

Mike Skidmore on how to benefit from a Noel Marshall Award on Autumn Storm

I bought *Autumn Storm*, a 1987 Westerly Storm, at the start of 2023. She was smart and looked after, but underused and in need of serious upgrades for serious cruising. And so followed three winters of refit: replacing the engine and associated systems, a complete rewiring to add lithium batteries, a complete replumbing to add pressurised hot water, refitting the galley and heads and updating parts of the layout. On deck, I have updated the instruments, added an electric windlass and a modified bow roller to fit a bigger anchor, modified the rig to fly a second headsail and, all-importantly, fitted a pigstick for the burgee.

There is always more work to do, more ways to improve things. But now the boat is well set up for spending a long time aboard away from marinas and other luxuries. It is a comfortable home, safe at sea and at anchor.

Because I did all the work myself (with the constant reassuring advice of Peter Whatley (RCC)) I needed to punctuate the long winter weekends with short snaps of summer sailing. It was always important to be reminded of what the work was for. That's where the Noel Marshall Fund came in. I wanted to make sure *Autumn Storm* is as safe as possible for less-experienced sailors to get more people on the water. I also wanted to offer more chances for RCC cadets to cruise more regularly, in less familiar places close to home. The NMF kindly offered funding towards vital basic safety equipment including life jackets and a life raft, letting me get out on the water immediately.

The first summer was a short south-coast cruise, seeing how far west we could make it from *Autumn Storm's* base in Eastbourne. The outward leg was tough with a week of brisk westerlies. I was still learning about the boat and how to balance the huge genoa and, to make things worse, I had skimped on the cheapest antifoul. The boat struggled to pick up its green skirts and get going, preferring to plod to windward on its ear. But, despite this, the sun shone merrily. Joined by Will Eaton (RCC), we gamely beat down the Channel, finally pitching up in Cawsand for a well-deserved fish and chips.

For the return leg, the westerlies did not ease up, but the sun did. Joined by Ben Warnick (RCC) in Plymouth, we flew the spinnaker for the first time off the Great Mewstone. The wind built, too much for the kite, and we started to broach, directly on course for the Slimers. Ben hung onto the helm for dear life while we promptly dropped the sail into the water. Not elegant, but much better than a rough grounding.

The best day's passage was from Salcombe to Studland Bay – about 90 miles in 12 hours. With a F5-6 behind us, the swell was mountainous off Portland Bill, even with a wide berth. But, helped by the tide, we regularly touched up to 10kts over ground while surfing. All good fun, except during the frequent rain showers when visibility dropped to metres ahead. We all had a good sleep that night.

In 2024 I had bigger plans, and a month of sailing to fill. With a deadline of the sea shanty festival in Falmouth, once again Will Eaton and I set off into westerlies. But this time the bottom was clean, the new folding prop had been installed (very last minute), most of the old electrics still worked and we could sail the boat much better. The only major mishap was losing the ensign overboard off Start Point. Although we eventually found it, it wasn't easy spotting a blue flag in the sea.

After a weekend of singing in Falmouth, Jem McPartlin and Ruth Avery (RCC) joined for a brief sunny and windless meander in the South West. With very little swell, we made the most of fair-weather anchorages along the coast, stopping below cliffs and in unvisited coves. Eventually, they had to leave and I dropped them in Dartmouth.

From there the wind refused to fill in for another week. But, wanting to make the most of time off work, I picked up two more friends who had barely stepped on a boat before and set off on a long motor to the Channel Islands. But with no wind and endless sunshine, the islands were a beautiful place. Anchoring at La Grande Greve on Sark and Herm's Shell Bay, we spent days walking the islands and lounging on the beaches, fishing for mackerel and drinking wine as the sun set. It was a true idyll, and a perfect introduction to sailing for my two friends.

In 2025, all the work came together in a long summer in the Hebrides. I navigated according to Gaelic folklore, seeking out the places where stories came from. But I have written about that elsewhere. For now, I'm dreaming of more cruising, further and further away.