

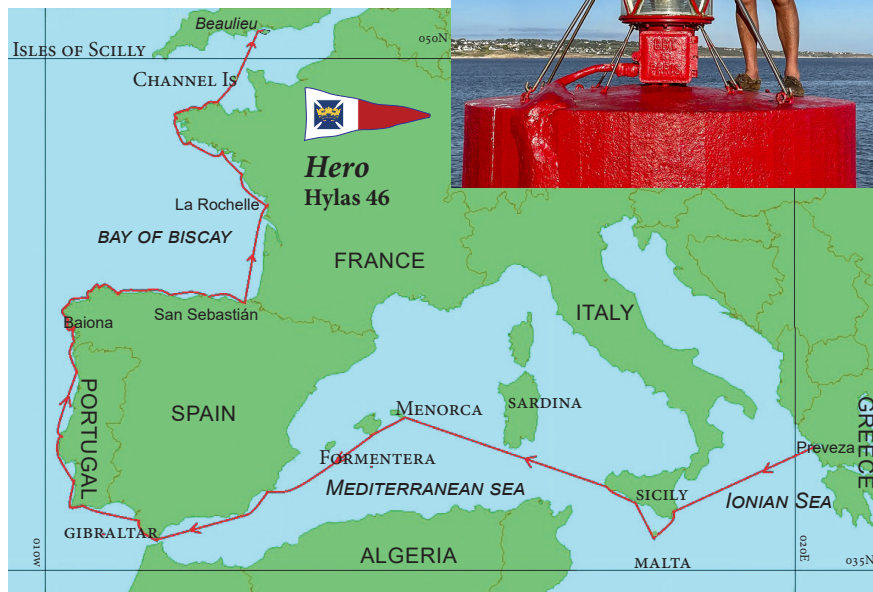
Rolling home across the sea

The Ionian to the Solent

William with Susannah Garnett

Many accounts in *Roving Commissions* are of sailing in home waters, in rain, sleet and gales (which we have read whilst smugly basking in the glorious heat of the Mediterranean and Aegean). Surprisingly, I persuaded Susannah last Christmas, that if we were ever going to return to cold water sailing, now was the time. This coincided with the then requirement that UK boats needed to be 'home' before the end of June 2022 to avoid a further VAT charge. I was tired of the heat; butter melting even before breakfast.

We launched *Hero* on 22 April at Preveza. After a couple of days getting her shipshape, we set off in the crisp early dawn bound for Ortigia, Sicily. Having met my brother, who was grieving the sudden death of his wife the day before, and offering what solace we could, (the cockpit of *Hero* providing a secure and



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homely feel especially when overseas), we needed to set sail for Grand Harbour, Malta. The country's naval history and the two great sieges are commemorated with pride, in stark contrast to Malta's present reputation for political and financial corruption often associated with 'offshore' tax havens.



Icarus and the Temple of Concordia, Agrigento

Next stop Sicily where Porto Empedocle gives access to Agrigento, and when you look beyond the southern Sicilian poverty, compounded by it being the off loading point for immigrants rescued at sea, it has a simple charm about it, and the pizza was as good as anywhere.

Agrigento visited, we anchored off the harbour entrance at Mazara del

Vallo, sailed on to enjoy the grandeur of Marsala, especially the villas built by the producers of the fortified wine. Florio, founded in 1833 and regarded as the best, still pumps small tankers full of the stuff, many bound for France.

The following day, joined by friends we arrived off the entrance at Favignana (an Egadi island, off Sicily) to discover, prior to taking down the mainsail, that the gear shift was locked in neutral. We again took the morse control to pieces as we sailed in circles outside the harbour, to discover a tiny split pin was blocking the lever.

