

A voyage in odd times

Hamble River, UK to Nevis, West Indies

Ben Coulson

As a new member of the Club, it seems appropriate to introduce myself, vessel and crew: *Midnight* is a capable 42 foot, round bilge, long keel steel ketch. Built in Belgium in the mid 1970's, she's simple, strong, well-mannered and now set up for long spells of independence. She has been a good cruising home for just over 20 years in which time we've cruised about the North Atlantic. Niki, my wife, is a natural traveller - trusting and gutsy. The same can be said for John, the ship's cat. Both came aboard in the Canary Islands and have made *Midnight* their home, Niki 14 years ago, John 17 months ago. I was brought up in Portsmouth in a sailing family. *Hannah* our 9 ton Hillyard was our happy family home from home. The way of life had strong appeal and aged 18, I set out to find a way to live it.

I warn the reader that I am not a natural writer: Schoonerman Sterling Hayden states in his book *Wanderer* that 'writing and wandering don't mix'. I think maybe he was right.

Prior to our testing time in the UK, with the onset of Covid and an ever changing maze of restrictions everywhere, we had maintained a state of readiness, always keeping a wary eye open for restrictions that had potential to trap us. In the spring of 2020, at short notice, we had left the West Indies and sailed back to the UK. For most of 2021 we remained in various Canary Islands because my father had received a serious diagnosis and I wanted to be on the east side of the Atlantic, at least until we knew father's prospects. In the dry of Tenerife we undertook a refit of the decks. By early October 2021 it had become clear that we needed to return to UK to be with father and family. We wound up the refit, stowed all and left Tenerife for the UK. The usual brisk NE winds, current and seas dictated we track close hauled north west to the region of the Azores until we ran into winds with a west component



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to take us northeast for the rest of the trip. In a sudden and heavy gale in mid-October just northeast of the Azores, the self-steering rudder snapped at the waterline. Fortunately, *Midnight* is quite easily balanced and steered herself for the rest of the way. Neither barometer nor sky had indicated that blow until it was virtually upon us. We arrived in Lymington on 26 October. With the kind permission of Frank and Jo Esson (RCC) and the Hamble River authority, while *Melmore* was in refit, we made our winter base on her mid river pontoon mooring just off the Jolly Sailor pub .

0840 28 April 2022 on a bright and chilly morning, without last goodbyes we cast off. No farewells other than a wave from friends who noticed us leaving. Captain and crew had Covid. Given the varied stance towards the wretched bug and those with it, we had kept to ourselves.

The unscheduled five month winter stay in UK had, for good reason, been harrowing. It was now high time to go, to return to our life, rhythm and peace aboard. It didn't matter that *Midnight's* bottom was foul from five months of inactivity, it was time for her and us to leave.

Spirits rose as we chugged off down the River Hamble . The loose plan (all our plans are loose) was to go to Newtown Creek or the Beaulieu River to stow, look at the weather forecast and set off when it felt right. It was good to be back on the river which since childhood adventures afloat has been a favourite.

The next morning was bright and fresh. Feeling somewhat energised after an idyllic night, the mooring was slipped. Time to get going on the first of the Solent
Midnight, a 42' long keel steel ketch



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ebb and the very light northerly breeze. Off West Lepe Niki placed the lei given to us by Frank and Jo Esson on the water. The lei is a garland of local flowers and vines presented as a token of love and affection. As the vessel departs on its voyage the lei is placed gently on the water to ensure one's safe return. This Fijian tradition is accompanied by the short but beautiful song *Isa Lei* sung by those left behind on the beach. Frank spent time sailing in the Pacific and has adopted the tradition, one that we now like too.

In the early afternoon with the Needles, family and friends astern, *Midnight* headed slowly west under full sail. At about 1700 off St Alban's head the breeze died and with a strong foul tide we motored to nearby Lulworth Cove. We do not have an electronic autopilot and do NOT enjoy steering under power. We dropped anchor at dusk, one of three anchored yachts. Seemingly nothing of the place had changed since our last visit in 1998. Lovely. The plan: to wait peacefully here for wind.

