

BERMUDA TO ENGLAND IN 1969, PART 2

John Robshaw

(Flying Fish 2019/2 carried the first part of John's account of joining OCC Founder Hum Barton aboard his 35ft Rose Rambler in Bermuda to sail back to England. Also on the crew was Bill Nelson, like John only 25 years old whereas Hum was 69, but by all accounts she was a happy ship. We rejoin them as they arrive in the Azores.)

The nine islands which comprise the Azores archipelago are situated some 750 miles west of Portugal. The language is Portuguese and, at that time, very few people spoke English. Their population was mostly poor farmers and fishermen eking out a living on the volcanic islands. Wine-making seemed to be an important industry, thankfully for thirsty visiting sailors, along with tuna fishing and whaling. The only foreign company on Fayal was Cable & Wireless, and there were only a dozen or so expatriates living there.

We felt like VIPs when we pulled up to the dock and saw 40 or 50 people watching us. However, it seemed that watching the infrequent arrival of international yachts was a popular pastime in Horta as there was little else to do in the quiet port. An old friend of Hum's named Peter, who owned what turned out to be the most popular bar in town, came on board before we had even tied up bearing fruit, meat, eggs, cheese, bread and a gallon of local wine – what a welcome!

Nanice's crew was also there to meet us. They had been genuinely concerned for us, since they had arrived three days earlier and when they had last seen us we were motoring away from them while they were bobbing around in a calm. They told us that if we hadn't arrived by the following day the air force was going to send out planes to search for us. The whole town seemed to know of our arrival, since the air force and the fishermen had reported us and people ashore had been watching us through binoculars.

After quite a few glasses of Pico wine we stumbled along to Peter's bar for a few beers. Then we were invited for supper aboard *Nanice*, where I finally got to satisfy my enormous sea appetite with a huge plate of roast beef and vegetables. Hum had a 1½lb lobster and only ate about 3oz of it. When he had finished eating he let me shovel the rest onto my plate and I polished the whole lot off, washing it down with a few swigs of wine. After the meal it was back to Peter's for more beer and a sing-song. I was really liking being back on shore!

All the yachtsmen seemed to hang out at Peter's and we met nearly all of them – Canadian, British, Australian, Dutch, American and French. One Dutch sailor was on his way back to Holland in a 35ft sloop after spending two years sailing around the world, often on his own. He told us he didn't know what he would do when he got home – probably take off sailing again. I met a Canadian family from Vancouver who had covered 24,000 miles in two years. They were heading for the Mediterranean for some summer sailing and then home. The owner was a millionaire and they had brought four of their children aged 8 upwards along, together with a nanny who was teaching them. What a great education those kids were getting!

The Sunday newspaper had a detailed description of the arrival of *Rosie* and her skipper 'who was an important member of a grand family of yachtsmen by the name of Humphrey Barton', as well as details of the yacht's dimensions, who spotted us first, how long we expected to stay and that we were departing for Gibraltar. Bill and I went to a service in one of the Catholic churches, though Bill only stayed for part of it. The churches were by far the most impressive and best decorated buildings on the island – an indication of the faith and dedication of the population for their religion. That evening I met a Somalian who was working on a Greek freighter that had stopped at Horta, and later joined the guys on watch who were having lobster and wine for supper. I stumbled back to *Rosie* sometime Monday morning.

Next day a friendly Frenchman who owned a bar in town came by *Rosie* with a bucket of fish and gave us half of them, so we had fresh fish for supper. My high school French helped us communicate since he spoke little English. Then on Tuesday five of us took the ferry over to Pico with the son of a wealthy Azorean who owned a fishing fleet, a very modern canning factory, and about a dozen other businesses in Pico and Fayal. We were taken on a tour of the island by car, stopping at a tuna factory, a cheese factory and a boatyard. We had another huge lobster lunch and our host very kindly paid for everything.