From Favignana we sailed to Mahon (Menorca) without our planned stop as the forecast off Sardinia showed the predicted NE was due to back further and develop into a Mediterranean early summer gale. The northerly airstream was coming

across the Pyrenees and through the evening and night thunderstorms raged to the south of us, as we close reached with three reefs at speeds of up to 13.7 knots. The lightning bolts must have been many miles away, but were daunting. We have bad memories of being caught in thunderstorms.



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By midday the following day it was blowing a full gale, NNE but being early in the season we found a berth stern to the main quay at Mahon, a magnificent harbour to enter, even more so, in a gale.

RCC members seldom talk of the sickness and exhaustion associated with a couple of nights offshore in a gale. Again I was reminded that, for all the talk of beautiful moonlight and isolation associated with sailing across distant oceans, for me (I confess) it's the leaving and arriving, with the anticipation of both, that I really love most when cruising.

One reason I had been keen to come to the Mediterranean early this year was to enjoy the wildflowers and bird life, as summer moved steadily northwards. The Balearics are a key stepping stone for the migrations up from Africa, and the hedgerows were full of birds, whilst swallows and swifts screeched above us. We explored inland on scooters, including to the convent at Mount Toro, the highest point, from which one can see the entire island coast. The fields were full of huge cows consuming the abundance of wildflowers and grasses.



That evening we hosted Andrew Eddy (RCC) who was sailing down to Sardinia. A happy time was had, and it was a great opportunity to clear out those drinks that one buys abroad, and which never taste so good when you get them home. Having talked to his and our crew about the RCC including the associated flag etiquette of being a member, I then shared with them the 'Jewel in the Crown' (the Songbook). We sang late into the night with the fervour of those who had endured a tough trip.

With the northerly backing and easing, we roared down to Isla Cabrera hooking one of the migrating tuna. A beautiful sunset, followed by a silent night on one of the buoys with the moon above us and stars bursting into life, was memorable.

With light easterlies, a full day's motoring brought us to Formentera. At anchor on the west side of the isthmus I watched, throughout the afternoon and evening, as a procession of swallows flew north, having made their first land stop since Africa. This happy sight was in sad contrast to several migrating birds we had seen desperately trying to fly north in the gale force winds between Sicily and Mahon. Not many could have made it (too high they made no progress and too low they risked being caught by the waves) and although they tried to land on our decks, the weather was too fierce. Heart breaking.

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The better weather offered a dream ticket of southerlies backing NE. From our pre-dawn departure we relished a champagne sailing day, reaching at a steady 7 knots hour after hour, under a cloudless sky and eating tuna carpaccio (one to cherish when the boat bills arrive). We anchored at twilight off the southwest side of Illa de Tabarca west of Alicante, (some respite from the north easterlies but the swell creeps into the bay), then after a short night, pushed on to Cartagena, goose winged in F6 dodging the fish and mussel farms.



Enjoying tuna carpaccio underway

48 hours later another full day brought us back to the Playa de los Genoveses, just east of Cabo de Gata. However the waves from a NE breeze followed by the swell creeping round the headland once the wind started to blow from the southwest made for an uncomfortable 24 hours. We did have the pleasure of meeting Mark and Jo Downer (RCC), who were sailing *Pepper* east on their retirement cruise.

We can never find anywhere pleasant to stop when going west so we pushed on to Gibraltar, at one point surrounded by a huge pod of juvenile orcas (slightly disconcerting, as the adults looked on from a distance), to anchor off La Linia outside the Alcaidesa marina. We needed to check out of Schengen so walked to the Gibraltar border to clock out explaining that we had ‘intentions’ to travel to Tangiers.

Intentions change, and we left *Hero* at Queensway marina in Gibraltar.

Leaving *Hero*, we rushed home to a Sea View Yacht Club regatta to celebrate the centenary of the 1922 Mermaids, and the Platinum Jubilee. We had restored *Zara* our 1922 Mermaid for the centenary. Great work once again by Will and David Squibb, who in 2015 restored *Hero*.

