

Learning the hard way

Cruise from Scotland the France and back

Henry King

Awarded the Dulcibella Prize and the Sea Laughter Trophy

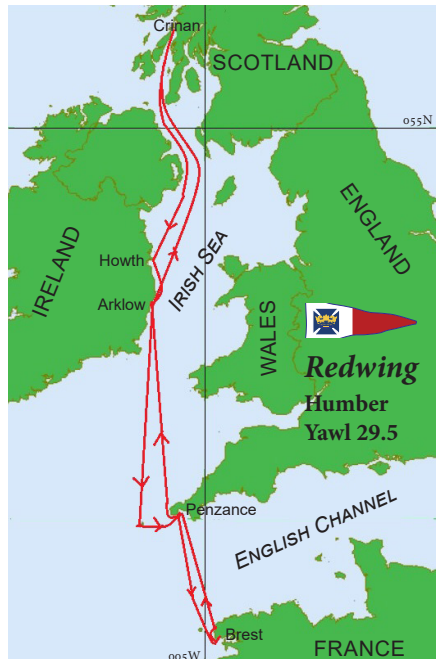


I must start by thanking my father for his bravery, entrusting a group of students with such a special boat. *Redwing* has seen many adventures in her 112 years and despite what you are about to read, we did our best to make ours as safe as possible. I would also like to thank the RCC for allowing the Marshall Fund to help purchase an AIS solution which calmed many nerves, both ashore and afloat.

If I were to describe each of my crew in two words, Billy would be

musical and diplomatic, Wiktoria energetic and enthusiastic, Maciej disciplined and honest, Hamish quiet and reliable and Davie talkative and easy-going. But sailing experienced was mixed; neither my flat-mate Billy nor my course mate Wiktoria had sailed. However, Wiktoria's fiancé, Maciej, is an experienced sailor who at the time of writing is a week out of Japan as a cadet officer on an liquefied natural gas carrier. I've sailed with Hamish on *Ocean Spirit of Moray* at school and his brother Davie, who was joining us later, also sails.

The plan was to cruise to Morbihan to join the cadets. But exam timetables and work and did not allow enough time, so Brest was the compromise since Hamish's exams ended 19 May and Maciej and Wiktoria had to get



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Our reinforced bunk

to Paris on 7 June for his brother's wedding. Things would be tight but flights were booked and we were committed.

I arrived first on 15 May, beginning preparations by installing a water tank. Despite being afloat, the amount of preparation made France feel very distant. The spars were ashore, the electrics didn't work, the AIS system wasn't installed,

nor was the display for the new depth sounder and the battery wasn't charging. Spirits rose as crew arrived, hungry for jobs, working fast enough to find time for a coat of paint and varnish. Hamish was the last to arrive and we celebrated with Wiktorija's home brew mead which cushioned the blow when the foldout bunk four of us were sleeping on collapsed. A few boards from the cockpit floor provided the necessary reinforcement.

After deciding which last minute preparations could be ignored, we cast off at 1755 22 May 2023 with a NW4. The mood was electric as we bore away and the Sound of Jura opened up before us, Paps rising in the evening sun. Wiktorija, who was unaware of phosphorescence, had a beautiful surprise coming on deck at 0200 for her watch when she was greeted by glowing sea as we held a steady five kts.

We quickly slipped into a steady watch routine of four hours on, six off staggered so only two hours were shared by the other watch. Wiktorija and Maciej had spent

weeks making delicious vegetarian stews and curries which they had pasteurised in jars ready to eat. This saved a great deal of time and money but Hamish, who grew up farming sheep in the glens of Morvern and was raised on venison, had reservations about the lack of meat.

Redwing's galley



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L to R Billy, Maciej, Wiktorja, Hamish & Henry

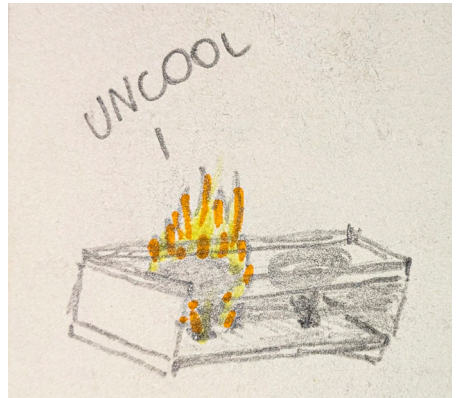
passports to declare our arrival. This earned me such a look of confusion that in my embarrassment I gave the hull length instead of overall length. I should have realised we were in the wrong place before blocking the walkway with the 5' bowsprit, but after a sheepish trip to the office, some inelegant manoeuvres and a bit of fending off we could head to Dublin where more friends also happened to be on holiday.