By 1000 the next morning, Saturday, Lulworth was filling up with sun bathers, back packers, bikers, hikers, campers, paddle boarders, swimmers, motor boats, more yachts and armies of jet skis. I put on clothes. By 1500 Lulworth Cove was stuffed. Seemingly everyone had high spirits, ice creams, speakers and phones. Carnival time. After the day of carnival and with the prospect of a Sunday carnival we decided to leave, regardless of the lack of wind. After 90 minutes of motoring the anchor was dropped in five meters in good holding, just 100 meters SW of Weymouth castle. We stayed there for two very quiet nights. We feel the anchorage would make good refuge in strong SW through N winds.

On the morning of 3 May, with still no prospect of usable wind but with a strong urge to get going, we weighed anchor and motored for 15 noisy hours across Lyme Bay. At 0245 just two miles south of Salcombe a light, land scented north breeze came up. We shut the engine off, hoisted all sail and engaged wind steering. Finally, having made some westing we were sailing, in silence, under a clear starry sky, on a flat sea on course for Ushant. Bliss.

20 hours later and with only a very light north breeze the iron horse was on again to help push us around Ushant on the last of the ebb. Finally, with Ushant astern and a fair tide we stopped the engine. It wasn't started again for 41 days.

With Ushant light dipping below the horizon astern it really felt like we were at last on our way, albeit in very light airs due to the high pressure system just to the west. Progress was slow but steady. For the next five days or so with light breezes from E, SE, S, SW, we stayed west of the main shipping route. On 11 May, day six in Biscay, about 60 miles north of Cape Finisterre, the forecast NNW F4 sprung up. We set No. 2 Genoa (known as the Tractor because it really pulls well) on a pole to starboard. Under full main, mizzen and staysail *Midnight* bound along on a glorious reach in a moderate sea at about hull speed for the first time on the trip.

This was becoming our slowest crossing of Biscay so far and we had slipped back into our passage making routines and rhythm. There was good opportunity to rest,

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start to reflect and to shake off the Covid bug that had accompanied us from Hamble. Uncharacteristically, I had been feeling cold and quite drained physically and mentally.

Since leaving the English Channel Niki had obtained a weather map via HF radio at three day intervals. She had recently acquired the ability to obtain

GRIB files gratis using a pactor modem linked to the SSB. The availability of the weather information has literally revolutionised decision making at sea and is a very welcome change to guesswork or the excellent *Atlantic Pilot Atlas* on which I had previously based decisions during ocean passages. I still use the *Pilot Atlas* for passage planning.

Our life aboard at sea follows a simple pattern. Power consumption is kept to a minimum daily consumption of 10 – 20AH; the GPS is generally off, in traffic zones the AIS receiver is generally on. *Midnight* has an LED mast head tricolour light, no refrigeration or electric pumps. Power at sea is generated through two small solar panels and an Ampair towing generator recently gifted from Frank Esson's *Melmore* for higher latitudes where the solar panels are not effective. In colder climates cooking is on the Reflex diesel drip feed cabin heater or the Jotul wood burning stove. Both have iron hot plates. Availability of fuel dictates which stove is connected to the single chimney. When a cabin stove is not in use we cook on a Shipmate paraffin stove, which is generally lit twice daily. Two thermos flasks are filled with hot water in the morning and topped up on the evening lighting. I have lived with paraffin stoves for more



Gentle progress across Biscay



Niki and John fishing in Biscay

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than 50 years and now understand them. Paraffin under pressure burns as hot as gas. Having a paraffin stove avoids the bureaucracy related to gas and issues that can arise when refilling or exchanging bottles abroad. Routinely we carry 120l paraffin, enough for two years.

Food is preserved by jarring, drying and pickling. We make chutneys and jams when fruits and vegetables are in plentiful supply and carry lots of rice, lentils, pasta and other dried foods. Most unchilled eggs keep for a month or more without varnishing etc. Potatoes, onions and cabbage that have never been chilled can last for several months, depending on climate. When fish is plentiful, surplus is canned. In cold climates we find the often abundant naturally oily fish sustaining and warming. In warm weather Niki propagates micro greens - enough for a small but vital daily salad. Energy from these is very noticeable indeed.