We had always expected the tough bit of the return voyage to the UK to be the route north up the Iberian Atlantic



Zara, our 1922 Mermaid

William with Susannah Garnett

coast. The Azores high combined with the thermal low in central Spain blows the Nortada down the coast, bending into the Algarve at some force particularly in the afternoon. If trying to keep out of the wind and away from the 'nibbling orcas', you have to wend your way through a morass of fishing pots.

Back in Gibraltar and a quick drink with Andy Bristow (RCC) and his young crew, we anchored in the sunset off Punta de Getares to get out of the 41°C heat in Queensway Marina.

After an early start into 20 knots W the wind died, and we motored close inshore out of the way of the orcas to pass just sixty metres off Cape Trafalgar. The destination was Rota, the Spanish naval base leased to Nato forces. Our inshore plan was seriously undermined when we realised, just before we became entangled, that even if you keep east of the cardinal mark of Conil de la Frontera you will find yourself trapped in a line of fishing buoys/nets running the whole way to the beach, (note the community edit on Navionics). The three mile westward detour undermines hugging the cape at Trafalgar, where you have to punch the prevailing south running (wind driven) current of three knots.

Arriving at Rota and anchoring off the beach we were proud not only to see that HMS *Prince of Wales* was the lead ship of the Nato base, but that her ensign came down bang on 2100, without noise or drama. By contrast, the US battleships take their ensigns down at actual sunset, loudly playing a tinny recorded version of their national anthem, which they switch off as soon as the ensign is down.

We had a long day's motoring to Portimao, followed by a delightful day, reprovisioning by dinghy up river and walking on the cliffs above the anchorage

Te Vega anchored off Portimao



on the east side of the entrance. The beach is immaculate and walking above the beaches looking west to Cape St Vincent, at sunset is a treat.

This was the first time we had anchored amongst a large group of yachts since 2019, led by *Te Vega*, now the largest gaff Schooner (156ft and built in 1930). Her beauty heightened our sadness at the sinking on the same day of *Eleanora*, the modern exact replica of *Westward*, the American racing yacht.

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The forecast of easterly winds meant that we charged off round Cape St Vincent and close reached towards Sines on the Atlantic coast of Portugal, before the wind died away and we found ourselves in thick fog for the first time since we rounded Finistrerre in 2018. To me it felt good. Sadly, there is little that is positive about Sines other than that it is convenient for those going north or south (no wonder Vasco De Gama was so keen to explore new places).

After a stop off Cascais, a further day's motoring saw us crawling up the coast, close in, bound for Baiona via Leixoes. It is surprising how the Nortada falls away if you keep close in. We were fortunate to have no encounters with orcas, and although we saw a few dolphins, the main joy was the bird life. Cory's shearwaters breed on the Ilha da Berlenga, just off the coast west of Peniche, and they accompanied us north from Cape St Vincent up to Vigo. For such solitary birds, they were remarkably sociable and inquisitive, flying close to the boat, their wingtips just off the water's edge as miraculously they were lifted by the waves. Such is the richness of these waters that Manx shearwaters, the bulk of which breed in Skomer, undertake the 1500km flight to feed in the Galician fishing grounds before returning to support their solitary chick.

There are few places offering a warmer welcome than the Monte Real Club de Yates in Baiona. The medieval castle walls in which it is situated, the impeccable service of the staff, its location looking out across the harbour, the infamous G&Ts, great value Spanish brandy and Galician fare are a delight.

We hosted lunch off Las Islas Cíes to our beloved friend Alfredo Lagos, whose father was well known to so many RCC and RYS members and where Alfredo and his brother run what is now a fourth generation boatyard (clients included the former King of Spain – until the yard had the cheek to send him a bill). Climbing to the top of the island and working off the near deadly excess of food, the view of the beach is spectacular, as are the granite sculptures created by the elements.

