

LYDIA ACROSS THE TASMAN

Donald Begg

(Donald and his Bowman 48 Lydia left Lymington, on England's south coast, in 2014, crossing to the Caribbean via the Cape Verde islands and continuing into the Pacific. They reached New Zealand in November 2016. A year later Donald was ready to move on...)

Whangarei, 13–17 October

Lydia is in the water again. She has been refitted and serviced, her bottom has been pampered, caressed, and de-barnacled, and she has been lowered gently back into the Pacific. The Norsand Yard in Whangarei appear to have met every positive expectation. My thanks to Mark, the service manager from Falmouth, and to David, the hoist manager from Germany who carries off heavy-lift operations with a delicate touch.

Once in the water I motored her the couple of miles to the marina in the Town Basin in Whangarei, mildly surprised to stop all traffic at the bascule bridge with a word on the VHF, and secured her for a couple of days of storing and marine Mrs Mopping. The dirt ran off, and is still running off, in rivers. The town of Whangarei is light-

industrial, but the paucity of its charm is compensated for by the friendliness and helpfulness of its people, as always in New Zealand. It's quiet and out-of-season still, but of course it's springtime, and the birds' dawn chorus is cacophonous. No *tuis** at the marina, but some very tuneful sort-of-blackbirds.

I needed a new USB cable for my sat phone, having cleverly left the old one at home. The young lady at the phone shop near the marina, who knew her stuff, told me that my cable was

* A member of the avian honeyeater family, with handsome black and iridescent plumage and a noisy call which combines normal notes with cackles, clicks, wheezing and timber-like creaks and groans.



Lydia

not a phone part and that I would need a specialist computer shop – “Try Beryl’s in Tarewa Road”. Well, I got instructions as to my route, and thought I wouldn’t forget Beryl’s even if it sounded more like a patisserie than a computer shop. Got there, looked around, no sign of Beryl’s, now what do I do? By coincidence, the shop that I’m standing outside looks pretty techy. Look up ... see the name ... double-take: F. W. Barrel Technology. Friends divided by a common language! But I got my part and, as the young lady might have said, no worries.

I had lunch with Annie Hill, the redoubtable and charming ‘Voyaging Annie’, who is building herself a boat at Norsand Yard, and who had kindly agreed to keep an eye on *Lydia* during my absence over the European summer. Annie left Liverpool as a young girl to sail across the Atlantic, never came back, and has now covered over 170,000 miles. She has a fund of anecdotes and good advice, and used to write the column *Blue Water Letter* in *Yachting Monthly*. Her boat is 26ft, junk-rigged and will take her another couple of years to complete, after which she is quite capable of sailing it anywhere. Thanks for your help, Annie, and good luck with the project.

The weather is cool in Whangarei, 10°C at night, time to head north. I plan to sail for Opuā tomorrow, taking a gentlemanly couple of days over it and anchoring somewhere at night.

Up to Opuā, 17–18 October

After a long weekend in Whangarei the boat was cleanish and the fridge was not looking as idle as it had been, so ready to go. My appreciation to Mary Schempp-Berg, OCC Port Officer for Whangarei, who saw that I was there and made a point of saying hello.

On Tuesday morning I rather lazily motored the 15 miles down the river – there was wind, but it was fluky and drizzly. Once past Marsden Point I got sail up, made a tangle of the mainsail as I always do first time out, got it sorted, and finally had the bows pointing towards the Pacific. The sun came out, there was 20–25 knots of breeze on the quarter and, to plagiarise David Mitchell, *Lydia* came out of the river like a rat out of a drainpipe. What a difference a clean bottom makes! I had planned to stop at Tutukaka or, if the going was good, at Whangaruru, but the boat was revelling in the conditions, logging 7, 8, and even touching 9 knots, so we kept going for the 50 miles up from Marsden to Whangamumu, close to Cape Brett. I had anchored there on my way down six months earlier and thought it charming. It is a very sheltered, woody bay, five miles by forest track from the nearest road, and wonderfully isolated. The only signs of humanity are the ruins of an old whaling station. The calm and the birdsong are terrific, the water deep green. There was only one other boat there, a motor-cruiser wearing no colours, maybe a professional crew awaiting owner’s instructions.

