

DIARY OF A CANADIAN ATLANTIC HURRICANE

John Franklin

(Al Shaheen is a 42ft aluminium alloy sloop, launched in England in 2001. She crossed the Atlantic the following year, and since then John and Jenny have explored the Caribbean, the US East Coast and Nova Scotia.)

One normally associates Atlantic hurricanes with the Caribbean, Florida and the Gulf States of the US, but they occasionally threaten the eastern seaboard of the US and the Canadian Maritime Provinces. Atlantic hurricanes are normally spawned in the area of the Cape Verde Islands, and almost always start by tracking westwards towards the eastern Caribbean islands. The majority pass across the Lesser Antilles and into the Caribbean Sea, and then either head north towards Florida and Louisiana, or west towards Cuba and Haiti and then into the Gulf of Mexico. However a few 're-curve' to the northwest just before or immediately after passing the Virgin Islands, cross the Bahamas, and then track northwards parallel to the US east coast, usually clipping Cape Hatteras and heading into New England or the Canadian Maritimes.

In late August 2010 Hurricane *Danielle* became the first threat of the season but, in the event, passed well east of Bermuda and then spun off to the northeast and decayed

Preparing the ground tackle





The calm before the storm

harmlessly over the Atlantic. On 24 August *Al Shaheen* was in St Peter's at the southern entrance to the Bras d'Or Lakes. We had an internet connection and became aware of the then Tropical Storm *Earl*. Our primary source of information for the next 12 days was the regular bulletins issued by the US National Hurricane Center, an offshoot of NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). When we didn't have an Internet connection – which, during our trip southwestwards down the Nova Scotia coast, was most of the time – we found that we could receive these bulletins over our SSB radio via the Saildocs service, using a Pactor III Modem.

We planned to return to Chester in Mahone Bay to haul out on 13 September, and also to attend a Cruising Club of America raft-up on 4 September and a Cruising Association meet the next day. We envisaged a leisurely trip down the coast exploring new anchorages.

24 August

Al Shaheen left St Peter's and sailed across Canso Straits to Canso, a lovely thrash to windward in southerly 20 knots, well reefed. Calm night at anchor in Canso.

25 August

Al Shaheen sailed to Yankee Cove in Whitehead Harbour, another 25 mile beat to windward in sunshine. The next day produced foul weather so, after dragging at first light, we re-anchored in a more sheltered cove and went back to bed. No other boats in the anchorage.



27 August

A boisterous 41 mile sail to Isaacs Harbour in a lumpy sea, under reefed main and reefed jib, followed by a beautiful, calm evening in lovely surroundings.

28 August

NHC bulletin No.10: 'Tropical Storm *Earl* racing westwards over the tropical Atlantic', 1140 miles east of the northern Leeward Islands.

We motor and then sail 28 miles to Marie Joseph's Harbour, where we pick a huge pot of mussels for dinner. Beautiful evening and no other boats in the anchorage.

29 August

NHC bulletin No.14A: '*Earl* heading towards the Leeward Islands in a hurry', 570 miles east of the Northern Leeward islands with central pressure of 989mbs.

We motor-sail 29 miles to Malagash Cove in Sheet Harbour. One other boat in the cove.

30 August

NHC bulletin No.18A: 'Hurricane *Earl* heading for the northern Leeward Islands', 100 miles east of Barbuda and now a Category 1 hurricane with central pressure of 972mbs.

We sail and motor 58 miles to Sambro Harbour. An incredibly hot day, perhaps 35°, with water temperature at 23° – this is Nova Scotia, land of fogs and cold water! We watch a local fishing boat unload a huge catch of Porbeagle shark and swordfish, plus three bluefin tuna valued at \$10,000 just for the three of them!

31 August

NHC bulletin No.22A: '*Earl* continues to move away from the Virgin Islands'. By now it is 95 miles northeast of Puerto Rico and moving west-northwest, with central pressure down to 939mbs. Having clipped the Virgin Islands *Earl* has become a Category 4 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 135 knots, and is expected to turn northwest.

Looks like we may have a problem! We sail to Mahone Bay to look for somewhere to shelter, e-mailing all our local friends for ideas, and berth at Lunenburg Yacht Club, Hermans Island. It is very hot and humid.

1 September

NHC Bulletin No.26A: 'Powerful Hurricane *Earl* continues moving northwestward'. Now 125 miles east-northeast of Grand Turk and heading northwest at 14 knots, it remains Category 4 with central pressure of 940mbs.

On the morning OCC NE USA SSB net we learn that a number of OCC boats in Penobscot Bay in Maine are getting concerned and heading for Smith's Cove for shelter. Via the net we are put in touch with OCC/CCA members John Harries and Phyllis Nickel aboard *Morgan's Cloud*, who are on their mooring less than a mile away from us. We discuss tactics, and then motor over to *Morgan's Cloud* where John and Phyllis kindly offer to lend us their spare 60lb spade anchor as well as a huge alloy Fortress as backup. John and Phyllis have decided to remain on their mooring, which is well engineered and has two

4000lb boulders as ground tackle. We decide to anchor further down the inlet where there is plenty of swinging room and reportedly very good holding in thick mud. We stake our claim, expecting other boats to arrive, remove and bag the two headsails from their furlers to reduce windage, then go for a swim to cool off. The water temperature is 23.6°.