While we were stopped above a small fishing village we heard a lot of shouting and were told that a whale had been spotted a few miles offshore. The whaling industry in the Azores started in the 1850s and lasted until the 1980s. It was one of the last places in the world where whales were hunted from open rowing boats – *canoas* – using hand-thrown harpoons. Spotters were stationed on high points around the coast watching for whales blowing when they surfaced to breathe. A call was shouted along the shore until the message reached the harbour or cove where the boats were kept. Then a motor boat with a 'crow's nest' from which to keep track of the whale would tow one to three *canoas*, each with a crew of seven, out to the vicinity of the whale, where the *canoas* would drop the tow and sneak up on their prey under oars.

As soon as they were close enough, one of the harpoonists would throw his harpoon, attached to a very long line, and the boat would then be towed by the whale with the other boats staying as close as possible. Whenever a harpoonist was within range he would throw another lance into it. The whale would eventually tire from exertion and loss of blood, though it could be up to 12 hours before it died, after which it was towed back to shore by the motor boat. The whales near the Azores are usually sperm whales, the bulls 40–60ft (13–18m) long and the females 30–40ft (9–12m). Almost every part of the whale's body other than the internal organs was used.

We spent our last few days preparing for the next leg of our journey. I did some grocery shopping to stock up on fresh fruit, vegetables and meat. The latter was a bit tough as the animals had to graze on mountainsides, but it was all very healthy and reasonably priced, as was the wine. When we came to fill up *Rosie's* fuel and water tanks we discovered that a significant amount of fuel had leaked into the bilges during the previous leg, but Hum and Bill found the leak and Bill soon repaired it. *Nanice* left at around 1000 on Thursday for Plymouth and, after a final small party on board and bidding farewell to the friendly and hospitable Azoreans, six hours later we also set sail for Plymouth – a few pounds heavier than when we had arrived! We had a about 1200 miles to go and Hum figured it would take us 10 or 11 days.



With Hum aboard Rose Rambler in September 1970 (the paper in my shirt pocket is my application to join the OCC, signed by the Admiral himself)

Hum had originally planned to sail from the Azores to Gibraltar but, since the boat needed a major refit and there was news of a lot of labour trouble brewing there over Spain again claiming the British territory, he changed our destination to Plymouth. It meant a longer trip by a few hundred miles but we had the supplies and, because he was out of money, Bill was happy to land in England and save the air fare home.

A few hours out from Horta, however, Hum fell on deck and cracked at least one rib. We asked him if he wanted to return but he said definitely not. He then decided to change our destination once again from Plymouth to his home port of Lymington, a little farther east, where he'd feel better off at home among friends. He was in pain for about a week and couldn't move too quickly or breathe deeply for a few days, and after that he took it easy. He slept right through his watch on the night of his fall so Bill and I started taking double watches. I took 2100–0100 and Bill 0100–0500, covering the night because Hum was not able to see in the dark and we were starting to get into busier commercial shipping areas.

Our 4th day out was a disaster – we ran out of booze! We had brought four bottles of gin, one bottle of rum and five litres of wine from Horta and it was all gone ... or so we thought. Towards the end of the trip we discovered that Hum had hidden a bottle of gin and was nipping at it in daylight when Bill and I were sleeping.

It was getting cooler now and I started wearing socks. Hum had stayed in his pyjamas since Horta since he found them most comfortable – he was a comical sight on deck with his pant legs rolled up and his all-weather jacket on! About a week out of Horta, Hum was rummaging around under the cabin sole when his eyes lit up and he showed us an old gin bottle he found containing a light blue liquid. He was going to pour himself a glass but Bill insisted on smelling it first. It turned out to be methylated spirits used to start the stove – such a disappointment! He told us that two years before in Malta he had mistaken paraffin for gin and was laid up with what he called 'paraffinitis'.

