same as a holiday cottage," says Spall. "Except, if you left it for a few weeks, nobody would burn it down."

He is ribald and quick-witted. His language is robust. There is a lot of effing and blinding. But, somehow, it's completely inoffensive.

"What the heck am I doing here? It's not because of some hokey, grandiloquent philosophy. But there's something remarkably profound about being a minute cell, on the sea, in the tides, pushed along by the wind. The earth is turning – that's what the wind is. The turning of the earth affects the wind, the wind affects the sea..."

Bang! Right now, the wind is affecting the sea. The barge clashes against the harbour wall.

"I don't want to talk about it as if I'm bloody Vasco da Gama or Dame Ellen. But you get a real idea of the bravery of these people. Of Columbus, Magellan, Drake. All those people."

Another thing, says Spall, is the feeling of entering a place by sea, the way people used to, centuries ago, rather than just turning up in a car.

"It's fascinating. It's... thrilling."

Spall says he saw a lighthouse the other day and felt a profound sense of relief. Then he realised that people had been feeling the same sense of relief, in this exact spot, for hundreds of years.

He talks about surviving cancer. In 1996, he was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia. "I don't think we'd be doing this if I hadn't gone through that," he says. It happened at a high point of his career. He had just made 'Secrets and Lies' with Mike Leigh, and the film had been nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes. But Spall felt incredibly tired all the time. And he was covered with bruises. The bruises were everywhere except for his face.

"I looked like a cross between a Lucien Freud and a Picasso during his blue period. Like I'd had a protective mask on my head, but I'd been in a fight with Mike Tyson."

"I'd just been diagnosed with leukaemia. I asked the doctor two questions. I said, 'Am I going to die?' He said, 'No, no. They can do marvellous things these days.'"

Shane, who has been quiet, says: "That's not what he told me."

Spall says: "The other question was, 'Will it mess up my career?'"

He says he's always worried about his career. He went to Rada, joined the RSC, got a part in 'Auf Wiedersehen, Pet'. Then he couldn't get work for a while. Then he was discovered by Mike Leigh.

As a character actor, he is peerless, but full of anxiety.

"Is it going to stop? Will I be surplus to requirements? The stakes get higher and

higher." Then he says: "I've learned that the less you worry about it, the more it takes care of itself." I'm not sure if he knows this for sure. "If I couldn't do it, I don't know what I'd do."

When he was ill, he says, it was touch-and-go for a while. He might not have made it. He used to sit by the side of the Thames, watching the water flow past, trying to deal with the prospect of his own death. He thought of the history of the Thames.

"It was the gateway to the world. And one day I thought, it's just a bloody great ditch of water."

He made himself two promises. If he recovered, he would buy himself a Rolls-Royce and a boat. The Rolls-Royce kept breaking down. But the boat worked out.

Shane says: "We saw the first swallows three days ago. Or maybe they weren't the first ones."

"And the guillemots," says Spall. "Hundreds of guillemots out there. And the dolphins! I saw a couple of dolphins. I'm like a bloody meerkat, looking at things." He puts his hands to his face in the shape of a pair of binoculars.

Spall says, of his recovery from cancer: "We went through this together. She stood sentinel by my side."

"That's because I'm your wife!"

"Some wives bugger off and find somebody who isn't dying."

We bob against the wall of Fishguard harbour. The Spalls' next stop is Aberystwyth.



"And the dolphins! I saw a couple of dolphins!" Timothy exclaimed. "I'm like a bloody meerkat, looking at things." He puts his hands to his face in the shape of a pair of binoculars."

"When I talk about the terror of the sea, and the terror of death," says Spall, "there's a massive difference. With the sea, there's the stress of working out a passage. And then you have a day like this. The sense of achievement! The joy!"

Condensed from a 24 April 2010 Daily Telegraph article.

For more about the Spalls at Sea: [www.spall-satsea.com](http://www.spall-satsea.com)

## An 'Idiot Mariner'

Timothy Spall describes himself as an "idiot mariner", but feels like Marco Polo. Four years ago, the actor and his wife, Shane, set off from London in their boat, named after their granddaughter. It was a present to himself, for getting through leukemia. They are in no particular hurry, and have only got as far as Wales.

Boaty people can tend to be terribly tedious, especially to landlubbers, but the Spalls are delightful.



Not many yachtsmen can act out the Beaufort scale so entertainingly. "Force 10, very high breaking waves, dense foam streaks," he shrieks, dense foam streaks flying from his own mouth. Not that Spall is really a yachtsman: the *Matilda* is a Dutch barge, specially converted and very comfortable it looks too, with bookshelves and a cosy wood-burning stove.

