

ONE YEAR ON Bob and Elaine Hazell

(Since leaving the Hamble in June 2008, Bob and Elaine have sailed more than 48,000 miles aboard *Pipistrelle*, their *Wauquiez 48PS*, completing their circumnavigation in Grenada earlier this year. Visit their blog at www.yachtpipistrelle.wordpress.com. All photographs were taken by the authors, except where indicated.)

After a full twelve months, several thousand more miles under the keel of *Pipistrelle*, and with a circumnavigation under our belts, we feel able to describe in *Flying Fish* the significant events that so adversely coloured our Indian Ocean crossing in 2015. In summary, this is the story:

- Lightning strike in the Maldives, totally disabling all systems on *Pipistrelle* (see *Lightning Never Strikes Twice!* in *Flying Fish* 2015/2); repairs and replacements in remote Gan by an engineer flown in from New Zealand;
- Setting off from Gan having tested both autopilots, only for both to fail in the first 9 miles, and having to return under extremely difficult sailing conditions;
- Finally heading for Chagos and, on arrival, picking up what turned out to be a dodgy mooring, ending up on a reef with damaged rudder and slightly bent propeller shaft, repaired with the help of other cruisers in the anchorage;
- Sailing to Mahé in the Seychelles without motive power, and having to be towed in to Port Victoria by a commercial tug after the steering failed as a result of the Chagos incident.

Why have we not fully reported all four incidents before now?

Firstly, to use a cliché, to protect the innocent – namely close family and non-sailing friends, some of whom would have been alarmed and incredibly worried for our safety, and begging us to hang up our sailing togs. This we very, very nearly did. Because of our ordeals, our mental and physical energies have at times been at an extremely low ebb.

Secondly, and unfortunately, we add to that mix the sometimes indiscriminate use of social media and their personal sailing blogs by a small minority of cruisers to publicise negative events which happen to other cruisers, often before their families become aware of them, and apparently with scant regard for the truth. This is *schadenfreude* in the truest and most negative sense of the word. For us this aspect created huge and unnecessary additional angst, which has had a lasting effect on us both. Originally the whole point of social media was just that – a social sharing with friends and the wider community. Unfortunately some people, including a few OCC members, appear to think it acceptable to share online not only every aspect of their own lives but those of others as well, whether the people in question agree or not. Sadly, that is what happened to us.

Even so, after much agonising and thought we are picking up on a suggestion made some time ago, to go to confessional and tell the full story in *Flying Fish*. One year on, we feel able to do so.

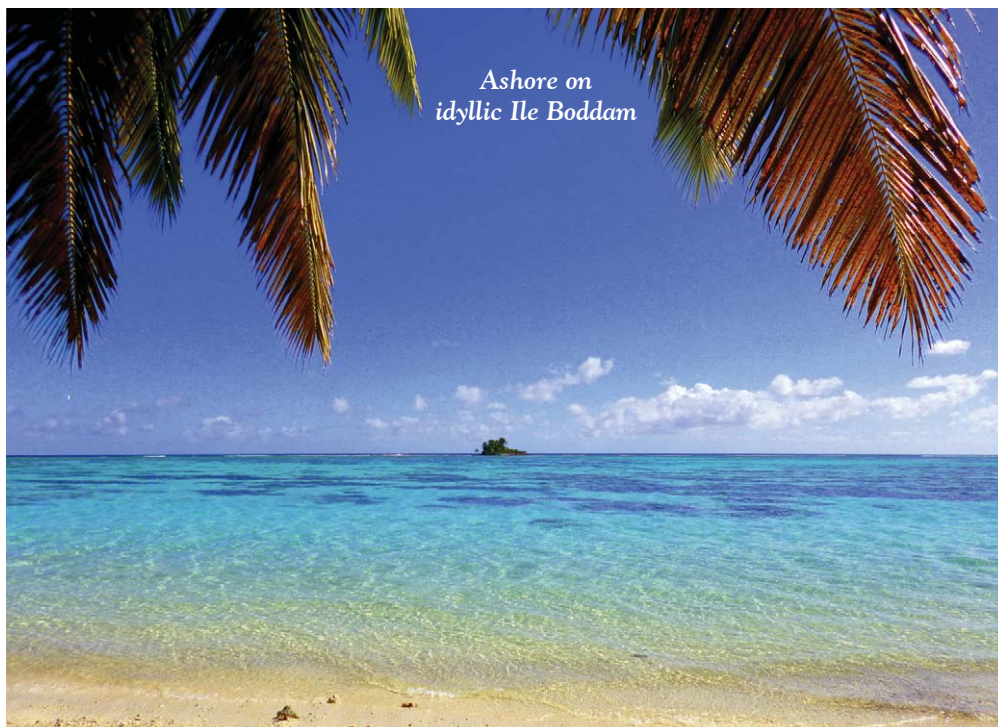
On 2 April 2015 lightning struck *Pipistrelle*