Wednesday morning, and disaster. I weighed anchor, put the engine into gear, and the propeller fell off (or so I thought). One moment I’m rejoicing in the remoteness of the location, and the next I’m coming to terms with a serious breakdown a long way from help. Well, the decision process wasn’t difficult – there was nothing to gain by hanging around, so I got sail up and ghosted out of the bay towards Cape Brett, enough wind in the lee of the land for 3 or 4 knots of boatspeed. I telephoned Opuā Marina which kindly agreed to have a boat ready to tow me in, provided it was before their closing time of 1700. Five or six miles to the Mammoth at Cape Brett, round his tail, and then a very long 25 mile beat up to Opuā with 20–25 knots of wind on the nose,



*The Mammoth at
Cape Brett*

my mood unsympathetic to the beauty of the Bay of Islands. I eventually got there at 1900, too late for the marina, but edged up the last bit of the river in very flukey wind conditions and managed to find a space not far from the marina in which to drop the pick. Just to improve my good humour it was race night for the local sailing club, and the race boats were buzzing around me wondering what page this bloke in his heavy cruiser could be on.

Chris Tibbs, in his safety briefing for ARC crews, has a saying that disasters are seldom as bad as they appear to be at first. He may or may not be right, but now that I had the leisure to look I found that it was the Aquadrive coupling between the gearbox and the propeller shaft that had broken, in the engine room, and that shaft and hopefully propeller were still in place – so probably no need for the expensive haul out that I had been dreading. On Thursday morning I was towed in, and the excellent engineer from Seapower was soon aboard and dismantling the coupling. The finger points at an engineer in French Polynesia who replaced the prop-shaft bearing but appears not to have fully tightened the bolts on the coupling. They had fallen out one by one, until the last one had to take all the strain, and sheared. The verdict from Seapower is that it should be repairable, but a new flange is needed and must first be located. Murphy's Law – it's a long weekend in NZ. It seems the flange will have to come from the US, hopefully by the end of the week. Bob McDavitt, weather router, tells me that I should have a weather window for Australia on Tuesday. But ... I'm unlikely at that stage to have a propeller that turns. Patience.



Opua, 19 October – 5 November

Opua is a serious yachting centre but not much else. Paihia, down the road, is a pretty resort, not quite yet in season and limited in scope. The people are charming, the Bay of Islands is picture-postcard, but I've spent a lot of time here over the last year and I'm ready for something new. What proportion of a cruiser's existence is spent wrestling with cabin fever induced by breakdown or contrary weather?

But ... I have a small rented car and can get about. I've potted up to the old whaling port of Mangonui, across North Island to Kaitai and Ahipara on the Tasman Sea, and back to Opua along the remote and rustic inter-coastal road. The land is green and beautiful after the spring rains – if one wished to be a farmer I can think of no better place. I've also walked the overland route to Whangamumu Bay, a steep hour and a half's hike each way over the hills from the nearest road (itself a clinker track), well worth it for the exercise, the views and the birdsong. There are lots of boats arriving from the Pacific islands at this time of year, and the marina is buzzy.

Tuesday the following week. The part has arrived, been fitted, tested, and the boat appears to be whole again. My thanks to Chris, the engineer at Seapower in Opua. He is the size and shape of a grizzly bear, with a ginger rasta hairstyle, a Ho Chi Min beard, and a lot of the old ink on the skin. He has done various bits on this boat and impresses me as a natural engineer. I could use him as crew. There is a depression coming over North Island, with a stiff wind from the northeast, backing to northwest – not good for Australia. This is likely to last until Saturday or Sunday, at which time I hope to be on my way.

Engineer Chris

**Passage to Bundaberg,
–17 November**

I have the green light from Bob McDavitt, weather router. The high pressure that has given us north winds for the last week is away to the east, the north wind will back to the southwest in the afternoon. There is then a deep depression well down over South Island which will give me strong northerlies the day after tomorrow for a 60 mile corridor which I can cross at right angles, then a nice high taking over and giving me southeast trades all the way to Bundaberg. Farewell NZ, and all the familiar sights like the Mammoth and Ninepin Rock. Three white sails up, and 7 knots on a grey afternoon.

