

A Scilly Idea

Tom Bott and Tom Chivers
Wayfarer 'Egret'
August 2020

Preparations

In 2019, while in his last year at university in Bristol, Tom B was put in touch with a Professor of Medicine Dr Trevor Thompson through a family friend. He was told Trevor was a keen wayfarer adventurer who was planning a channel crossing in the summer. We had been looking to increase our offshore experience after our Danube cruise in 2016 and it seemed like a great opportunity to gain some serious cruising experience in company with an experienced wayfarer cruiser (and a doctor to boot!).

Unfortunately, as the scale of the Covid-19 crisis became apparent it became clear that a trip to the continent would be out of the question. Undaunted we turned our attention to a domestic trip. In conjunction with Trevor we pencilled in a trip to the Scilly Isles in August as a compromise which still included a serious offshore passage and would give us good experience for a more ambitious continental expedition at some point in the future.



As our Wayfarer Egret had not been on a serious expedition since 2016 and neither of us had experience skippering offshore we had some serious preparation to do. The first thing we needed to do was to sign up for an online Day Skipper theory course. Although we had cruising experience with the RCC, we wanted to improve our route planning and navigation as our trip would take us out of sight of land for a significant length of time. From our pilot book of the Scillies we knew that there was a good chance fog would make it unwise to rely on our GPS and we would have to be confident in our chart based navigation skills.

Similarly as we would be operating offshore we thought it wise to invest in a VHF so we could coordinate with Trevor's boat and other vessels who might come across us. This meant we both had to take the VHF course to get a license for our hand held device. We spent a glorious few days in the sun scrubbing Egret, fixing the tiller extension, adding a fixed steering compass, and refurbishing the self-bailers. We also had reefing lines put into our mainsail as we knew that we would be facing some stiff breezes in the channel. We invested in some good quality drysuits because in any kind of sea the wayfarer is a very wet boat. We also decided it would be wise to get a Personal Location Beacon (not least to put our mothers' minds' at rest) as a capsized mid voyage could be potentially dangerous.

Before the main trip we went to Ardingly reservoir for "sea trials" to see how our self-bailers were holding up and to try a capsized test to see if masthead flotation was needed. We took



the opportunity to introduce Tom C's girlfriend to sailing for the first time. She enjoyed the gentle heel of the Wayfarer almost as much as the picnic in the sunshine at anchor. Wisely, she sat on the beach for the capsize test. We were pleased to find out that Egret was relatively stable on her side, but we quickly realised that emptying her would require something much more buckety than the pump we had bought.

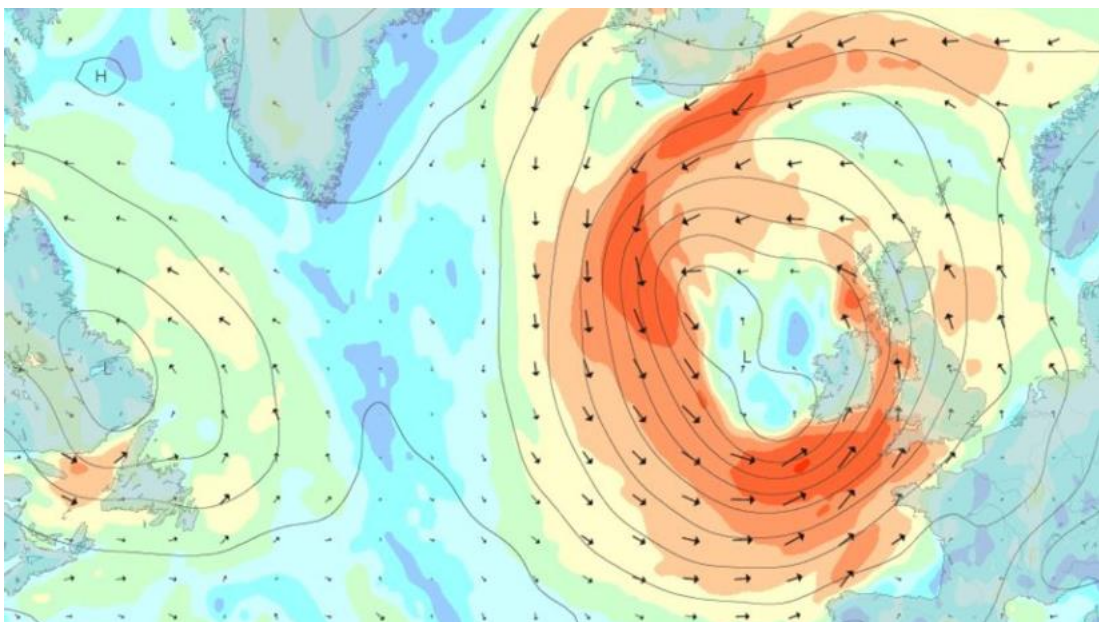
Having replaced the perished wheels on our launching trailer and rigging a self-inflating masthead flotation device with a spare lifejacket we were ready for our Scillies trip