Las Islas Cíes



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Next stop Muros a few miles further north, where we were piloted in by the local dolphin. The following morning we were woken by the blasts that announce a feria - Corpus Christi. Large, handheld rockets were lit from the rocket man's cigarette ... cool. Fresh cut flowers were laid in ornate patterns along the pavements, and in the evening the town processed behind the cross and banners of the local church, with prayers being said, as the town band provided musical accompaniment. The marina in Muros proved a great place to leave *Hero*.

Returning two weeks later, and believing that we had now left the sandy rain of Africa behind, Susannah washed the boat from the tip of the mast to the deck and mentioned to me that she had noticed that the top spreader end cap on the port side was loose (we had clashed in Eos in 2021

and Muros' floral decoration celebrating Corpus Christi

with a neighbouring boat). I thought the fitting must have been like that for 18 months, it was something that I was going to fix on our return – big mistake. Rounding Finisterre in next to no wind was a relief, but the forecast afternoon NE5 soon kicked in and we found ourselves beating up to Camarinas in NE6 on a silver sea. As we tacked in close amongst the rocks off Cabo Touriñán, conscious of so many British naval ships that have been wrecked in this area, I looked up to see that the leeward cap shroud had popped out of the spreader and was flying loose. With the rocks ahead and needing to tack, Susannah shot out of the cockpit to rig up the dyneema runner and spinnaker halyard to the base of the shroud, before we were able to roll up the jib and drop the main. It was a near disaster.

After four hours of arduous and slow motoring into Camariñas, in a bouncy sea, worried about the rig, rather than go to the marina or the anchorage to the northeast, we went into a bay just east of Punta de Monte Farelo. After some tough leverage to loosen the Staylock (the name is accurate) bottle screw, I climbed the mast and reattached the shroud into the spreader, a temporary fix.

A Coruña was, as always charming, but as we needed to go to the Selden agent, we spent the night to the north off Sada Marina in the Ría de Betanzos. The heat was considerable (as we watched the Wimbledon men's final), but the sun was eclipsed in an instant by a bank of fog, an ongoing theme along the north coast.



Muros' floral decoration celebrating Corpus Christi

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At Cedeira we walked along the Ensenada de Esteiro, after having navigated as far as possible up the attractive Rio das Forcadas, on the rising tide. We then met with Charlie Watson (RCC) and his crew on the glorious *Saecwen* for drinks in the sun whilst the main bay was still shrouded in fog.

With northeasterlies and easterlies forecast for the coming week (all the way up wind to San Sebastian), we pushed off into 28 knots but with a clear sky, to find the wind easing, but the fog returning. Whilst historically we have always dreaded fog, we felt reassured by the 'See me', AIS and radar. We arrived in the evening emerging from the fog bank off Ribadeo, one of the great cities of the northern coast and the boundary between Galicia and Asturias. The marina is friendly and efficient, but shallow, so enter above half tide. The town is, as the pilot says, luxurious.

After a twelve mile yomp amongst fields full of birds and butterflies, we left to go east, poking our nose in at Puerto De Viavéz before a night moored behind the harbour wall at Lluarca.

When we had come south around the Bay of Biscay in 2017, the northeasterlies made life easy, and we didn't notice the swell or waves, so it is better to do the circuit in a clockwise southerly direction on the back of the high pressure that swerves round the bay, and on return wait for the low pressure southwesterly back north across the bay.

The challenge of the north coast, leaving aside fog, is the access to the smaller Rias, where the entrance is often shallow and the Ria empties into the prevailing onshore northeasterly. Neither leaving nor arriving is pleasant in those circumstances, despite my affection for both. However, we succeeded in sneaking into the Ría de Villaviciosa just before high water, being sucked into the narrow channel, before anchoring just above the small marina, in the 3m patch. The Navionics community notes that others were chased away by river police, but we had a wonderful evening surrounded by kayaks and fine sculling boats; enjoying the waders and other



birdlife that appeared as both water and people disappeared.