By the 7th or 8th day all our fresh food was gone and we were back to canned food, spaghetti and instant potatoes. The last of the bread was so mouldy that after toasting it we had to scrape the mould off to make it look edible. We were now eating food that had been on board for a very long time, probably from at least the last time Hum had been in England. The spaghetti had little white bugs eating holes in it but we cooked it anyway. Most of the tins were quite rusty on the outside, although the insides were clean. The last of the meat had a strong odour when we opened the ice box, but it tasted alright after it was cooked and didn't look as green as it had before. The ice block had melted completely – back in Horta, when I was buying ice at the tuna canning factory, they would only (and reluctantly) sell me a 30lb block instead of the 50lbs I asked for, because the fishing fleet was about to go out for a week and needed all of it. Hum's concoctions always tasted good, however, and invariably 'hit the spot'. He sometimes tried to produce more than I could eat but he gave up on that challenge in the end.

Around the 8th or 9th day out we ran into a strong headwind which forced us 60° off course, heading towards the northwest coast of Spain, but when we were about 160 miles off the coast the wind died and we were able to continue on our correct course, motoring into the wind. This added about two days to our passage. We were now hitting patches of fog and at times visibility was down to half a mile or less. On the 9th day a naval ship, possibly American, altered course and passed close to us flashing Morse signals. None of us could read them so we just hoisted the ensign to signal that we were a British vessel and waved.

On our 11th night out, when we must have been 200–300 miles from land, a little songbird about the size of a sparrow landed on Hum's arm! It flew into the cabin, hopped around awhile and then flew into the forward cabin. That was the last we saw of it – it must have died from exhaustion and hunger. I had read a tale of a near-shipwreck in which the author claimed that if a bird came on board at sea and lived it was a good omen, but if the bird died that meant trouble ahead. A few hours later, as I was sitting reading in the cabin during my watch, I got quite a shock when I noticed water covering the cabin sole ... and it tasted salty. Were we going to sink? I hastily woke Hum and Bill. It turned out that the engine's water cooling system had sprung a leak and water was gushing out. We spent all night fixing the leak and waiting for the 'quick-drying' cement to harden. Fortunately, by morning it had and we were on our way again.

On the 12th day a naval plane flew very low over us three times. It looked to be Canadian and Bill said it could be on submarine patrol duty. Later in the day a thick fog rolled in very quickly and within minutes the temperature dropped 10°F. One minute we could see for miles and the next minute we could only see about 100 yards. The humidity must have been nearly 100% since our beards were dripping wet in no time. We calculated that we were some 80 miles southwest of Ushant and about to enter the English Channel on the French side. Bill had produced another accurate landfall, since we saw the Ushant lighthouse the next day.

We were stuck in fog, with no radar or radio transmitter, and were forced to cut the engine and proceed under sail so that we could hear any ships coming close. We were glad that we at least had a radar reflector. We could hear foghorns all the time and a few times heard the engines of large ships in our vicinity. Just after midnight we came

out of the fog as quickly as we had entered it – it looked like the edge of a smoke screen, it was that distinct. After that we constantly had up to ten ships in sight at all times, a few of them altering course for a closer look at us.

Our 13th day out was also unlucky – something else to pin on the death of that little bird? – as the ship's radio packed up and we could no longer listen to music. Bill had a small transistor radio as well, but the batteries were low. Then we sprang an oil leak. We used up a few quarts of oil while we tried to find it, but eventually Bill and Hum located and repaired it and we were motoring again. By this time the engine was clearly in need of a serious overhaul – covered in oil, with wire and wedges holding parts of it together and emitting various new squeaks and groans. One of the sails was also looking the worse for wear. It was lucky that we were on the home stretch, although the Channel was also the most dangerous stretch because of the considerable marine traffic, coupled with fast tides and the possibility of fog. Bill and I busied ourselves washing *Rosie* from top to bottom and it took us until we arrived in Lymington to finish the job. Hum told us it was the first real cleaning she had had in many years.

The Channel was unusually calm according to Hum and we made good time under power, but we still had an oil leak which we never did find and which necessitated frequent topping up. We eventually ran out of oil about 100 miles from Lymington and, with light winds and contrary tides, it took us nearly two days to cover the last bit under sail. We had motored about 500 of the 1600 miles that we covered on this leg, due to the calm weather, but the last few miles were really frustrating as we had adequate fuel and just needed a few quarts of oil. At one point we tried to buy some from a passing yacht but they didn't have any to spare.

