He who has the last laugh

A moment from a cruise

Christopher Elliott

Several times, when the weather was fine and cruising with Sandhurst cadets on the Nicholson 43 *Wishstream*, as a young captain I would take the yacht through that narrow pass between Brecqhou and Sark in the Channel Islands, the Gouliot Passage. Better still, once did it with the spinnaker up! (Oh, the arrogance of youth…).

Closing on the gap I would wait until one of the crew inevitably piped up:

"Errh….sir…. sirrr…sirrrrr!!! Have you seen THAT WIRE across the top of the gap..!".

To which I would reply sharply, in a strangled voice:

"OMG, no!!! NO!!! Good god, HANG ON CHAPS, I don't think we can pass under it!!"

Which is exactly what it looked like, given the perspective of the approach.
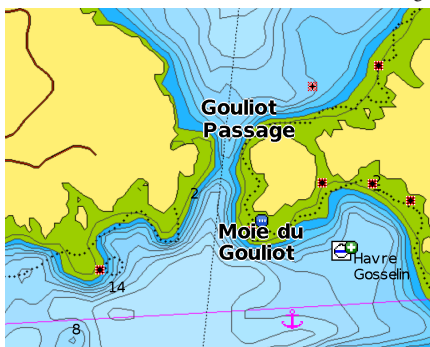
Everyone would then crouch down nervously, expectant of a flash and a bang, and possibly the mast collapsing.

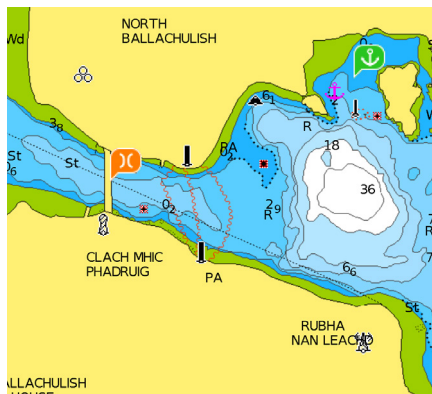Once we were safely through, I would then confess the deceit, which to my disappointment invariably produced only weak laughter from those being fooled. There is a bridge near Sonderborg in Danish waters where the same trick was played on several occasions too. More side-splitting mirth, again not universally appreciated.

Early this season, I was sailing by myself up Loch Linnhe, heading for Ballachulish to explore a prospective walk above Glencoe. I had been under the steel lattice bridge at the entrance to Loch Leven several times before, but not in my present yacht *Otter*.

Gouliot Passage

Approaching my twilight years and definitely now an old salt of self-evidently vast experience, I was a bit slack in looking up tides, clearances, etc. After all, the weather was fair and the wind calm.

Loch Leven Narrows

As we approached the bridge, I noted from the chart that the clearance under the Ballachulish Bridge was 16 metres. A bit less than I had remembered…

Quickly thumbing through my owner's manual, I discovered that *Otter*'s mast was 13 metres long.

Relief. Plenty of space!

But as we hurtled towards the bridge at 9.7 kts, in the grip of a rip tide, I suddenly had doubts. Grave doubts. VERY grave doubts indeed ...!

Approaching Ballachulish Bridge

Was that the clearance at low or high water? What was the exact state of the tide?

Blast! The mast was deck stepped and I had forgotten to add the height of topsides of the boat to the mast length – but was *Otter* 1.5 metres, or, two high out of the water…?!

And what about all that paraphernalia on the top of the mast – which must add at least half a metre!

As we rushed towards the solid structure at warp speed, led by the nose in the surging tide and (by then) unable to turn, I had a complete muddle of confusing mathematics in my head.

However, looking up at the reality of the rapidly closing iron girders above, showed that we were certainly, surely, inescapably, unavoidably, inevitably,

inexorably (and horribly-damagingly) going to hit them ... very hard and very fast!

I crouched downwards instinctively, flattening myself onto the cockpit sole in craven cowardice, screwing up my eyes tight … awaiting the dreadful crash as terrible, awful, damage was done to my beloved yacht – how could I possibly do this to her?

Final approach to the bridge at 9.7 kts (note: this photo was taken on the way out, later!)

Of course, there was only silence, broken by the happily gurgling waters as we slid smoothly underneath the girders, with probably yards to spare above.

Minutes later, safely anchored close to port in the Bishop's Pool, feeling much shaken and with a heart rate well into the red, I had a double brandy.

And, somewhat ashamed of past misdeeds, I apologized heartily several times over to all my previous victims!

Chris Elliott first gained this experience in Otter in 2022. After the editors omitted his account from last year's Journal by mistake, he sailed *Otter* the same way this year.

Otter moored peacefully and safe in the Bishops Pool, with Glencoe in the background