Unfortunately our hopes of reaching the Scillies were slowly dashed as Storm Ellen gradually approached from across the Atlantic bringing wind speeds of over 45 knots and swell of over 4 meters. Trevor had only a narrow window of availability and it looked like our trip would be over before it had even begun. Luckily the storm made landfall on the 20th, slightly earlier than expected, and it looked like there would be a small weather window before Storm Francis arrived on the 25th. The Scillies were now totally out of the question; although the gale force winds had abated the sea state was far too rough for open dinghies. As we only had a few days until our window we frantically looked for back up options, the idea of a summer with no sailing didn't bear thinking about!



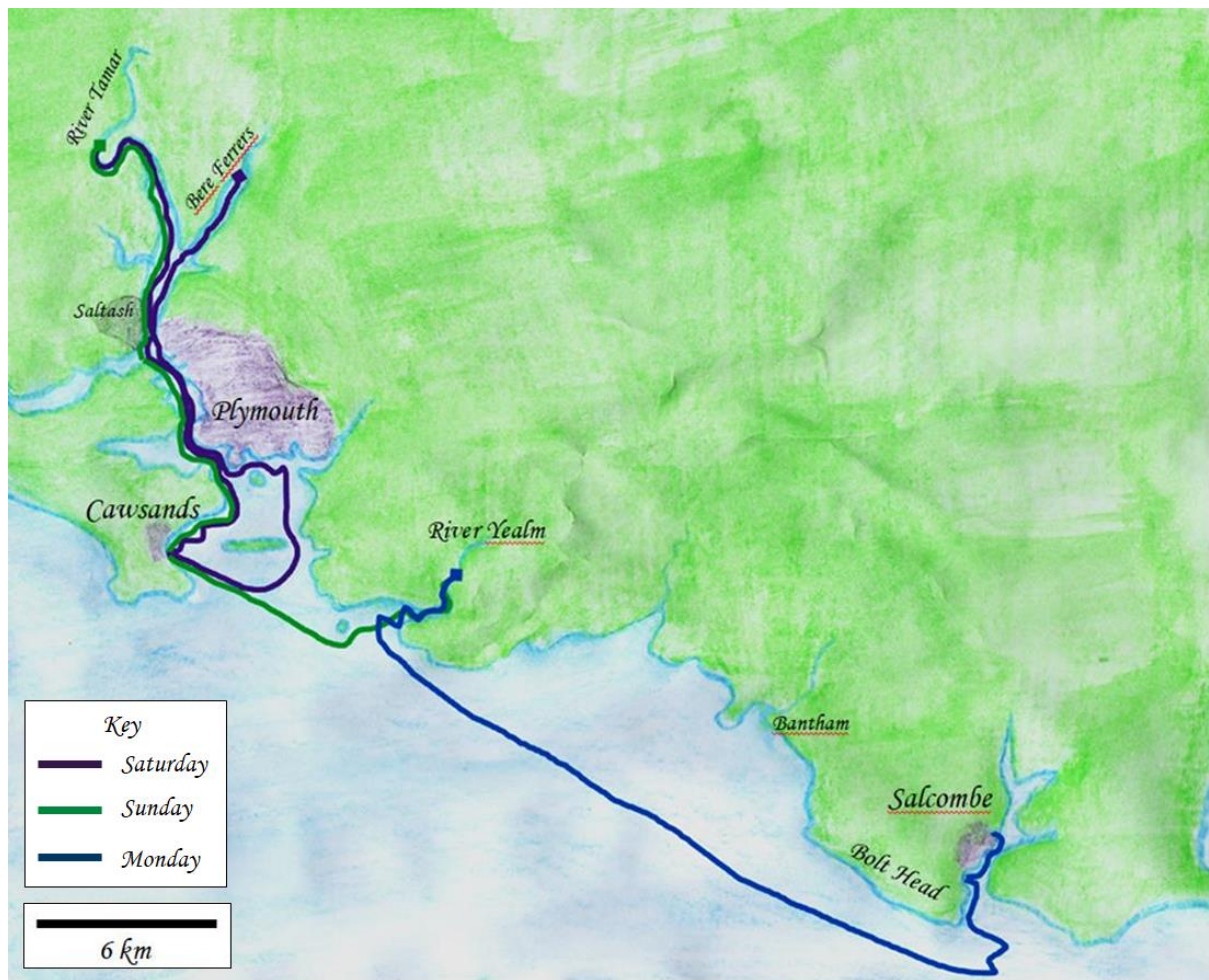
Capsize drill

After lengthy discussions with Trevor and his crew Will, we decided that Plymouth would be a good alternate starting point. The Tamar offered good sheltered cruising if the weather was poor, and if weather permitted we could cruise along the coast, either East to Dartmouth or West to Fowey. This seemed like best we could do in the circumstances as we were desperate to do some coastal cruising. As we did not have the luxury of time when it came to planning our back-up trips we had to do a fair amount of passage planning in the car on the way down to Bere Ferrers where we would be spending the night. The drive was long and uneventful barring having to cross three lanes of stationary traffic at the Stonehenge round about. Friday night saw some last minute passage planning and we decided that we couldn't make a final decision until we saw the sea state past the breakwater. We would wake up early to rig, and catch the early tide to take us down into the Sound and to Cawsand beach where we could have lunch and assess our options.



Storm Ellen

Saturday



The tributary of the Tamar we were launching into turns into a sticky quagmire at low tide so we had a very early start to get Egret rigged in time to beat the tide. We got the mast up all and all our kit stowed away in record time but in our haste we forgot some crucial elements including Tom C's phone charger, all our cutlery and the wire for attaching the jib to its halyard. We came to rue our haste. Our hosts made us a very welcome cooked breakfast and then we were off.

