

BERMUDA TO ENGLAND – MY FIRST SAILING EXPERIENCE, Part 1

John Robshaw

(Past member John Robshaw forwarded this account of a transatlantic passage with OCC Founder Hum Barton in 1969, thinking – quite rightly – that we might like to add a copy to the Club archives. Wearing my dual hats as both Archivist and Editor, I felt it deserved a wider audience.)

It was 1969 and I was into my second year of travelling. I had spent a year working in Bermuda and then Barbados and was planning to head to Europe next. Although I had no sailing experience to speak of, I had my heart set on crossing the Atlantic by crewing on a yacht. I had no schedule or time pressures and was looking for ways to travel as slowly and interestingly as possible. Since I was leaving the Caribbean in May I hoped to catch a yacht heading back to Europe for the summer sailing season, but unfortunately it seemed I was a few weeks too late and would have no choice but to fly to Europe, with a stopover back home in Canada first.

On my way to Canada I decided to call at Bermuda to see friends, and was picked up at the airport by John, with whom I was staying. On the way from the airport, when I was relaying my story of my search for a crewing job, he told me that just that morning the local newspaper had run a story about a famous old sailor who had just arrived from the Caribbean and was looking for one more crew member for the passage to Europe. What a coincidence!

The newspaper cutting which John had seen the morning I arrived in Bermuda





Rose Rambler in the Caribbean

accounting firm where I'd worked while I lived in Bermuda. I spoke to one of the partners, who I knew was a keen sailor, and told him about my possible imminent sailing opportunity. When I mentioned that the skipper was 69, had a heart condition and was half blind, he strongly suggested that I would be taking a huge risk and should reconsider my decision, but before I could change my mind I got a call to say I'd been accepted.

I boarded *Rose Rambler* at 5pm on 24th May 1969 and stowed my gear, after following advice to wrap it in plastic bags. When I first met Hum little did I know I was in the presence of an accomplished and well-known sailor. He was Admiral and Founder of what became the internationally-known Ocean Cruising Club, counting such famous sailors of the day as Sir Robin Knox-Johnston and Sir Alec Rose among its members. Hum thought the membership was about 650, but at the end of the voyage we discovered that it was actually 1800.

Hum was born in 1900 so was 69 when I met him. He was quite a story-teller and we learned many details of his adventurous life. He had qualified as a pilot in the First World War and been a naval engineer in the Reserves in the Second. He was the author of three books about his sailing adventures, as well as many articles. One was about his 1950 two-handed crossing from England to New York in a 25ft yacht with no engine. The voyage took 47 days, of which "four days were spent in a hurricane that just about finished them off".

Next morning I headed to the yacht club in St George's hoping to be interviewed for the job. I knew the odds seemed stacked against me – I couldn't cook or navigate and I didn't even know my way around a boat ... but I WAS eager! I had a long and very enjoyable chat with skipper Humphrey (Hum) Barton and his first mate Bill. They told me the plan was to stop at the Azores and then head to Portugal or Gibraltar since the boat was in need of work. Bill and I were both 25 and we really connected. As I was leaving he whispered to me that I'd be OK since I was English, educated and could pay my way after the trip was over – three key requirements for Hum.

After the interview I dropped into the offices of Cooper & Lines, the

He had been a yacht surveyor in his later working life, valuing boats for insurance purposes, and had retired ten years previously. Now he lived aboard *Rosie* and spent his time sailing around the Atlantic and Mediterranean, following the sun. He thought he had set the record for Atlantic crossings in small yachts – I think it was 14 by 1969. He said many times that this was going to be his last long trip, since it was getting to be too much for him. When I joined the boat in Bermuda he was beginning the second to last leg of his 1968/1969 cruise, which had started in Malta and had taken him to 99 ports in the previous 14 months – a true rambler!

He was wiry and about 6ft tall, and a 'tough old sea dog'. He told us he'd had meningitis, malaria, typhus (the only survivor of an epidemic in a settlement in Malaya, now Malaysia) and broken ribs. His eyesight was so bad he couldn't make out a face more than a few feet away and was planning to have cataract surgery when he was next in England. The meningitis had damaged his legs and he needed assistance to walk. His liver was bad as a result of the diseases he'd had and, no doubt, his alcohol consumption. He 'smoked like a chimney and drank like a fish' as the saying goes. His coronary heart disease, *angina pectoris*, acted up periodically, for which he had medication. He could be quite grouchy at these times, so Bill and I tried to humour him and keep his mind on something else.

Bill Nelson turned 26 during the trip. He was an extremely capable sailor, whose father and friends were all sailors and who had lived near the sea all his life. The passage might have taken much longer if Bill hadn't been on board, as he was adept at solving most of the mechanical and sailing gear problems we encountered, sometimes with Hum's guidance. I found him to be very likeable, with a great sense of humour and also very patient while 'teaching me the ropes'. Bill and his wife had sailed from England to the West Indies, crewing on another yacht. They then worked for a hotel in Antigua and when that job finished his wife, five or six months pregnant, flew back to England. Bill moved on to the British Virgin Islands where he met up with Hum, whom I believe he had known previously since they were both from the same part of England. Bill and Hum sailed from the BVI to Bermuda with an ex-WREN officer, but she left when they made landfall.

