

Riddlers’ Reunion on *Almira* ... and then there were two

From Lymington to Dartmouth and return

John de Trafford

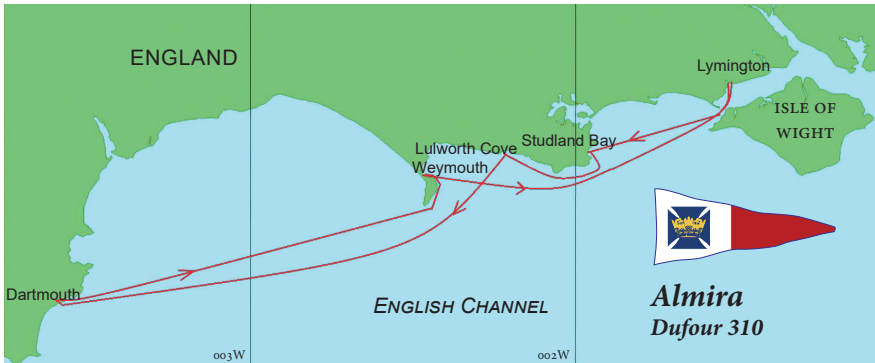
Awarded the *Founder’s Cup*



We began with four. The 2015 trip to the *Riddle of the Sands* territory was a memorable experience. David, Nigel and Olivier had all crewed with me before, but never together and the dynamic worked a treat. Olivier, a long-standing Belgian friend, could make no sense of these crazy Englishmen suggesting they should bring a pound of Raven Mixture and a No 3 Rippingille stove. He was advised to read the *Riddle of the Sands* and was soon able to join the banter.

Talk of the Riddlers’ Reunion began in 2020, but Covid ended it before it got going. 2021 was another wasted year, but by 2022 the four of us were raring to go. The old jokes were resurfacing and vows were made to reread Erskine Childers’ famous book. But a full reunion was not to be. First Olivier was forced to pull out with a heart problem and then, on the eve of departure, Nigel went down with Covid and so we were two.

In my pre-cruise instructions, I informed the Riddlers that the plan was to avoid beating into strong winds. Plan A was to head west towards Devon, Plan B



John de Trafford

was to head south across the Channel, while Plan C was to ride out westerly gales by gunk holing in Chichester Harbour. In the event we went west, perhaps swayed by the lack of strong winds in the forecast and perhaps because I had an innate preference for A over B or C.

We two remaining Riddlers set off from Lymington with a fair tide and in high spirits. *Almira* was provisioned and raring to go. Both of us had been busy in the run up to getting away and didn't feel like sailing through the night. Poole Harbour beckoned with Goathorn Point as our intended destination. The wind was F2-3 on the nose but the waves were sloppy from an earlier blow, so it was not the pleasant sailing we had anticipated.

A long starboard tack took us south of the rhumb line and gave us a first class view of Old Harry. These cliffs and stacks deserve greater acclaim than I and many other locals give them. One can be rather blasé about sights on one's doorstep and forget to appreciate them to the full. I was reflecting on this with David and making comparisons with our 'Riddle of the Sands' cruise, where the scenery had disappointed. However, David reminded me that the Frisian islands have a charm of their own, so often misty and atmospheric. He recalled anchoring in 8m, completely out of sight of land, only to be surrounded by mud banks as the tide dropped away.

On the next tack we approached almost twenty boats in Studland Bay, taking shelter from a WNW wind. A decision was made to cut short our journey and join them for the night. I normally follow the advice of not immediately writing the intended destination in the log book and substituting the word 'towards' for the word 'to'. Is this superstition or purely pragmatism? Whichever it is, a flexible approach has its advantages.

The next morning the sun lit up Old Harry with a golden glow. In 2001 UNESCO designated the coast, from Studland Bay to Exmouth, England's first natural World Heritage site. The first section, usually referred to as the Jurassic Coast, is

Early morning sunlight on Old Harry, Jurassic Coast



Riddlers' Reunion on Almira ... and then there were two

beautiful to sail along and it was indeed the plan for day two. That is until *Smit Romney*, the Lulworth Range Safety Boat, hove into view. David swore that there had been no red flag flying on St Aldhem's Head but we followed their instructions to keep south of 052 degrees, 33 minutes. As we short tacked along this boundary, we could only hope that the practice firing was for a good cause. Perhaps some brave Ukrainian service men were being trained in the use of advanced weaponry to defeat Putin?