Despite leaving right on the high water early the next morning, there was a standing (and unwelcome) wave at the entrance. We spent a long day beating into a NE6 up to Santander.

We loved Santander's sandy beach anchorage on the starboard side Susannah beating into F6

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at the entrance, and even more so the shallow anchorage behind Punta Ravirosa. We were there for the weekend coinciding with the festival of the sea, when the virgin is taken on the local fishing boats around the harbour. We dressed overall in celebration and anchored off the Real Club Marítimo. Mornings and nights were spent enjoying the old city and the afternoons were spent anchored amongst literally hundreds of other boats south of the southern peninsula.

One disappointment of sailing in Spain is that the yacht clubs are not, as a general rule, welcoming. They are more social than sailing clubs and pretty standoffish. One exception is in our beloved Castro Urdiales, our next stop. The club, which offers moorings and a 24 hour launch service, was very welcoming.

We skipped past Bermeo and pushed on to Guetaria, where there is a single visitor's pontoon immediately on the port side on entry. The harbour remains devoted to the trawlers harvesting the best anchovies in the world from the Cantabrian sea. The sepia photographs on the walls of restaurants show huge fleets of sailing fishing boats in the late 19th century doing the same, and women on the seashore hand filleting these anchovies, as they still do today in local fish markets.

Arriving in San Sebastián initially we were turned away from the tiny inner harbour with its ten berths, as being too big (14 metres) but after we explained that we were exhausted because "we had sailed from Greece" (which we sort of had), Susana, the old fishing port officer, allowed us to stay a maximum of two nights. Each morning we walked the Playa de Concha (one of Europe's best) along with hundreds of others and swam in the warm waters in the afternoons when eating and shopping was in forced abeyance. It is a really wonderful place.

Our great nephews, Oliver and Nathan, joined us for their first offshore passage. I explained to them that although the wind was set F4 NW, (we were bound for Île de Ré), life never quite worked out like this, and we were more likely to be close hauled than on a close reach, and for it to blow harder.

Sunset in the Cantabrian Sea



After a sunny and light breeze start in the afternoon and a fine sunset, the weather deteriorated. In the twilight and darkness we were close hauled, with the seas building.

The night was tolerable but pretty rough and an eye opener for the boys arriving on deck in the darkness and rain, so arrival into the lock at San Martin on

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Île de Ré was heavenly. It is one of our favourite ports. After sea wall jumping and tandem cycling, we waved the boys off, and we then spent a couple of days off Île de Yeu in the anchorage to the south (Anse de Vielles) and at Joinville enjoying the company of Nick and Sue Nottingham (RCC). We loved the weather, the food, flowers (especially hollyhocks) and witnessing the pursuit by the sophisticated Parisiennes of the simplicity of 'Les Vacances' with their aged Renault 4s and Mini Mokes, parked in their shrub filled, low maintenance gardens.



Arriving at La Rochelle is always a treat. The grandeur of the St Nicholas tower, the resplendent limestone enhancing the architecture, the general sophistication and the living history that means the locks continue to play a key part, are a joy to behold. In the last couple of years the city has had a tremendous makeover. The area around the harbour has been pedestrianised, and now has the feel of cities in the south of France. We left *Hero* for three weeks at the Bassin de Chalutiers.

Arriving back in late August, an 0415 departure saw us motoring up to Île d'Yeu and a couple of days in full sun with that huge low horizon, reminiscent of sailing on the English east coast. Continuing to sail northwest, we gave thanks at the church on Houat and spent the night in La Trinité where, to our surprise, the charge for picking up a mooring buoy was the same as a marina berth. Once again, we had problems with our gear shift which we discovered just after we had cast off and started to wash down through the moored yachts (always check you have thrust before you cast off). Remarkably no damage (other than to the marriage) so we made for Port Tudy, one of my favourite spots in southern Brittany. Neaps enabled us to take the inner buoy in the outer harbour.