The day after I boarded Bill gave me a detailed tour to learn various nautical terms and sailing procedures – I discovered that Hum was a real stickler for the use of correct terminology! *Rose Rambler* incorporated everything he thought that a yacht of her size should have, based on his considerable sailing experience and from his many years surveying boats. Five years old at that time and the first of the Rambler class, she was a 35ft sloop, 29ft on the waterline with 5ft 6in draught, 9ft 9in beam and a 42ft mast. She displaced 8 or 9 tons, including 2½ tons of ballast, making her a sturdy and seaworthy ocean cruising yacht, and had a top speed under sail of about 7 knots. She was powered by a 36hp Perkins four-cylinder diesel, and carried 70 gallons of fuel which gave a cruising range of 700 miles – quite a distance for a small yacht. This came in handy when we experienced calm weather en route to the Azores as we were not forced to ration our fuel too strictly. She could carry up to 80 gallons of water, and we used two gallons a day between the three of us when economising. Food was calculated at 25lbs per head per week and we left Bermuda with about four weeks' supply. So all in all, with food, fuel and water, we were 1800 to 2000lbs heavier at the beginning of the passage than at the end.

Before we left Bermuda we were berthed alongside another yacht from England, a 42ft yawl yacht named *Nanice*. They were also heading to the Azores and Hum decided we would leave when they did and race them. Her cruising range under power was only about 100 miles, so we thought that if we ran into much calm weather we would have no trouble beating them. At 0915 on Monday 26th May we set sail from Bermuda on the first leg of our journey with *Nanice* right behind us. We were pretty well on our own, however, as our radio transmitter wasn't working due to a lightning strike *Rosie* had suffered earlier on.

The first day's sail was agonisingly slow as there was little wind, and we managed only 62 miles in 24 hours. The temperature was in the 80s Fahrenheit (the high 30s Celsius), the sun was beating down, and we were inching our way through the 'Bermuda swell' with the boat slowly pitching and rolling. This gave me a headache and I had no appetite for lunch, but fortunately I didn't get seasick and by supper time I felt fine. After that I was in a constant state of hunger and never missed a meal.

Steering was easy, as she was so well balanced that her Gunning windvane self-steering could steer her for hours and sometimes days if the conditions were right. It made our lives much easier as we could stay below in the cabin and just pop up every 15 or 20 minutes to check the compass and ensure everything was okay. It also meant we could have our meals in peace and comfort, not least because both stove and saloon table were gimballed. We steered by the compass, and if the wind was too light we motored. On the first leg we motored about 250 miles because at one point we hit a calm which lasted four days.

Hum taught me how to use the sextant and plot our position on the chart. The angle of the sun at its highest point, or zenith, gives your latitude, and a combination of measurements at other times of the day are 'reduced' using mathematical tables to give you your longitude. Both are lines, and the intersection of the two is, in theory at least, your actual location. The north star can be used in the same manner. I found that the determination of the angles and the use of the sextant came easily to me – the mind of an accountant, I suppose. Hum told me I could always get an ocean crewing berth if I knew how to navigate.

We towed a 'log line' consisting of a simple rotator mechanism, like a large spinner, on the end of a 40–50ft line, to measure distance through the water. At the end of each watch we recorded the miles travelled in the log book, together with the compass course, estimated wind force and direction, and any other relevant information such as ships sighted and their courses, sail changes and times of starting and stopping the engine (fuel consumption was also checked periodically by dipping the tanks). We would then plot our estimated position on the chart and compare it to our dead reckoning position as a double-check on the accuracy of our celestial navigation. There were sometimes slight differences, but generally they were pretty close.

We split the day into a watch schedule for cockpit duties, while those off duty could sleep or do whatever. I was on from 1400 to 1600, 2100 to midnight and 0600 to 0900, which meant I cooked breakfast. While on watch we were responsible for ensuring we stayed on course, watching for wind changes and trimming the sails accordingly, and watching out for squalls by checking cloud formations. One of the most important duties was to watch for commercial shipping. We had a radar reflector, but it was only a foot or so across and I always wondered how much

of a blip it made on a ship's radar screen. It would have been a great help to be able to contact an approaching ship by radio, but as mentioned earlier, our radio transmitter was dead.

Sleeping was not a problem with all the fresh air and exercise we were getting. 0600 came around very quickly, but once on deck the wind and movement of the boat woke me up instantly. We used fabric guards (lee cloths in the UK, leeboards in the US) to keep us from falling out if the boat rolled too much – up to 40° in rough weather. We were on port tack for the last 12 days of the passage because the north-northeast wind remained constant. The deck over my bunk leaked when we shipped water and there was constant dripping which I tried to avoid when sleeping. The motion of the boat made me dream constantly, in colour and about different things each night. Hum talked in his sleep, sometimes carrying on a conversation and getting cross if you didn't answer!