He's not exactly very 'SAS' either. It's more a case of: Who Doesn't Dare Doesn't Even Set Off. They spent the best part of a year in the Helford river, waiting for the weather to clear up before plucking up courage to attempt a rounding of the treacherous Lizard Point. "If in doubt, don't set off," Spall says, studying the book that shows all the tidal streams that flow round the Lizard. It's probably just as well: he's on the wrong page. That's not the Lizard, Tim, it's Portland Bill, which you must have already passed to get where you are now – but maybe you didn't even notice it.

SAM WOLLASTON writing in 'The Guardian' 6 May 2010



# 'The Princess Matilda'

Tim and I have a large extended family, so space and comfort was important to us and we wanted something we could use all year round, *Matilda* can comfortably sleep six.

Our double master cabin has an en-suite bathroom with a washing machine – I wanted to have a full sized bath, but there wasn't enough space for the bath and a washing machine; the washing machine won, I'd had enough of tramping to launderettes with dirty sheets as we'd done on our last two boats. We use only Eco washing up/powder products and have two fresh water holding tanks which can keep Tim and I going for several days without refilling, but if I use the washing machine I prefer to do it when we take on water. The back cabin has two twin beds, and there is a shower and head next door.

*The Princess Matilda's* holding tank for the heads is under our bed. A red light comes on when it needs emptying. We use a biodegradable and fish friendly product to keep the tank smelling sweet. Formaldehyde is a product that completely covers any stink, but it also kills fish, and is used by undertakers, so we've never used it. We discharge our holding tank when we're at least four miles out, Tim and I swim, so we don't want to swim in shit either! Since we left Limehouse in 2005 we've only ever come across 2.5 pump-out stations.

The dining/chart-plotting table in our saloon, which can seat six for dinner, can be removed to make the sofa into a double bed, and there's loads of storage underneath. We have a diesel fired central heating system - We-

*'The Princess Matilda' was designed and built by Peter Nicholls. The hull with a chine and a cone shaped bow was specifically designed to give us excellent handling at sea.'* explains Shane. *'She can, and indeed has, handled some pretty big rolling seas; like any other sea going vessel a wave to the broadside is not so comfortable.'*

*'Timothy and I did a fair bit of research before we commissioned Peter to build us a boat, our original intention was to take her across the channel to the French canals, maybe to the Mediterranean. Who knows we may still do this, but we'll get around Britain first.'*



basto, which is efficient and doesn't use too much fuel, and we've a wood burning stove, which is pretty nice on a frosty winter's night. We also have a large Onan generator, which we run for an hour a day if we're not on shore power; we used it a great deal last summer when we were moored on a swing buoy on the Helford River.

As we progress further around the coast of our wonderful country, we are becoming to realise just how unique *The Princess Matilda* is. We've not seen another dutch barge since we left Brighton (2007). We draw a lot of attention, experienced sailors are always genuinely interested in our journey and will compare notes with us on the passages we have

in common. True we do get the odd credulous enquiry 'did you bring it by sea? Isn't that a canal boat?' But usually we get this from people with absolutely no seafaring experience — or have boats that never leave the marina berth. The real professionals, like Patch and Paul the RNLI coxswains from Penlee and Fishguard both recognised the seaworthiness of *Matilda* and Hosey the Fishguard RNLI mechanic who switched over our fuel tanks was impressed with her engine, a Perkins Sabre 140 h.p. – That's endorsement enough for us.

When we came out of Limehouse in 2005 and decided to turn right instead of going over the Channel, we had no compass, VHF radio, life-raft, flares, or any charts. We

were very very stupid! We spent 18 months on the Medway. Tim got us to Gosport/Plymouth with an Azimuth compass and his passage calculations were worked out the old fashioned way; he'd learnt it all in a book we'd picked up on the upper Thames: 'Learning to Navigate - a guide for all ages'. The compass was a birthday present, Peter Nicholls recommend it and fitted it when we

were on the Medway 2007. We had a Garmin Satellite Chart Plotter (which we'd got from the Southampton Boatshow) fitted in Weymouth 2008 and the Simrad Robertson autopilot fitted in Gweek Quay on the Helford River 2009. The Raymarine radar was fitted in 2010 by Dangerous Dick Dynamite – otherwise known as Roy Luscombe of Specialised Marine Electrics – Roy is the best in Wales, if not the world.

**SHANE SPALL**

*For more about the Spalls and their voyage round Britain see [www.spallsatsea.com](http://www.spallsatsea.com) from which the above is extracted.*