The incident has been described in both the *Pipistrelle* blog and in *Flying Fish* 2015/2 under the title *Lightning Never Strikes Twice!*, so there is no need to repeat it here, other than to say again our sincere thanks to the cruisers who helped us. Our subsequent stormy return to Gan was also documented in the blog. Highly important and relevant here is that in both instances we informed our nearest and dearest in our own time and after the fact, which crucially enabled us to put a positive spin on events and put minds at rest.

Two months later – Chagos

Still licking our wounds from the lightning incident, we were devastated by a further event which could have had a totally different outcome had it not been for the concerted efforts and expertise of all other cruisers at the anchorage off a remote, deserted atoll. We had a story to tell in our own time if we wanted to, and one which was worthy of publication. With journalists in our midst, had we not told it ourselves others would have done so, with or without our agreement. So we did, anonymously, in a couple of magazines, stating the true facts and course of events.

Part of the remote British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) 300 miles south of the Maldives, the deserted island of Ile Boddam contains the ruins of a church, a warehouse, a prison and other buildings, reminders of a small population forcibly relocated to Mauritius and the Seychelles in the 1960s by the British government. The jungle has taken over – the nearest habitation is over 100 miles away at Diego Garcia, a prohibited area to all but the military. The beautiful soft sand of the shallows and shoreline is deceptive, as in deeper water the bedrock is coral. When we arrived there was one yacht at anchor and six on moorings, none of which had an anchor deployed as well.





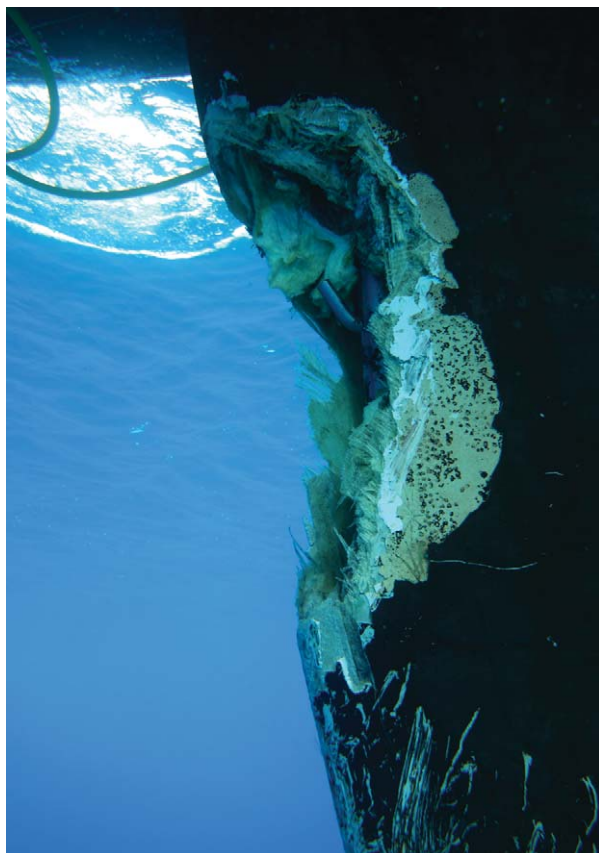
A double rainbow as a squall goes through

After two failed attempts at getting *Pipistrelle*'s anchor to hold on the coral we decided to pick up the last available mooring, which we were told had recently been used by another yacht of similar size in winds of up to 40 knots. The ropes attached to the buoy were not in good condition, so we snorkelled down 3m and found a ship's hawser at least 4in (10cm) in diameter, through which we passed two of our substantial mooring lines. In turn the hawser was secured to a coral head or *bommie* 12m down – too deep for us to free-dive, and scuba diving is prohibited in the BIOT. With the engine in reverse and revved to 2500rpm, equivalent to over 30 knots of wind, the mooring held.