On passage we exercise by running on the spot and practice breathing exercises. Handling the gear is also good exercise.

We do not keep up communications when at sea: for us most of the point of being at sea is to be independent, out of touch and, we hope, mostly out of mind. We do now have the capability for email via HF radio but shall not utilise that until we are again in remote locations for long spells. I find the level of communication now considered normal intolerable.

Crew member John

Time at sea generally revolves around food, reading and just being. John, the cat, has adapted to the life well. He gets very excited when we catch fish. Apart from occasionally reefing the main, changing a headsail or tending fishing hand lines our time is our own. Watches in daylight are informal. We keep an unconscious eye open. At night one of us is usually up. Fortunately Niki tends to sleep early, from say 2000 to 0200 ships time. I prefer to sleep the last part of the night. I generally sit to starboard at the chart table just below the companionway facing forward through the cosy saloon. Niki sleeps to port, John on the chart table or at my feet. From my vantage point I see the clearly defined rounded hull sides, the extent of our world. When at sea for long spells we feel we are in another dimension, time is uncluttered,



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Ben and Niki celebrating Ben's 20 years of living aboard *Midnight*

thoughts clear. Generally we feel somewhat euphoric, no anxiety, no personal or third party expectations to fulfil. I value the complete lack of imposition and lack of any financial considerations.

The glorious reach southwest on the NNW F4 lasted about 24 hours. As forecast the wind had slowly veered to the NE and a following sea had come up. Niki received a seven day forecast that unfortunately indicated strong southerly winds in a couple of days. Yuk! It made sense to get south without going more west, so we gybed all and made good rolly progress SSE about 80 miles off the coast of Portugal. On 13 May the wind moderated. At lunch in glorious sunshine in the cockpit we opened bubbles and other treats to celebrate the 20 years to the day of living aboard *Midnight*. Good old *Midnight*. Late that night the wind dropped to almost nothing and then to nothing at all. Late the next morning a slight SSE breeze came up. By midnight with a SSW 3+ we were close hauled going south east, NOT the direction we wanted but preferable to any alternative. With a beautiful, almost full moon, we made towards Cape St Vincent. The next day, Sunday 15 May, 12 days into the trip from Weymouth, we took stock of provisions. We check the drinking water level on Sundays at sea. We had 600l - 3/4 tank.

On a visit to the rail at about midday I noticed small tuna following close in our wake. In quick succession we caught three small (four kg) tuna, ate very well and spent the afternoon canning the rest. John loves raw tuna. Interestingly, the tuna were only attracted to the lure when competing for it. Clearly competition outweighed caution. At about midnight, with a crystal clear sky and beautiful full moon high to starboard, I could see a myriad of small tuna to port, odd ones glinting in the moonlight as they swam, apparently acres of them as far as I could see. The higher I climbed the mizzen mast the further I could see them. Incredible, swimming,

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Tuna for lunch, supper and canning

Hopefully, we were now in the north element winds common in this area. It felt as if we were again on our way and in the right direction.

We had left England with open minds as to stops. If we had been nearer to Bayona when off northwest Spain with the forecast of brisk south element winds we might have put in there. We love the comfortable Monte Real Club de Yates, the anchorage and town. Likewise we might have called in to Madeira or Tenerife if we had ended up much closer to either. As it happened on 21 May (day 18) we found ourselves 110 miles from both Madeira to the north and Tenerife to the south. With the good breeze and in good spirits we chose then to continue to the West Indies. The Atlantic high seemed to be establishing in the vicinity of the Azores and as we have found on previous 'late' east - west Atlantic crossings in March, April, May or June we anticipated an almost

seemingly with purpose, en masse in the direction southeast that we were making. Our position, the Bay of Gibraltar, approximately 145 miles WNW of the straits of Gibraltar. Were these small tuna migrating? to the Med? The very light breeze had veered as forecast to the north and by lunch time next day we were bounding southwest on a NW3 with one reef in the main. Hurrah.