We originally planned to sail close to the coastline and keep out of the tide. However, short tacking, five miles offshore made for much slower progress and, to cap it all, when we turned north for Lulworth Cove, the safety boat hassled us to stand on further to the west, claiming that the range boundary extends just beyond Lulworth. Only afterwards did I read in the *Cruising Companion* that yachts may be firmly 'invited' to leave the zone but they have a right of passage. That may be strictly correct but I don't believe in forcing the issue.

Lulworth Cove has an almost mythical status. I first visited it nearly 60 years ago and have returned occasionally over the years. I was expecting a crowd but was relieved to find only a handful of boats as we anchored in 4m. The rock formations around the bay didn't disappoint and soon it was out sketchbooks and to work. Some idiots with a ghetto blaster were partying on the shore, but fortunately they didn't stay long. We wrapped up the day with a fine meal of *Almira* prawn risotto, followed by berries and cream.

Lulworth Cove (David Robinson)

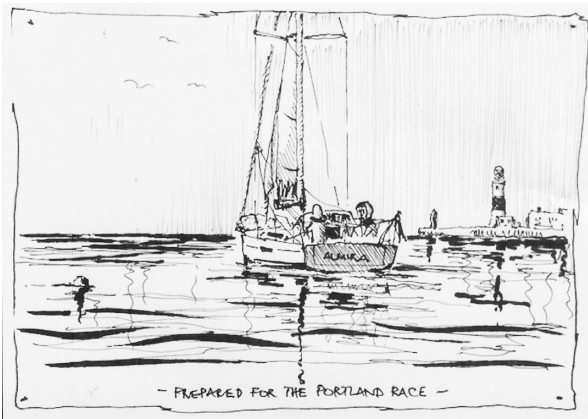


John de Trafford

There is a saying that an army marches on its stomach, I don't know the equivalent expression for yachtsmen. However, I do know that food takes on an enormous importance in planning a cruise. Part of my love of the sea is the heightened sensations, whether companionship, enjoyment of the view, or simply the food and drink.

Lulworth is known to be worth avoiding in any wind with a bit of south in it. However, the wind had blown from the west and northwest over the past two days and continued to do so through the night. Yet, despite that, we were rocked by an uncomfortable southerly swell forcing its way through the entrance. How and why it had occurred was a mystery. Wash from some distant cargo ship? But if so, why was the effect only felt at night?

The following day required an early start to catch the tide round Portland Bill. Both David and I had taken the inland passage several times but it seemed prudent to do our revision. The *Channel Cruising Companion* quotes Frank Cowper in 1893: 'I was hurled about the deck, holding onto the tiller all the time. The seas come on board fore and aft. I had no steerage way and could get no command over the boat' and the *Companion* goes on to suggest: 'wear oilskins, life jacket and safety harness (clipped on), close all hatches, engine at instant readiness – even if the sea looks moderate'.



Prepared for Portland Bill (David Robinson)

It appears that pilot books love to amplify the potential dangers of these unusual geological features, think Corryvreckan on the west coast of Scotland. However, it is better to be safe than sorry and so we were all kitted up for what was a relatively calm and uneventful rounding. The guidance was to ensure that the top

window of the lighthouse was clearly visible above the top of the obelisk and safer if at least one cable off the Bill. In practice we more than doubled that distance, while keeping a close watch for lobster pots.

The weather was fair but the wind was dropping and backing to the southwest. Our not-so-secret weapon, the Code Zero, was deployed. This is flown off a specially constructed bowsprit and can be sheeted in hard and used to windward in lighter airs. However, eventually we had to make use of the iron sail during the lulls. Our spirits were lifted when a school of porpoises appeared to starboard.

Riddlers' Reunion on Almira ... and then there were two

They glistened in the water, gracefully arching their backs as they came up for air. Sadly, they were soon gone, but left us with a conversation about the correct collective noun. Google offers a choice of school, pod, shoal, herd, gam, crowd or turmoil. You can also take your pick of plurals – porpoises, porpoise or even porpoisesa.

As the sun began to dip and the contours of the land became clearer, the moon appeared and a large herring gull decided to land on the lifebuoy. Worried he was going to poo on the deck, I tried shooping him away. However, whether hoping for food or merely hitching a ride, he was hard to shift. The wind picked up and we decided that it was another sign that Devon was making us welcome.

Not long after, we were sailing up the Dart and looking for somewhere to berth. Dart Haven Marina was not responding but a VHF call to Dart Nav resulted in us mooring up at the Town Pier, where the helpful Jo took our lines and gave us the lie of the land. At her advice, we headed to the Dartmouth Yacht Club for showers and a cold beer, followed by a meal in a local restaurant looking across the river to Kingswear. As the sun sank further in the sky, the village was illuminated in yellow, orange and finally a dusky red. All was well with the world.