The weather was mixed for the next couple of days – one moment calm, the next squally with torrential rain and strong winds – and despite assurances from others and doing everything we could to reinforce it, we were still concerned about the mooring, normally a 'no-no' for us in all but locations where we know they are reliable.

In our forward cabin we were sleeping fitfully because the wind had increased. Suddenly, as if in a bad dream, we were aware of a change of boat movement – a sideways slide accompanied by a slight grinding. Fearing the worst we were up in a flash. Before the anchor alarm had had time to sound, we were in the cockpit with the engine on. It was 0400 and blowing about 35 knots with pouring rain. Within moments we were on a coral reef. Initially we were able to get off, but in the pitch blackness had no idea which way to turn to reach the safety of deeper water. The tide was falling and the keel came to rest on the coral, leaving us helpless and with no control.

Quite unexpectedly, our immediate VHF call was answered by two cruisers. The mooring area was relatively small and dinghies appeared magically out of the darkness.



The damaged rudder, still in situ

As dawn broke two kedge anchors were laid to secure us, one of them loaned by another boat. We could see that we were surrounded by coral and there was no clear escape, but the support team quickly grew to six, with dinghies, snorkels and dive gear. An initial visual underwater check showed the rudder had a large gouge in it and the propeller shaft was slightly bent at the taper for the propeller. Inserting rubber tyres from the ruined jetty, and timber where the hull could have been exposed to the grinding of coral, saved *Pipistrelle* from further damage.

High water was at 1400 and during the morning we refloated. An underwater inspection of the reefs was made to plan a careful

***800kg of ballast
weighing down the bow***





route out through numerous *bommies*. In intermittent rain, 15–20 knots of wind, and overcast skies with no sunlight it was difficult to detect the reefs, and because the propeller shaft was damaged we couldn't use the engine. We were warned that it was unlikely we would reach safety without touching another reef. With two dinghies lashed alongside port and starboard for motive power we slowly progressed through the coral, using a system of four kedge anchors each strategically placed from a dinghy by hand, guided by the team in the water, with the deck team pulling in and easing ropes using winches and the anchor windlass. At 1600 we finally dropped the anchor in 12m on coral bedrock. This time it held. The sun was shining. We and the support team heaved a huge sigh of relief. Everyone was exhausted.

Carrying out repairs in the middle of nowhere is immensely challenging. One of our group, who happened to be a naval architect, arranged via e-mail for a friend to visit Wauquiez in France to obtain details of the rudder. He needed to calculate the weight required on the bow to lift the stern high enough that when the rudder was released, sea water would not enter through the rudder tube. The answer was 800kg (1764 lbs). First our bow was loaded down by pouring sea water from our deck wash into old fuel containers stored in the 'yacht club' ashore. Then all heavy items that could be moved from the stern were transferred to the bow, including anchor chain and spares from our stern cabins. The difference in balance was remarkable – the bow dropped by 9in (23cm) and the stern lifted by 8in (20cm).

With ropes controlling its descent, the rudder was successfully released from within the lazarette, lowered and, supported by flotation bags and fenders, manoeuvred to a dinghy for towing ashore. Once there, a portable genset, angle grinders and sanders were organised and all the damaged GRP cut away. After a good dousing with fresh water from the nearby well it was left to dry overnight, and the next day repairs began. The naval architect was expert in working with GRP, and had copious quantities of resin, hardener, and the different types of lay-up materials aboard. The rudder should



The voids almost filled

have been filled with foam, but when the inside was exposed it was barely half full and shrivelled. Repairs carried out by a British yard in 2008 had clearly been poor, which had weakened the whole structure. Fellow cruisers found material from their own boats to use as stuffing, but there was still a shortfall so we stripped copra from the masses of coconuts lying around, mixed it with resin, and inserted it into the voids. It was a team effort – everyone who wanted to help was involved, including the children.

Nearing completion in the open air workshop



The silk finish

After applying layers of different glass mat to obtain maximum strength, the rudder was finally covered with silk for a resin finish. At turned against constant 15–20 appeared from one of the boats which, secured between the palms, provided enough protection for work to continue. Once the resin had hardened a coat of antifouling



smooth this stage the weather us, with tropical downpours and a knots of wind, but a very large plastic tarpaulin was applied, and finally a celebratory 'pot luck' barbecue on an open fire was held at the improvised 'yacht club'. For the return journey to *Pipistrelle* the repaired rudder was slung between two dinghies. We now had a floating rudder, so a significant weight of anchor chain was attached to sink it. Then we had to manoeuvre it so the stock could be inserted into the rudder bearings before it could finally be secured in place. All the weight up forward was removed and the items re-stowed. Plans then began to take shape to manoeuvre us out of the atoll – still with no motive power.