'Her sails from heaven received no motion,
Her keel was steady in the ocean'

Anon



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direct route (without the usual need to drop well south to stay out of the calms near or in the high). Some people show surprise with our 'late' crossings; the fact is that we generally have good 'late' crossings, I think at least as good as those that cross in what has become the accepted best time some months earlier. My stance is that we go when we can, the mail ships did it, we can.

For the 12 days since the decision to press on to the West Indies we had averaged 99 miles/24hrs, including four quiet days with 40 to 68 mile runs - reasonable progress given the thick Hamble weed and my uncharacteristic lassitude when it came to sail changing. I was content with progress, had recovered from Covid and had managed to process some thoughts and emotions from the time in UK. It was good to be looking ahead instead of reflecting on recent sad family events in UK and the worrying developments unfolding in Europe. At last we were beginning to blossom. We had recovered our equilibrium.

Peaceful isolation and communing with nature has progressively heightened our senses and reduced tolerance to interference/nonsense. Sea time has become a necessity. Daily issues, sometimes challenges, at sea (generally weather related) are real but not resented. I'll happily rise to any challenge at sea. After a long spell of sea time we feel refreshed, pure, calm, thoroughly content, I suppose - happy.

Midnight is our key to this state, we value her immensely and over two decades, have personalised her, as a home and vehicle. She's set up for high latitudes, does well in the tropics and the ice. Our world is DIY, everything simple.

We can stay off DHL routes and remain independent. At 42 feet with heavy displacement she comfortably carries provisions, fuel, water, gear and spares enough for long spells without compromising living space/quality of life.

All her gear and equipment is good quality and heavy duty. Maintenance is simple and replacements only needed infrequently.

2 June, day 31, I noticed, as hoped that the long green Hamble river weed had all but gone. *Midnight* had last slipped 5,600 miles/20 months ago at the Elephant Boat yard in September of 2020. From what I could see the antifouling looked pretty intact. Daily runs improved. In the consistent winds lines of seaweed had



Making good progress

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formed, fishing was good, the seas larger and more even. The breeze had stiffened to a constant NE4 and we bounded happily along. With the increased wind and seas the self-steering was having some difficulty. A reef in the main and some stiff plastic taped to the trailing edge of the wind vane, to increase impulses, seemed to make the necessary difference. A few days before departure, in Jo and Frank Esson's garden, we had hurriedly laminated and shaped a plywood self-steering trimming rudder to replace the one broken off in the gale near the Azores in October 2021. I had reduced the length by 15 cm in the hope of reducing the likelihood of breakage - the reduction was a mistake. In due course we will extend it by a few cms.

On 8 June we gybed all to head south west. We were quite far north and with a seven day forecast of E4 ish a broad reach poled out to port made sense to track south west. Confused seas suggested a counter current, the attendant increase in apparent wind made it necessary to put a reef in the mizzen to further assist the self-steering that was again struggling. The more lively motion over the last few days had disturbed sediment in the water tank to the extent that the tank water became quite murky. We decanted four jerry cans of drinking water from the tank and for the rest of the trip syphoned off clear water daily from the surface of the water in the cans. On 13 June, with stiffening easterly winds, we gybed all onto starboard to commence our broad reach WNW in to Nevis. At noon on 14 June we had 240 nm of lively sailing left to run. We had had some mild squalls at night and periods of less wind due to convection, in general progress was good. With some good daily runs, 160+nm, the daily average had risen to 120. In the early hours of 16 June (day 46) we rounded the south of Nevis into its delicately scented lee. We dropped sail, started the engine and picked up a mooring off Pinneys beach. The lamp was raised in the fore triangle and we turned in.



I awoke from deep sleep with the uneasy and mixed feelings often felt after waking from a long night of tumultuous dreams. A swim, friendly check in and a few cold beers ashore quickly assuaged those feelings.

This voyage closed the circle of a number of unplanned voyages. Starting from St Kitts and Nevis in mid-April 2020, where uncomfortable curfews and lock downs and the threat of a navigation ban had left me in no doubt that we must leave, pronto.

25 months and 11300 miles later, we were VERY happily back in what we consider home waters.