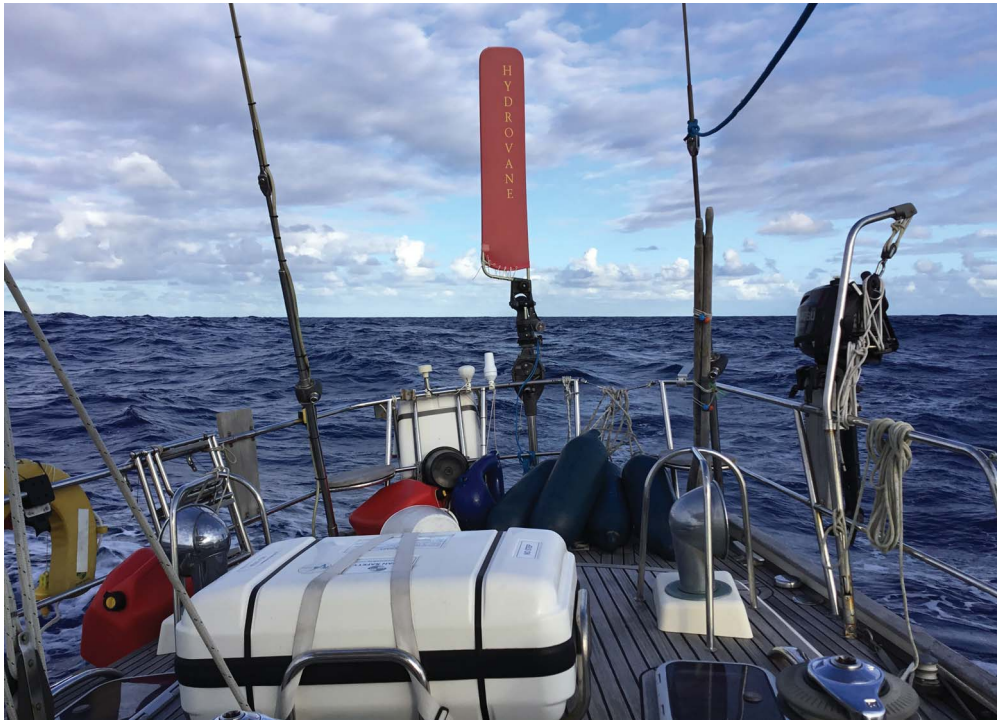
Cathy, who looked after the boat during lay-up in Raiatea, had something of the witch about her. She said to me “*ne commence jamais un voyage le vendredi*”, it’s certain bad luck. I believe her, I wouldn’t have started on a Friday, this was a Sunday. But, three weeks ago I had launched the boat back into the water in Whangarei on Friday 13th. That can’t be a problem, I had thought, I’m only taking her a couple of miles up the river to Whangarei Town Basin today, it’s not the start of the voyage proper. Then I lost the Aquadrive coupling on the way up to Opuia. Have I served my penance?

The depression hit me as forecast, not a big problem, north wind between 25 and 30 knots, but on the beam. But then an unexpected depression formed around Norfolk



Ninepin Rock





A touch of roughers in the Tasman

Island, giving me similar strength winds from the south for an additional couple of days. The first consequence was that I abandoned my thoughts of calling at Norfolk Island, which I had hoped to visit, as now I needed to get west and into the high. The wind itself was not a problem, but the seas were very steep, and on the quarter, so the boat was slewing and I had to slow her down to avoid a gybe or broach. For a while I was in what I think of as my storm rig, staysail only. The staysail does not set well with the wind abaft the beam, but it's steady, and the boat was comfortable at a modest (for the conditions) 5–6 knots.

At this stage, and after sterling performance all the way from Lymington, my autopilot failed. Luckily, and for this very circumstance, I have a Hydrovane as backup. But I had never really made friends with the Hydrovane, suspecting it of being too light for a heavy boat like a 48ft Bowman, and had lazily preferred the electronic immediacy of the autopilot. Here then came the most positive element of the voyage – the Hydrovane behaved impeccably from then on in varied conditions, suspicion waned and friendship blossomed. So off George, and on Hydro. I wanted to call him Hydra, but if you look at him from the cockpit he is definitely not a girl. His disadvantage, of course, is that he can't be used with an engine, so later on in light winds it was either sail slowly or hand-steer. Levity aside, I have to say that the sudden realisation that I was alone without an autopilot, 300 miles downwind from NZ and 1000 miles from Australia, was probably the most sobering moment of my sailing career. I am surprised in retrospect that I had not lost more sleep over the prospect in the past, and promise to keep it high on the priority list in the future.

Just as the wind was beginning to ease and the sky to clear, the port intermediate

shroud parted. I've no idea why – it wasn't under particular strain. The rigging was renewed by Berthon only three years ago, and it was surveyed and approved by the rigger in Whangarei. If that wasn't enough of a surprise, two days later the starboard intermediate also parted. Luckily, a Bowman has several strong stays backing each other up, and the running backstays have a similar run to the intermediates. I was careful not to put up too much sail, and the mast never showed any sign of distress.

