

Peter Blair
To the Outer Hebrides and back again - Part 1

22 May 2022 – 17 July 2022

Sunday 22 May 2022



Just minutes after slipping our lines at 06:15 from the hammerhead pontoon of the Cowes Corinthian Yacht Club a novice crew member drops something into the Medina River. My planned 'man-overboard' drill is thus prematurely activated on Day 1 of this eight-week long sailing adventure to the Outer Hebrides.

Anyone rising early who saw the woefully amateurish attempts of my first week's crew members to retrieve the fumbled fender - now gracefully floating closer and closer to the small-boats channel and the Cowes breakwater, might have had cause to wonder whether my plan to sail 1,000 miles away from the security of the Isle of Wight and then 1,000 miles back again was such a sensible one as we risked grounding her almost before embarking upon this epic journey. The 2.3m draught of this 50 year old classic 44' S&S Swan was going to be something to be cautious about over the weeks ahead.

Rather like my experience at the start of the 2015 Fastnet race, there wasn't a breath of air evident across the Solent. We began speculating about what proportion of this voyage was going to have to be without canvas and dependent on diesel – 30%, 40%? As we passed Yarmouth an extraordinary sight appeared before us – a c.300-foot-high band of fog stretching across the water from the island to the mainland. A quick rummage in lockers to find a hand-held compressed gas foghorn before we plunged into the all-engulfing dense



bank of opaque light-diffracting water droplets. At least going west there would be no container ships or oil tankers to look out for. Happily, within 10 minutes we were out of the other side into a bright sunny morning. Having made good use of the tidal flow we arrived much earlier than planned at 13:50 in the Marina on Portland Bill where the 4 on board bedded down for the night: a Judge (skipper), a Yacht Broker (first mate), a Change Management Consultant and a recently retired Barrister.

Monday 23 May 2022

Departing 07:10 we raised our sails at last but only found light airs to help us on our 55nm passage to the River Dart. It was slow work and the tide turned against us



half-way across Lyme Bay, making it quite a slog. All the anticipation of a picturesque arrival was dashed by a sudden squall which reduced visibility to about half a cable (c.100 yards) and completely drenched us as we approached the Mew Stone and Shag Stone at the river's mouth. Utterly bedraggled and cold we limped up to a pontoon mooring at the Darthaven Marina, Kingswear. The sudden downpour had

not been good for morale, but that was soon restored by us all squeezing into the car of Steve's fiancé who drove us across to Dartmouth, with heaters on full blast, for a hearty dinner in a cozy restaurant which warmed the 'cockles of our hearts' (an expression apparently derived in the 1600s from the Latin for the ventricles: cochleae cordis!).

Tuesday 24 May – Wednesday 25 May 2022

Off at 06:55 and the weather was now beautiful. The departure stunning as we motored out past the Royal Dart Yacht Club, St Petrox Church and Dartmouth Castle.



A shorter passage today to Plymouth (c.35nm) with the possibility of company - Charles Row KC has recently purchased a 32' Contessa (Baltimore Beacon) which

he keeps in Plymouth and we plan a rendezvous in Bigbury Bay. Having no portable radio handset for the cockpit (and being a bit rusty on the preferred choice of channels anyway) we struggled to co-locate but finally managed it with the use of mobile phones.



A glorious broad reach took us screaming home to a berth at the Queen Anne's Battery Marina. Unfortunately, one of our crew had not been feeling well (recovering from the dreaded CV-19 virus) and felt the need to depart early, so some negotiation was needed to see if we could pull forward another to fill his place. We would have to wait a day for his replacement, but in any event we were all a bit knackered, needed to try to locate a new EPIRB battery, the wind had strengthened considerably against



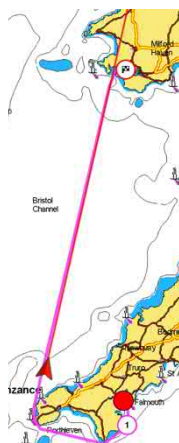
our West-South-Westerly route, plus the heavy showers and grey skies were a rather depressing prospect. More time for rehydration at the historic Dolphin Hotel on The Barbican with its famed pints of superb tasting Bass, before dinner with members of the Bar: Charles Row KC (and his son Hamish), Adam Chippindall and Anna Vigars KC. Those of you who have the misfortune of not being a member of the Western Circuit will need to use your imagination to create a picture in your mind of the Dolphin - a basic seafarer's inn with wooden planked floors and the best real ales served from tapped barrels propped up behind the bar. (Of course, it would be improper not to also mention the amazing Plymouth Gin Distillery a few hundred yards up the road which has been making their famous spirit since 1793. A mere 229 years compared to the 245 years which Bass has been in business, having set up their brewery the year after some North American states made a Declaration of Independence.)