The tides were our biggest challenge now that we were without engine-power. When the stream was running strongly against us, even though it seemed we were moving well through the water in fact we were losing ground over the bottom. On the afternoon of the 15th and final day we were trying to get past Portland Bill before the tide changed at around 1500. The Portland tidal race has been recognised for centuries as one of the most dangerous stretches of water in the Channel, if not the world, because of fast tides meeting over a shallow and uneven seabed. This can cause swells and a churning sea with crests of 6ft or more, but fortunately a narrow and much calmer channel runs inside it. We were about a quarter of a mile from the lighthouse when the rough sea of the tidal race began, and we missed the edge of it by no more than 50 or 60 yards. I remember it being a terrific, exciting sight but Hum wasn't excited by it at all – he said we didn't know how lucky we were, because we would have had no control over the boat if we'd been caught up in it. He said that in the 50 years he had been sailing the Channel he had never been so close to it. We were losing ground trying to pass the headland and its lighthouse, but we succeeded in steering to within 100 yards or so of the shore where the tide was weakest and we were finally able to make progress.

By 2110, when the tide was to turn in our favour, we were about 20 miles from Lymington, and as the tide turned we picked up one of the best breezes of the whole passage. We covered that last 20 miles in less than three hours, sometimes travelling at up to 9 knots. The Isle of Wight is separated from the mainland by a strait called the Solent, and Lymington is situated on the mainland side. The Solent is busy with commercial shipping and recreational boats and fairly shallow in parts, requiring careful navigation. Since it was dark, Bill and I were on the lookout for rocks and buoys and giving Hum steering directions.



Hum and Mary

We missed one buoy by about 6 inches and then almost ran aground when the echo sounder registered 7ft – *Rosie* drew 5ft 6in. Finally, to top things off, the wind dropped to practically nothing and the tide literally spun us around in a circle. We managed to make it about

100 yards farther and anchored just off Yarmouth, across the Solent from Lymington, at about 0130. We had soup to celebrate and went to bed about 0230.

At 0800 the customs and immigration launch came alongside and woke us up. They brought us the cheerful news that an hour earlier about 500 yachts had passed within a few hundred yards of us in the annual Round the Island Race. What a beautiful sight we had missed, having unwittingly anchored in a prime viewing spot!

Bill took the dinghy ashore to get some oil and we were across the water, berthed at the Royal Lymington Yacht Club, by lunchtime. A host of Hum's family and friends came aboard with food and beer, and Bill's pregnant wife and his parents also joined us. A couple of hours later Bill and I said our goodbyes and left with all our gear to stay at his parents' home near Southampton, and two days later I flew to Dublin where I had many relatives.

The passage from Bermuda had taken 40 days, from May 26th to July 4th, including the six-day stay in the Azores. Besides saving me about US \$300 in air fare, it was the most interesting adventure of my life to that point.

Postscript: After a month or so in Dublin a girlfriend whom I had met in Barbados arrived with a backpack so I joined her on a hitchhiking trip around Europe. On the England leg of our trip we stopped in Lymington to see if Hum was still there. He was, and he was preparing the boat for his next trip – to Casablanca. He asked us if we wanted to crew but we declined as we had our hearts set on seeing Europe.

The following summer I was invited to a wedding in the south of England and the day after the wedding the wedding party went for brunch to ... the Royal Lymington Yacht Club of all places! I couldn't believe my eyes when I went out on to the balcony and saw *Rose Rambler* sitting in the place where Hum, Bill and I had tied up a year previously. I went down the pontoon and there was Hum, just arrived that morning after another voyage from the Caribbean. He was accompanied by his new bride, Mary* – another 'old salt' whom he had known for many years. They had tied the knot just before they left Grenada.

* Mary served as our Commodore from 1988 until 1994, after which she was elected Admiral, a post which she held until her death in December 2015, days before her 96th birthday.