2 September

NHC Bulletin No.30A: 'Large and dangerous Hurricane *Earl* threatening the US mid-Atlantic coast'. Now 565 miles southeast of Cape Hatteras, moving north-northwest at 18 knots with maximum sustained winds of 135 knots, *Earl* remains Category 4 with central pressure of 941mbs.

This looks serious! By this time we have established an internet connection piggy-backing off someone's unsecured router ashore, so we are getting up-to-date NHC bulletins, satellite images and lurid forecast track projections – all quite frightening. There is no doubt at this stage that *Earl* will be passing very close to us. We continue to strip items off the deck to reduce windage, removing the bimini, flags, ensigns and life rings, and binding up the mainsail on the boom in a large tight sausage. We also lash the wind generator blades to avoid it self-destructing.

3 September

By 0500 EDT *Earl* is 85 miles east of Cape Hatteras and heading north-northeast at 18 knots, but the central pressure has risen to 955mbs. It is beginning to fill and weakening slightly, a trend which is expected to continue over the next 12 to 24 hours, and has been downgraded to Category 2. It is also expected to pick up speed. It looks like it will pass west of us up the Bay of Fundy in daylight on Saturday morning.

The mainsail secured





50 knots now

At 0730 EDT on the OCC NE SSB Net we learn that seven OCC boats anchored in Smith's Cove, Castine, Maine had a mini OCC Rally last night! They are expecting it to pass tonight, but well offshore so they should get an easy ride.

1500 EDT and *Earl* is 290 miles southeast of Nantucket, moving north-northeast at 21 knots but expected to turn to northeast in next 12 to 24 hours. It has dropped a further notch to Category 1, with maximum sustained winds now down to 80 knots and central pressure at 961mb. Wind and rain are spreading over Long Island and southeast New England.

The good news is that it is much weaker than it was, but the bad news is the turn to the northeast which will bring it much closer to us. It is still incredibly hot and still, with not a breath of wind and the water surface like a mirror. We go for another swim and then re-anchor with more swinging room, veering 60m of 10mm chain. We decide not to use the Fortress and lie to two anchors because of the danger of the cables becoming entangled when the expected 90° wind veer comes. Luckily, or strangely, no other boats have come to join us – what are we missing? Where is everyone else going?

4 September

0500 EDT and *Earl* is 145 miles southeast of Halifax moving northeast at 30 knots, with maximum sustained winds of 70 knots and central pressure of 965mb. The track



The wind starts to veer

projections are now predicting that the centre will come right over us at about midday. We are expecting the wind to come from the southeast, which unfortunately is the direction from which we are most exposed with a fetch of about a mile. Once it veers to the southwest we will be very sheltered, if we are still here! I place anti-chafe gear on the snubber, put a Blake slip on the chain, and take the chain off the windlass and secure it to the Sampson post just in case the snubber breaks.

0830: Wind ESE 34 knots, rain started, barometer 994mb, 2ft chop. We learn on the OCC Net that the guys in Maine had a pretty quiet night – almost a non-event for them.

0915: Barometer plummeting, now 990mb, wind SE 40 knots, continuous rain, 2ft chop and *Al Shaheen* is swinging wildly on her chain.

1015: ESE maximum gust 60 knots, 3ft seas.

1100: ESE continuous 55 knots gusting 60, lashing horizontal rain, barometer 978mbs. We are getting worried now and put both laptops, phones, passports, money, ship's papers and log into a sealed plastic kitbag encased in an auto-inflation lifejacket, just in case we have to swim for it. We are now wearing our own lifejackets.

1130: Maximum gust 69 knots. I think we are beginning to drag.

1200: A sudden lull! The wind veers sharply to south-southwest and drops to 10 knots. The sea is calm and all seems eerily quiet. The barometer reads 968mbs and is beginning to rise. I confirm that we have dragged about 50m so let out another 10m of chain. Time for lunch.

1230: Amazingly calm. We need to re-anchor, but how long have we got? I recover the anchor and find that we have picked up a large tree branch, so I quickly re-anchor and veer 50m of chain.

For us that was really the end of the storm. It continued raging above the tree line, but it was blowing right over the top of us and at sea level it remained very calm. By 1530 the barometer was back up to 990mbs and had reached 1002mbs by 2200.

We were not, in the event, in an ideally sheltered location and we were very fortunate that the system had decreased almost to a tropical storm by the time it reached us. Had it remained at Category 4 I doubt if we would have held, particularly with the anchor fouled by a branch. We later learned from friends that Deep Cove, the alternative anchorage, although better sheltered had become crowded with boats, many of them insecurely anchored. Considerable chaos had resulted, with several boats fetching up onshore. We were very glad not to have been amongst them.