I had wanted to stop in the Glénans not least because my father had died 25 years ago almost to the day, and he had spent much of his war in SOE ferrying spies or dropping or collecting secret photographs (read Nevil Shute *Most Secret*) from the Helford via the Scillies into France at the Glenans. However, we were tight for time, the weather was due to change, and we were keen to get to the Scillies where we would commune with him. Sadly, it was not to be.

With the wind filling in from the northwest, we had a tremendous sail up to Audierne, joining a cluster of boats in the anchorage all set to go north through the Raz the next morning. The sun was still shining brightly, but it was blowing a full gale from the east off Lands' End, and the wind was set firmly in the east-northeast for the next five days along the southern British coast. It made sense to

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hug the North Breton coast and cross through the Channel Islands. Gale bound for a couple of days in brilliant sunshine we enjoyed walking, in particular up to Paluden (the French and Spanish really do mark their footpaths extremely well).

With northeasterlies still blowing and rumours of how grim it was out at sea, we were getting worried that we would get stuck, so we motored out just after low tide through the Chanel de la Malouine and had a tremendous beat up to and through the Canal de Batz. Tacking *Hero* (14m) on a dead beat up that channel was fun. We were too late to get to Morlaix so we anchored off La Palud de Kerarmel, next to a classic Breton fishing boat, and went in through the lock the following morning.



Pierre Chanteau and his eyes

of avoiding the easterlies, we beat up to Ile de Bréhat and spent a day at anchor in Port de la Corderie. We felt consoled at our failure to get to the Scillies by the quality of the walks on Bréhat, the jagged rocks appearing as mountains at lower water.

From there we were back on the 'No. 9' route home, stopping in St Peter Port where we met Susannah's niece and her children and took them for a sail to Sark. We then sailed up in the dark with ominous lightning all around for a short night at Bray.

We enjoyed superb cruising across the Channel next day, in a SE 16 knots, average speed eight knots, catching the rising tide in through the Needles, five seasons after we had left.

Although the number of boats visiting Morlaix has declined, there is still a thriving overwintering community.

We borrowed bikes from the lockkeeper and harbour master as I wanted to visit an artist in Carantec. He has been affixing eyes to rocks and harbour walls all around Finisterre and we hoped he would have one that we might purchase.

After a couple of days

Sailing with Wolf, off Sark



Rolling home across the sea



Half-mast at Beaulieu

Our social event of the season was to be the RCC Beaulieu Meet. A key attraction of home waters is to cruise and anchor with pals. It was understandable that it was cancelled, with the death of the Queen, but it had been a key objective since we had left Greece and indeed it dictated the timetable for us getting back from La Rochelle. So we moored amongst a small group of friends for a low key unofficial gathering that enabled us to reflect on the reign of Her Majesty and to share stories amongst those who had been fortunate enough to spend any time with her, and to toast her and the King after which we sang the National Anthem. The flag etiquette during mourning, (half-mast) and during the sitting of the Accession Council (full-mast) kept us busy, but we had good reason for wearing our ensigns at night.

Reflecting also on the unexpected death of my brother's wife at the beginning of our voyage, Susannah and I were thankful for the lives of selfless service, and examples set by two great women.

Two days later as the rain tipped down and images from friends' yachts in the Mediterranean and Aegean started to flood my phone I wondered whether we had made a wise decision, but I am sure we have. We are going to make the best of colder water sailing for the next few years hence I am installing a new Mikuni heater and a new Fischer Panda generator this winter.

Our last night of the season was at Newtown. Five years on, nothing has changed. Hunkering down out of a cold northerly we enjoyed watching yachts arriving as the sun set. Cold as it was, open hatches and portholes meant we were woken in the dawn by the cry of oyster catchers and curlews. The butter at breakfast in the cockpit had just the right texture, salty, firm but spreadable.

You don't get any of that in the Mediterranean.

It was good to be home.