Thursday 26 May 2022

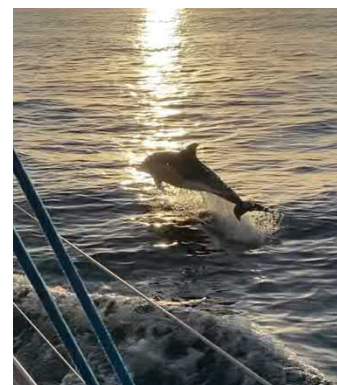
Our ornithological knowledge is about to grow since our new crewman is the chief accountant for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust based at Slimbridge. 40nm today to Falmouth, but unsurprisingly the wind is on our nose again, so long tacking required. At some point the autohelm stops working – it isn't getting the information it needs. Another concern is that the engine really did not want to start this morning on our starter battery, so we had to reconnect to mains electricity to encourage it into action. Is it too old and not retaining charge? We should try to source a new one in Falmouth. At Port Pendennis Marina we are going to be joined by another crewmember for the long journey to Milford Haven and he very kindly brings a new battery with him when he joins us in the evening. However, it is too big for the bespoke housing under my bunk in the aft master cabin and one of its terminals won't work with the connectors to the existing starter battery – hmm, wish I was an engineer.



Friday 27 May 2022



Five on board for a 28-hour passage around the Lizard and Land's End before crossing the Bristol Channel to South Wales. No help from what little wind there is and so this is going to be a long motor. Sadly, our latest arrival begins to suffer mal-de-mer quite badly as dusk falls, so it becomes apparent that rather than having two night watches of two crew, with me roving between both watches, instead I shall have to join one of the watches. The hours tick by, but as dawn breaks we have the joy of being followed by our first pod of dolphins.



Saturday 28 May 2022

The end of Week 1 - a taxing mixture of adverse wind, no wind at all, downpours of rain and some equipment issues, but this morning we completed the 142 nm passage from Falmouth, across the Bristol Channel, to Wales, topped-off this morning with a delightful pod of dolphins as a gloriously sunny dawn rose above the misty horizon.

But wait, just as we exit the lock-gates into the floating marina at Milford Haven all my engine power dies – the hydraulic gearbox has emptied itself of all its oil. The Harbour Master announces that there is no Marine Engineer available until Monday. “Because?”; “They’ve all gone sailing”!

This now presents me with a number of causes for acute anxiety:

Number 1 - half of my crew immediately jumped-ship so as to catch one of a scarce number of trains away from their mad skipper;

Number 2 - the remainder are as clueless as I am as to how the hydraulic oil could have escaped from a recently fitted and serviced gearbox. We simply can’t find a fault – let alone fix it; and

Number 3 - the Deputy President of the Queen’s Bench Division and Lady Dingemans are descending the ramp to the pontoon, steering two frighteningly overloaded and out-of-control Tesco’s shopping trolleys, displaying an unnatural and unnerving measure of enthusiasm and joyous bonhomie as they join us as crew for Week 2.



Sunday 29 May 2022

With a sense of ominous foreboding, we troop-off to the Church of Wales to plead for divine intervention. It seems that despite 3 years of planning, this enterprise is already on the brink of hitting the rocks (metaphorically) through mechanical failure. The potential disappointment for the remaining members of the 36 crew I had press-ganged to take holidays and help me raise money for my charity (supporting Young Carers) weighed heavily. Nevertheless, we raised our English voices in worship of our creator God and pleasingly drowned out all rival Welsh voices, despite the deployment of counter-measures by the disapproving-looking vicar (whose beard

rivalled that of Dumbledore) as he generated levels of incense which breached all environmental regulations on atmospheric particulates.

And our prayers were answered: an engineer from Windjammer Marine was located in a boatyard shed, who discovered a fractured compression-joint at the end of a tiny pipe leading to an obscured pressure sensor. Once capped-off the adventure was 'on' again...

Monday 30 May 2022



...off to Eire. My daughter Annabel helping for part of the day as we accomplished an exhilarating 75 nm crossing of the Celtic Sea in a fast and furious 11 hours, to bring us in to the sleepy little fishing village of Kilmore Quay, where we rafted up against a trawler for the night. A village so sleepy nothing was open, not even the pub!

Tuesday 31 May 2022

Champagne sailing up the Irish coast to the town of Arklow, where we moored up to a pontoon on the river. At last we were able to imbibe some dark health-giving Guinness in a friendly hotel in town, for which this part of the world is so famous.



Wednesday 1 June 2022

It has been a notable feature of my experience at sea that Mrs Blair becomes increasingly agitated and vocal when I suggest that navigating a narrow channel would be most satisfying if it were achieved solely using the powers of nature – wind and tide. Hitherto my cruising experiences have always been in the company of my wife and, ultimately, it has seemed the wisest course to defer to her life-preserving instincts. Besides which, I fear I would otherwise be denied the excellent G&Ts she loyally presents upon safely anchoring or mooring for the night. Thus, for examples,

it has been with the use of engine-power we have zig-zagged through the Snake Passage in the Grenadines and motored between towering cliffs on the route from Sardinia to Corsica.

Having enjoyed champagne sailing weather for 2 days, today we sailed north to Dublin and approached a delightful challenge.