The Dart is a favourite river for both David and myself. We had sailed there directly from Lymington the previous year, helped by favourable winds. Not so this time. We were unsurprised to face westerlies but what I still find puzzling is the degree to which the wind in recent years frequently gusts between F1 and F5. I don't remember it from my childhood. Is it a result of global warming or am I just guilty or wearing rose tinted spectacles when recalling the past?

We had to vacate the Town Quay by 0845 the next morning but it gave time for a quick shop in the local Co-op. A call to Liz and John Langdon (RCC), my sister and brother-in law, confirmed that we were expected for dinner that evening. Then we cast off and enjoyed the attractive motor up to Dittisham (or Ditts'm, as the locals call it). It is a picturesque spot and so, after some boat jobs, it was out sketch books and time to enjoy the lovely weather. Top of the jobs list was to replace the joker valve in the heads. David regaled me with horrific stories of attempts to do so on other boats, but it turned out to be accessible and a 30 minute task. Who thought up the name joker valve?

The Langdons entertained us royally at their home in Totnes. We inspected their hives and were astonished to hear that they had purchased their new queen bee, which arrived ready for action in a sealed tube, on the internet,. I had thought of motoring up to Totnes and saving them the car journeys. The Imray *West*



Unwelcome hitchhiker

John de Trafford



Boats on the Dart (John de Trafford)

Country Pilot states that: 'The very determined can reach Totnes between HW +/- 2.' I lacked determination, partly because it was neaps. Or is that just an excuse? One day I must make a greater effort to check out a drying berth in advance.

I tend to be over-ambitious with my cruise planning. It means I seldom spend two nights in the same place, unless bad weather forces me to shelter. However, I am learning. A couple of phone calls revealed that Dartmouth was going to be very busy on a Saturday night, so we decided to stay put and set sail a little earlier on the Sunday morning. I gave *Almira* a quick scrub from the dinghy armed with a suction handle and a long brush. Feeling virtuous, it was then time to take advantage of a glorious sunny day, reading, sketching and lazing around. Bliss!

We were away at 0600 the next morning, keen to make our tidal slot round Portland Bill. Sadly, the forecast was for easterlies over the next few days and my exeat from home was due to expire. As the wind rose and fell throughout the day, we deployed the Code Zero and occasionally the iron sail. Perhaps this attracted a school of porpoises (the same group?) who came to bid us farewell from Devon. The previous year David and I had stopped in Portland on our way home but we reckoned that Weymouth is not much further. We could enjoy the Georgian charm and hot showers, rather than the calm of an anchorage. We could also enjoy David's excellent stir fry of prawns, onions, peppers and whatever else was left in the larder, added to rice and spring onions, cooked in a coconut sauce.

Riddlers' Reunion on Almira ... and then there were two

Our last day at sea was a repeat of the previous day, with fine sunny weather but a fitful easterly breeze. Our tidal gate was now Hurst Narrows and we had to deploy both sail and motor to arrive on time. As on the trip out, the Lulworth Range Safety Boat was patrolling aggressively and we were forced into stronger tide offshore. We were not going to argue with the crump, crump of heavy artillery and the chatter of machine gun fire.

When the engine is running, I frequently play music through the cockpit speakers to drown the noise. I prefer the gentle sounds of *Almira* under sail but needs must. Fortunately, David and I have similar tastes in music, as in so much else. A week together on a small boat is a good test of friendship and we came through with flying colours. We had met almost exactly 50 years earlier on the dock in Newport, both trying to hitch a ride back to England from one of the competitors in the 1972 OSTAR. It was a pleasure to sail together then and on numerous occasions over the intervening years.

It was my turn to serve lunch and, with provisions deliberately being run low, I concocted a Worbarrow Salad (we happened to be off the Bay at the time) consisting of Parma ham, mango, lettuce, tomato, spring onion, sweet corn and coriander, with a dressing of yoghurt, oil and mustard. Fortuitously, a great mix.

Soon after 1800 the wind kicked in and we entered the Solent on the remaining flood at over 8 knots. It was great to end the cruise on a high and look back on a successful week. We could have gone south and probably avoided the head winds, but otherwise we were blessed with fair weather, good companionship, and plenty of variety. Besides, there is always next year and hopefully we will manage a full reunion of the Riddlers.

Hillside near Dittisham (John de Trafford)