We spent a day in port seeing sights and making repairs – the compass light was fixed, and nuts and bolts were replaced in an attempt to maintain alternator belt tension. We still couldn't get any charge out of the alternator, but we had a spare battery and enough juice to get us to our next stop: Scilly.

The sight of traffic streaming in every direction across Dublin Bay was intimidating, but with our passive radar reflector and AIS we felt confident and followed Maciej's advice to hold as straight a course as possible, trusting them to avoid us. This worked until a tanker restricted by Kish Bank gave us a short blast. I got up to tack astern of the tanker just as the last thing you want to hear came up from the galley: "There's a fire!" Billy calmly announced, as yellow flames billowed up from the hatch. Maciej and I hopped down to assess the situation and saw the flames were contained in the cooker, coming from a fiery puddle of paraffin. Maciej shut off the fuel and readied a fire blanket, but it wasn't needed as the fuel was not spilling and the flames were shrinking fast. The cause was the unlit hob had been accidentally opened, allowing

Before we knew it Howth was on the horizon, and it was time to prepare. We had read that official guidance required flying a 'Q' flag on arrival to Ireland from the UK, so the hood (if it deserves that title) of my padded hi-vis jacket was sacrificed. We tied up at 1640 and I went straight to the harbour office with our

All sketches by Wiktorja



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liquid paraffin to leak until the heat from the active burner ignited the fumes, causing the initial fireball. Thankfully no damage was done and just as the flames were dying the first dolphins of the voyage surrounded us, calming our nerves.

We continued through the banks in hot sunshine under engine as the wind died with the fire. By the time I came on watch at midnight a gentle following wind picked up and everything was perfect, until the lights went out at 0219. While pulling one of the leads to change the battery, I noticed it was longer than I remembered. I kept on pulling until the other end was in my hands and I could see the crimp had corroded in half! We altered course for Arklow, 4nm ahead and now carry spare crimps.

Amazingly Lyle the harbour master responded to our text at 0200 with invaluable local knowledge, giving us the confidence to try and sail in. As the lights grew closer, the wind grew weaker leaving an ugly swell behind. We made it 100m up the channel before the lee of the mole killed our steerage putting us at the mercy of the river and swell. The crew grabbed the nearest stick, preparing to fend off, while the dinghy was rapidly inflated and deployed. So rapidly, in fact, that I stupidly jumped in without oars. Always keep calm. Hamish wasn't far behind and remembered the oars as well as a tow line. Together we pulled *Redwing* away from the danger, out of the lee, and drifted to anchor off the beach to the south at 0430. In hindsight we could have kedged up the channel, however the thought did not occur at the time.

Maciej holds seamanship to impeccable standards while at sea and parties just as hard whenever we stop moving, so the anchor had barely touched the bottom before the speaker was turned up loud and the Polish vodka broached. I left the party early in search of a solution to our rotten cable and was unprepared for the Irish hospitality we were about to receive. Lyle gave me a lift and knew not only where to find the parts, but also a friendly electrician with the right tools. Half an hour later I was rowing through the surf with two new battery cables, charged only for the parts.

Next stop Scilly, and with 20kts from the north forecast to arrive at midnight Maciej put two reefs in at sunset. The day that followed was perfect; sun shining, steady wind and an empty sea. Surfing down the long rollers was mentally and physically draining, but it was bliss to be doing some proper sailing after so much motoring in patchy winds and seeing the SOG touch 10.5kts for a split second was surreal. On 29 May 2023 we covered 129.6nm making an average speed of 5.4kts, and between 0800 to 1700 were consistently making 6-7kts.