Lying off the coast to the south of Dublin Bay (below the ferry port of Dun Laoghaire) is the small island of Dalkey with its picturesque abandoned crofts and Martello Tower. Boasting full-sail, shooting along on a broad reach with a following tide, we neared the Dalkey channel and, importantly, Mrs Blair was not on board!

How is it that instincts, which cannot surely be coded in DNA, silently pass from generation-to-generation?

On board was our younger daughter Annabel: "Dad, you're not going to try to sail through that channel are you?"

And I heard myself reply: "You are sounding more and more like your mother. Yes, of course we are."

This time the confidence of a father prevailed; there was no risk of forfeiting a G&T because Guinness was inevitably going to be the refreshment of the day; and, of course, I was emboldened by the boyish enthusiasm of one Lord Justice Dingemans. We entered the channel at pace, but before long our speed dropped as a result of the wind-shadow created by the mainland. Soon we were almost becalmed with dirty air shifting from one direction to another.



But as we studied the water surface and the tell-tales for movement, squinting up at the Windex, we found ourselves drifting with the tide closer-and-closer to a group of sinister rocks off the north shore of Dalkey Island. Now it was time to put some water between us and the submerged dangers to starboard by taking advantage of an onshore zephyr and short-tacking to the north-west. As we did so, the wind gradually strengthened and soon we were speeding across Dublin Bay and up into the mouth of the River Liffey. Challenge accomplished. Safety maintained. Another story to embellish over dinner!

And after a crew change - what a dinner. Flying into Dublin came a family law barrister (Jack Harris) and an oil field engineer (John Tuck) to join the recently retired community paediatrician (Mark Baggot) who had come on board in South Wales.

We were treated to a magnificent meal in a top fish restaurant before settling down as best we could to sleep in the noisy Poolbeg Marina, with the docks opposite us busily offloading cargo from an Italian container ship.

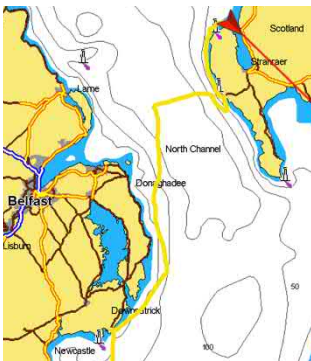


Thursday 2 June 2022

Another glorious day and we took a bearing of 17°T to the pretty harbour of Ardglass in Northern Ireland, a few miles SW of the entrance to Strangford Lough. Trouble is it is a good 60 nm as the gannet flies from Dublin and so we don't arrive until 18:30.

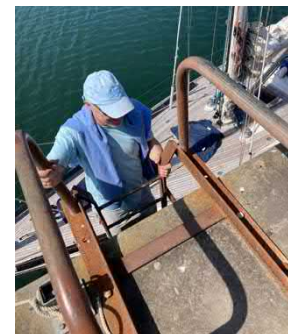


This wouldn't be so much of a problem if we could depart at a sensible time next morning but, having only decided to check our next passage plan once safely in harbour, I discover that the calculations are all against us. The plan for the next leg is to cross back over the Irish Sea to the hammerhead shaped Galloway peninsular in Scotland. However, taking advantage of the current is critical here because we must make use of the falling tide as the Irish Sea rushes north and out into the North Atlantic. This means the optimum departure time from Ardglass is going to be 00:15! Leave it until daylight hours and we will be fighting a fierce incoming tide as it rushes back into the Irish Sea through the thin 18nm North Channel between Belfast Lough and Portpatrick. So after re-provisioning, making supper, visiting the pub, giving a



detailed navigational briefing and grabbing a couple of hours kip, Jack and I take the first of the night watches. We slip our lines and gently ease the throttle to exit the harbour. It is absolutely pitch black and the marker lights are not especially clear, but despite feeling incredibly disorientated we find our way out into open sea on engine to take the route north. To my huge satisfaction Mark and John came up from below at 03:00 with cups of tea at almost exactly the spot I had briefed them I was planning to be for the start of their watch. And the day continued to unfold perfectly to plan. As the tide began to turn we headed east for Portpatrick and had

excellent wind to run us towards the Scottish shore. Because we had made such excellent progress we found that we would have time to take lunch at Portpatrick, only the tide was still too low for us to be able to enter the harbour. Nothing for it, but to drift and do a spot of fishing. A herring and a garfish was the sum total of our spoils, before we tentatively nosed in to this steep walled, voluntarily restored, haven. The boat's owner had asked us to avoid mooring against walls so we nervously fought the swell with our engine and fended off frantically, but the laid-back harbour master just chuckled and shouted down instructions to just let her settle naturally. And of course he was right.



Countless more excitements followed – navigating the Sound of Iona using only wind and tide; the beauty of the Treshnish Islands; Force 7 in the Sea of the Hebrides; a near fire on board; Staffa; the Crinan Canal passage; navigating the Menai Straits and shooting out across Cardigan Bay; plus anchorages to die for...what beautiful islands we occupy. And, in the process, raising more than £12,500 for Young Carers. [...to be continued!]