We ate very well. We had an icebox so had fresh meat, vegetables and fruit for the first five or six days, and after that ate tinned or packaged food. My appetite hit an all-time high while at sea and I was permanently hungry. Hum made lunch and supper and was a pretty good cook, and we had an impressive variety of concoctions even when a lot of it came from cans. I did the washing up and, every few days, pumped the bilges. Cooking and eating was fun and sometimes challenging, especially in high seas but, amazingly, we never ended up wearing any of our food. I suggested dragging a fishing line behind the boat, but Hum had experienced fishing lines getting hopelessly tangled with the log line.

*Humphrey
Barton's Vertue
XXXV, during her
1954 crossing of
the North Atlantic
which led directly
to the founding
of the Ocean
Cruising Club. Oil
on canvas by the
late Roy Glanville
RBA RSMA*



Between, and sometimes during, watches we played cards, read, slept or navigated. I read Hum's three books first and then whatever else was available. We listened to the radio, always trying to pick up a music station, but most of the time we had to settle for the BBC or US overseas news broadcasts, or occasionally a communist station. Bill and I decided that, to avoid one dangerous task, we would grow beards rather than shave. It was quite sunny for most of the passage and not as cold as I had expected – I even had a few chances to sunbathe *au naturel* when I was sheltered from the wind – and it only rained on maybe three or four days. If we needed to go up on deck in the rain or in a high sea we wore one of Hum's weather-proof coats, so we never got wet to any degree and none of us even had the sniffles.

Often at night there was bioluminescence in our wake. I gather this is caused by tiny plankton-like organisms that produce bright pin-points in the water when disturbed. When schools of fish came close at night they sometimes created bioluminescent streaks, and it was quite a sight to see porpoises crossing the bow at night, leaving shining trails like torpedo tracks, then suddenly veering off or under the boat to appear on the other side. One night I saw a bioluminescent trail about 100 yards away. It was 70 or 80 yards long and kept appearing and disappearing. I thought a huge sea monster might appear, but I think it must have been a school of fish swimming close to the surface. It was passing us so must have been caused by something alive. It was quite a sight!

I went through the log book before we reached the Azores and here are a few excerpts:

2nd day: sighted two large (± 30 ft) whales cavorting on the surface not more than 30 or 40 yards from the boat and seemingly quite oblivious to us. Later we sighted and then came alongside *Nanice*, which was stuck in a calm. We motored off, leaving them drifting around aimlessly, and didn't see them again until we reached the Azores. (We felt confident we would win the race, but later they picked up a better wind than us and ended up beating us by three days!)

4th day: electrical storm with much lightning during my night watch, but fortunately we weren't hit. We hove-to, had a couple of drinks and went to bed to let the storm blow itself out. It had moved on by morning.

6th day: set a *Rose Rambler* record, according to Hum, for distance travelled in 24 hours of 165 sea miles – she must have been doing close to her maximum speed of about 7 knots. The sea was high and the crests ran 10–15ft, often higher than the cabin top. (A sailor never refers to a 'wave', according to Hum – that is what someone does with their arms when they're saying goodbye.) Most of that day we were running downwind. During my night watch I remember happily singing away to myself and feeling the excitement of speed as we surfed on the crests, until Hum was jolted awake by the turbulence and decided we should reef.

9th day: sighted our first ship in eight days, a Dutch freighter which altered course to get a closer look at us. Often, according to Hum, they'd ask if you needed anything and sometimes they'd pester you until you made them feel good by asking for something. *Rosie* must have looked the size of a cork with a matchstick for a mast from a ship in

*A scrimshaw portrait
of Humphrey Barton,
in the collection of
Peter Café Sport, Horta*

mid ocean. We sighted ten ships on the passage, but saw very little other life except for jellyfish and a 10ft wide manta ray floating on the surface – and the porpoises, of course. Most of the time we were sailing in water three to four miles deep.

12th day: Bill's birthday. We celebrated with a bottle of wine that Hum had kept for a special occasion, followed by rum and Tia Maria. Unfortunately there were no ladies on board to complete the party.

16th day: saw three ships and figured we were crossing the shipping lane between Gibraltar or the English Channel and New York.

18th day: last day. We sighted land at 0830 (everything seemed to happen on my watch!) when the tip of the island of Pico's 7700ft volcano came into view. The peak was about 10 miles beyond our destination of Horta, a main stopover port for international yachts and the main town on Fayal (now usually spelt Faial). As we got closer to land it was apparent that we were exactly on course – Bill, who was doing most of the navigating, had produced an extremely accurate landfall!



Just after we sighted land a small plane flew overhead three times at about 100ft altitude – so low that we could clearly see the pilot. We found out later that it was a Portuguese Air Force plane searching for schools of tuna, which were an important part of the Azorean economy at that time. They also reported us to Horta, because *Nanice* had alerted the authorities to watch out for us. Then a school of porpoises arrived, swimming within three feet of the hull, jumping out of the water and always staying near the surface – our personal marine escort! I reckon they were 10ft or longer. Then a few miles from shore a couple of fishing boats came by and waved (they also reported us). We entered harbour about 1800, after logging over 2000 miles. It was Friday 13th June and I wondered if that meant anything in the way of luck, good or bad!

The second part of John's account, covering their time in the Azores and onward passage to Lyminster, will appear in *Flying Fish 2020/1*.