We dropped anchor in New Grimsby Sound at 2300 outside Hangman Island, which didn't shelter us much from the northerly swell, but it was so crowded we had no choice. The priority on arrival was finding a battery since the alternator still wasn't charging. Bryher Marine Engineering kindly sold us a brand new battery for a good price and charged the two we already had for free. Business taken care of, we spent a few days enjoying the white sandy beaches and local sights, capped it off with a ceilidh on top of Cromwell's Castle, after which the boat was truly dry

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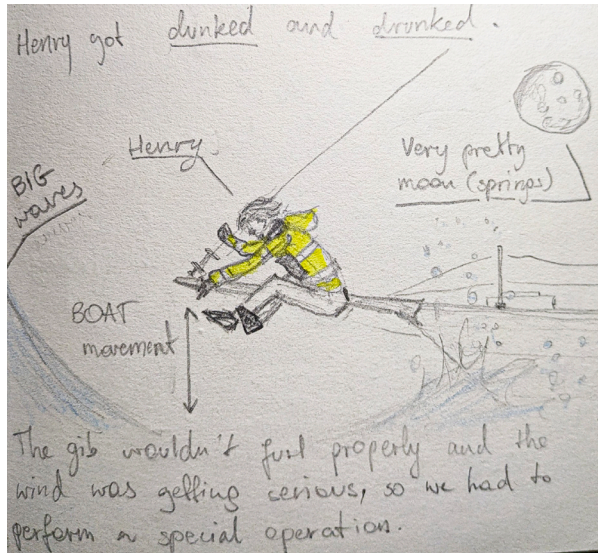
Redwing anchored outside Hangman Island

except for the last of the Bruichladdich which we saved for France.

On departure, there was good and bad news: the alternator magically came to life, working perfectly for the rest of the voyage, but the forecast was a bit too exciting for us in the south of the Channel, after we consulted Tim Trafford and commenced a long, wet beat to Penzance.

During the night the wind got up more than expected and the jib needed taking in. A stubborn pocket refused to furl, causing the mast to shake violently. This needed immediate action so I left Wiktorina at the helm while I tried to release the halyard from its handy-billy. This was impossible on my own, and since the sail was still shaking I went for the last resort before cutting the halyard: I climbed out to the end of the bowsprit, released the foot and continued furling by hand. Having achieved this, I realised I had been shortsighted and trapped myself on the bowsprit getting dunked. The wind was loud, so I gave Wiki my loudest shout asking for someone to bring a shackle key which woke the whole crew. Maciej appeared seconds later, and a smaller jib was soon flying. It's not surprising no one was sleeping well; Hamish had long since traded his sleeping bag for waterproofs no thanks to a stream leaking off the mast, and the others weren't much drier.

We anchored at the foot of St Michael's Mount to enjoy the best pasties of our lives while



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waiting for the wet dock in Penzance to open. After roasting in the sun we motored over and were pleased to see an RCC burgee. We had the pleasure of tying up next to *Bethulie* and meeting Charles and Elizabeth Nodder, who invited us aboard and traded stories with us, agreeing that electronics are best avoided where possible. That said we were very grateful to borrow their shore power adaptor.

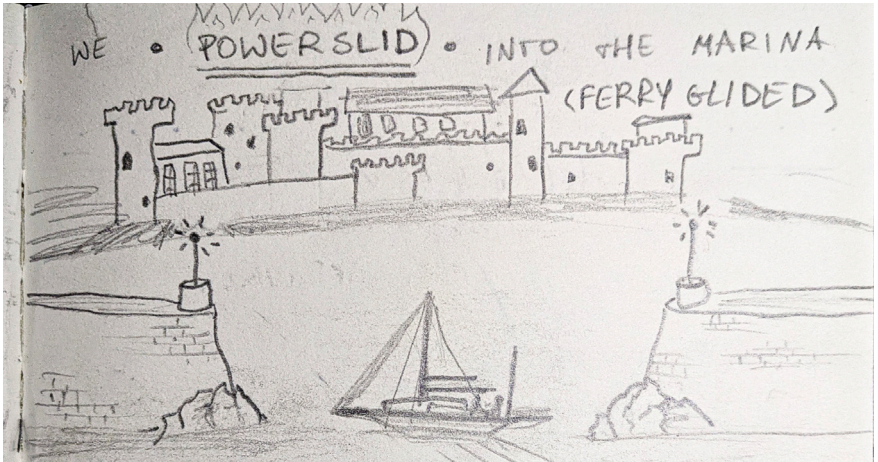
After our last night in British waters, it was finally time for the bit we'd all been waiting for: crossing the Channel to Brest. We felt the same excitement as when leaving Crinan, enjoying the sun and a perfect NE4. Little did we know what was about to happen.