Antifouled and awaiting transport back to Pipistrelle

then began to take shape to manoeuvre us out of the atoll – still with no motive power.



The makeshift 'Chagos Yacht Club'

Waiting for a weather window, we briefly took advantage of the beauty Chagos offers. Ashore we explored the island, finding protected coconut crabs in holes beneath the palms – apparently they're delicious! Fish are abundant because nobody is there on a permanent basis to fish. Below the surface we snorkelled and wondered at the

A coconut crab



beautiful coral. Warmer sea temperatures can result in coral bleaching – when water is too warm, corals will expel algae (zooxanthellae) living in their tissues, causing the coral to turn completely white. We saw

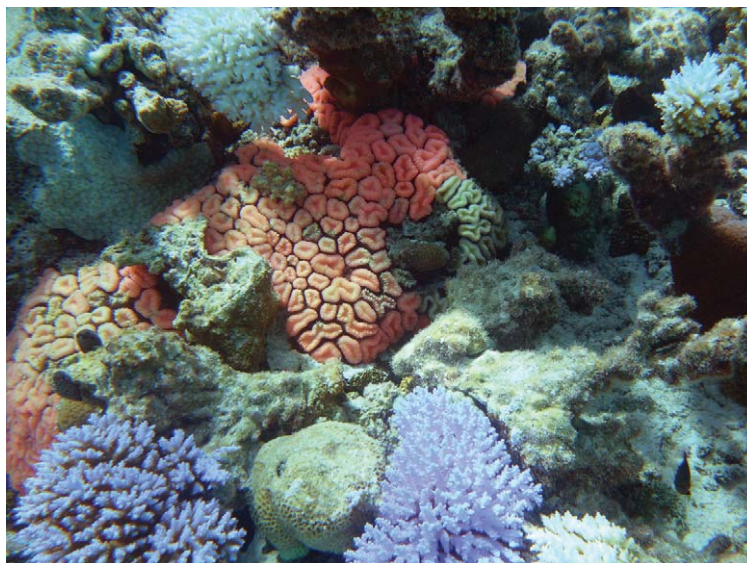
Bleached white coral

Coloured coral

some extraordinary colours in Chagos which we have not seen before, the most strident being the bleached white, as well as pink and blue.

Sailing to Mahé in the Seychelles

With a bent propeller shaft, using the engine was clearly impossible without



severely damaging or breaking the P-bracket, so we were still totally reliant on outside help to get us safely out of the atoll for our downwind passage to the Seychelles. We and the other five boats waited for the right weather window to give us at least five days of steady winds. Departures were staggered so we sailed in company with two other yachts, the others following on a few days later.

Getting out of the atoll was unexpectedly straightforward. We left in good light, a dinghy strapped either side to provide propulsion and manoeuvrability once the anchor was up. We were soon sailing gently across the lagoon, avoiding coral heads, and being guided out through the pass. Once outside we set off on what was to be a fast and challenging 1046 mile passage. Fast because it took just seven days; challenging because we encountered frequent squalls, constant wind shifts and ugly seas caused by the ITCZ. It turned into an uncomfortable passage, especially the last 48 hours which were anything but straightforward because of having no motive power.

Reporting our progress and position twice daily via the SSB on a scheduled frequency and time was comforting, as was weather forecasting advice we received from a cruiser who had access to the latest satellite pictures. We were also in regular VHF contact with the two yachts ahead of us. Our sail plan was mainly one reef in the main and a small genoa. With this we found that even in a 28 knot squall and torrential rain the rig could cope comfortably without needing constant tending.

Eventually, on Sunday 21 June at 05°49'S 58°30'E, we altered course to cross onto Seychelles Bank at the recommended waypoint. Effectively we were following in the tracks of the other yachts, until wind shifts forced us to alter course while they continued under power. As we approached, the seas became more and more uncomfortable, making both the forward and aft cabins impossible to sleep in. We dozed in the main saloon. By this time we knew we would not make Port Victoria in daylight, so had to slow down and prepare to spend another night at sea. We had already furled the genoa and were using the staysail, because some stitching on the former's sacrificial strip had come undone. After altering course slightly onto the wind to make for Frigate Island, we put a second and finally a third reef into the mainsail in an attempt to slow down, and the staysail was furled. But with 15 knots of wind

we were still sailing at over 5 knots, meaning we would arrive off Port Victoria at 0400. If that happened the plan was to heave-to. The question was where, with large sections of the bank uncharted.