Then, a more serious malfunction. The forward end of the boom is retained in the gooseneck by a nut which has in the past shown a tendency to work loose. I therefore make a point of checking it morning and evening and carry the appropriate tool in a cockpit locker, and recently it has remained nice and tight. Now, suddenly, the nut was rolling on the deck, and the boom was out of the gooseneck. There was no way that I was going to get it back in on my own at sea, so from now on the mainsail was out of action. The consequence was that we sailed most of the way from NZ to Aus under one foresail alone. It won't happen again. I shall have serious talks with a rigger and make sure that that nut



is permanently secured in the future, with Araldite if necessary.

The weather became sub-tropical, the sky was blue, the wind was in the right direction. There was the occasional dolphin, and the shearwaters had kept me company all the way. But the wind fell to 10 knots, and boat speed to 5, 4, occasionally 3 knots. Not a

Singlehanded sailing is well and good, but it's nice to arrive!

safety problem, but hard on the patience. This is why the voyage took 12 days when it should have taken 10 or less. Eventually, agonisingly, we crossed the shipping lanes, rounded Sandy Cape on Fraser Island, the wind freshened to 15 knots, and we clipped along the 50 miles of Hervey Bay at 6 or 7 knots under the yankee with morale on the up and land in sight.

We came up the Burnett River just before midnight. Port Control instructed me to anchor below the marina and await Customs in the morning, which suited me – I could feel a night's sleep coming up. I selected a spot to anchor, made my approach, put the engine into astern to take the way off her, and ... the engine lever jammed solid. Was this Neptune making a skewed offer of peace? He had kept his last laugh

until the last manoeuvre of the voyage, further out it would have caused me serious difficulty. I slept, and the marina boatman kindly towed me in in the morning. For the record, *Lydia* is not a boat that is thrashed. She is regularly and professionally serviced and maintained, and I do not skimp on cost. Oh, by the way, the joker valves on both loos failed during the voyage.

Friday morning in Bundaberg. The sun is shining, long trousers give way to shorts. The infamous Australian Customs are actually quite charming – I was even allowed to keep enough of the contents of the 'fridge to make lunch. Jason has removed the autopilot and taken it to his workshop, Gary has had an initial look at the engine lever and will be back on Monday, Colin will be along to look at the stays on Monday. A new chapter in the adventure begins. *Pace*, Neptune?

Bundaberg

I could have used some local advice when approaching Bundaberg, especially (inevitably) in the middle of the night. Unfortunately my e-mails to the OCC representative remained unanswered, as did the ones to the marina (the young lady who would normally have helped had a couple of days off).

One is constantly reminded before arriving in Australia that the immigration rules are stringent and the officials unforgiving. Both the *Pacific Crossing Guide* and the *Coral Sea Pilot* tell you not even to think about anchoring, but to proceed straight to the quarantine berth at Bundaberg marina and there to await Customs in hermetic isolation. Well, they're out of date – there is no quarantine berth. As mentioned above, I talked to Port Control on my way up the river and asked for guidance in identifying the berth. They told me not to worry but to anchor until morning, off the fairway and just downstream of the marina. This was easy, and most agreeable to me in the circumstances. In the morning I went into a normal berth in the marina, had lots of willing hands to take my lines, and was told to just stay on the boat until cleared. Not a problem. For the record, I should have checked Noonsite, they got it right.

Bundaberg claims to be the busiest port of entry for yachts on the east coast. The marina suffers a bit from river surge, but otherwise is comfortable, friendly and well-equipped. There is an abundance of technical expertise on hand, with the exception of a rigger – Colin Quinn lives and works 250 miles away and charges for his travelling time and cost unless he can combine several clients. Haul-out and lay-up facilities are excellent. There is a restaurant in the marina, another in nearby Burnett Heads, together with a good supermarket. There is a cheerful coterie of long-distance yachtsmen. Bundaberg is a pleasant, provincial town 9 miles away. Otherwise there is very little within 50 or more miles. I was disappointed to find that there is no local sailing area, unlike, say, the Bay of Islands. Lady Musgrave Island at the start of the Great Barrier Reef is a 50 mile sail and has no real anchorage. But hey, Brisbane is 5 hours away on the train and I'm going home for Christmas!