At 0245 Maciej noticed a deep thud coming from the bottom of the boat. After investigating the masts and tiller he woke me to discuss. The noise could be heard above the wind. I double checked the masts and tiller, pressing my ear to them and agreed they weren't the cause. We were taking on water, but it was impossible to tell whether it was spray from the heavy seas or something worse. At this point we were halfway across and feeling concerned, as it was agreed there was a small chance the keel was loose. The bolts had been replaced only 10 years ago which gave us hope, but land was 60nm away and there were no contacts on the AIS so we agreed we should prepare for the keel to drop even if it was unlikely to happen. Everyone calmly dressed up and as a team we readied the grab bag, pumped up the dinghy, lashed it to the coach roof and hoped it wouldn't be needed.

By 0330 it was probably time to reef, but I decided to keep the full main up; we would reach safety faster and the larger sail would hopefully prevent turtling. There was little else to do but hope and enjoy the exhilarating sailing.

Conditions calmed as land approached and we resumed watches until arriving at Lanildut to take stock at 1250. It was beautifully sheltered with a well-marked entrance, a welcome haven after the uncertainty of the night before. It was paradise

Sketch by Wiktoria depicting our entry into the harbour



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to soak in the sun on the white beaches and take our time strolling through the flowery fields above the cliffs. Perhaps we HAD drowned and this was heaven?

Reality abruptly returned the next morning – Wiktorja and Maciej had 48 hours to catch their train in Brest. With light winds, favourable tides, and local advice we decided the Chenal du Four would be calmer than The Channel and we could make it to Brest. The marks whizzed by and before long we were tacking through the Goulet and entering the Marina du Chateau, surprised by the strong current across the harbour entrance. As we motored into our berth at 0410 there was one last surprise: a bucket in the lazarette had blocked the throttle lever from going into reverse, but we were going very slowly so only our pride was hurt by the gentle bump announcing our arrival.

Well rested, the crew went to enjoy the city while I searched for advice, starting with the nearby Chantier du Guip. I got lucky and met shipwrights Nico and Cyril on a smoke break who kindly agreed to help. To have a proper look *Redwing* had to dry out, and there was a wall by the Chantier we could lean against but tides forced us to take the evening off. With Wiktorja and Maciej leaving the next morning we decided to have a farewell party, and the Bretons did not let us down. A groggy *Redwing* drying out



goodbye the next morning marked the end of the outward leg, leaving us who remained keen to get home, conscious of the marina fees piling up. We tried drying out but the wind had other ideas, arriving out of nowhere with a swell when the bottom was only 0.2m away. We hurriedly slipped our lines and very soon were spending another day exploring the city.

Eventually we succeeded and were relieved to see there was no serious damage – the cause was the pintle bearing allowing some play, which resonated with the keel it is stepped into. We couldn't fix it in Brest, but Nico and Cyril agreed it would get us home safely. They had generously made us some new mast chocks and with nothing keeping us we headed to the supermarché to stock up on as much cheap wine as we could carry. 70 bottles later we were ready to leave as soon as the tide turned. While waiting for the tide before the Chenal du Four

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we found plenty of spare moorings to borrow at Fort de Berthaume, which could be useful for anyone late on their way to the Raz de Sein. After a grey passage through Le Chenal, Finisterre disappeared into a sunny fog.

We picked up Hamish's brother, Davie, in Penzance. He was keen to join us for the return journey to Scotland and we set off into the fog immediately, catching our last glimpse of land until Arklow. The next three days were a windless, foggy haze: only the shrinking cheese supplies marked the passage of time. We passed close to the Smalls lighthouse, hearing the blasts long before glimpsing it for a few seconds through a break in the fog, which was immensely spooky.

We put in to Arklow again to share our French cargo with the harbour master, Lyle, as thanks for his help and went to the pub to regain some sanity. It didn't help that our entrance prompted an immediate silence, but we were once again humbled by Irish hospitality as our new friends plied us with Guinness. Thankfully the tide turned favourable in the afternoon leaving plenty of time to explore the brilliant maritime museum before we left.

We left Arklow with fond memories but frustrated by lack of wind. It wasn't until past Dublin we could finally kill the engine and have Davie show us what he'd learnt as first mate on *Golden Vanity*, a 1908 Brixham Trawler. We got creative in the gentle following winds, improvising a mizzen staysail and finally making use of the topsail halyard now the radar reflector could be stowed.

Night fell off Gigha and with it the first rain in four weeks, along with plenty of wind. Unfortunately, the rain lasted longer than the wind, but being so close to our destination and with a favourable tide we drifted into Crinan at 0600, covering the last mile in two hours before silently arriving at the pontoon.

Redwing stocked up before leaving France