Our course alteration at the next waypoint south of Frigate Island was a mere 30° to bring us on to a heading of 270° for Port Victoria. But the course change had had little effect, because the 2 knot north-going current countered it – we were slowly being swept north. On went lifejackets and safety harnesses to shake out the third reef and set some staysail. By this time we were hard on the southerly breeze, and watched the chart plotter anxiously to judge the effects. By zooming right in we saw to our relief that we were heading in a southwesterly direction towards our rhumb line.

But our speed over the ground was only 2.4 knots, scuppering any thoughts of heaving-to. The question was how far south of Port Victoria we would need to be for us to fully hoist the mainsail, feather it into the wind, and drop it into its sail bag without snagging on the lazy jacks. We had arranged to call one of the yachts with a progress report at 0730, before attempting to sail in through the pass, but VHF only works on line of sight and from where we were heading the signal would be interrupted by the land. Our other big concern was the frequency of squalls. They arrived quickly, the wind speed increasing in seconds from 15 to 28 knots, often with torrential rain. We no longer had the comfort of sea room, and were also sailing on the wind.

In the event, having turned for Port Victoria we were able to sail towards our destination. But the excitement was far from over – on taking *Pipistrelle* head to wind to drop the main just outside the pass, we found the steering had failed. We were about a mile upwind of rocks, but in only 35m of water, so dropped the anchor. It was too risky for another yacht to tow us in so – again with the help of other cruisers



*Pipistrelle under sail. Photo
Ingemar and Ann-Britt*



*Under tow
into Port
Victoria*

– we organised a commercial tug to take us to the quarantine area off Port Victoria, where we dropped the anchor one last time.

Once we had sorted ourselves out and ascertained that the steering had failed due to a damaged spline joint on the rod steering, we visited the various yards to decide where to haul and effect repairs. Gondwana Marine Services in Providence was exactly what we were looking for. General Manager Rajen Naidu, from Mauritius where he has his own boat building yard, had been seconded to Gondwana

*Being lifted
at Gondwana
Marine Services*





Port Victoria and Eden Island from Copolia viewpoint

Marine to develop a brand new yard. He understood precisely what needed doing, arranged accommodation for us while *Pipistrelle* was ashore, and had a skilled workforce with GRP and engineering expertise. The 150 ton travel lift and concrete hardstanding were both new. A replacement 40mm propeller shaft was ordered for us from Mauritius, together with antifouling. In their specialised workshop the rudder was split open and the temporary repair work – which had stood the test of a 1000 mile passage – removed and then expertly repaired, so that it is now watertight and immensely strong. The expertise and attention to detail provided by Gondwana Marine were first class.

We sailed from the Seychelles to Madagascar and on to Durban to have outstanding electronic issues from the lightning strike repaired. Equipment failures such as the anemometer were still causing problems, and the last piece of electronic equipment was not fitted until False Bay.

After crossing the South Atlantic via St Helena, we spent three very enjoyable weeks at Jacaré, Cabedelo in northeast Brazil, en route to Grenada where we crossed our outward circumnavigation track. *Pipistrelle* held up extremely well on these long passages. We have renewed confidence in ourselves, in *Pipistrelle*, and especially in the high standard of Wauquiez build quality. The integrity of the keel and hull is intact, and *Pipistrelle* herself remains structurally sound, as borne out by the survey report issued in the Seychelles.

We are well aware that without the help, support and expertise of all the other yachts and crews in Chagos, recovery would have had an entirely different outcome. We cannot stress strongly enough how overwhelmed we were by the unparalleled camaraderie, team spirit, generosity, friendship and thoughtfulness of our fellow cruisers. This was a small part of the international cruising community coming together and

showing itself at its best. In turn, as one would expect, we demonstrated our appreciation in many different ways both at the time and afterwards by paying for materials used, extending hospitality and entertaining. So it is exceptionally sad that the whole affair was marred by social media and online sensationalism, and that the actions of a few turned the camaraderie of the many sour, leaving such a bitter aftertaste. One year on, we hope that we can put the incidents of 2015 behind us, move on, enjoy cruising again, and trust that others will let us do just that.



No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

John Donne (1572–1631)