We rowed out to midstream, dropped anchor and began to hoist the sails (which was when we realised we had left the jib wire). When we tried to raise the anchor we discovered it was firmly lodged in the mud. As the water level dropped visibly and our centreboard touched down we had terrible visions of spending 8 hours on a mud bank 200 meters from where we had launched. Fortunately we freed ourselves with the panicked use of an oar!

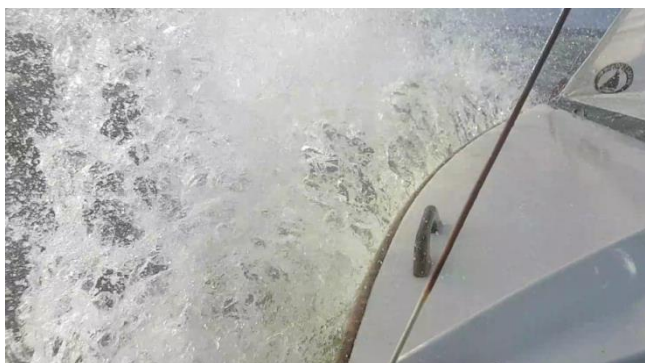


Tom C and Egret, with Osprey and Trevor and Will in the background

Out into the Tamar proper we were blasting along in 15-20 kts of wind with a double reef in the main. We felt the thrill of adventure as we finally felt the spray in our face after our months of planning.

Beating under bridges through moored boats led to some slightly hairy moments but with our Danube experience we were relatively comfortable with the side slip of the current.

Entering into the Sound we had our first taste of coastal sailing in Egret, as even in the relative shelter of the breakwater we were soon dealing with a large, but gentle swell. We raised Osprey on the VHF and agreed to poke our noises past the breakwater and either head East to Dartmouth or bail to Cawsand beach where we would have lunch and finalise a plan B.



The crew's perspective. We were very happy to be wearing drysuits

Even before we were past the breakwater we realised that the sea state was far too rough to consider a coastal voyage. As we were beating into the waves we had good control over Egret but the waves were such that, despite being close by, Osprey would regularly completely disappear from view before shooting up on the next wave like a cork on a bottle. When Egret was in the troughs of the waves our sails completely depowered which meant we were constantly leaping in and out of the boat as she repowered at the crests. As our first experience of coastal sailing surfing down the backs of the waves was incredibly exhilarating but we were glad to reach the refuge of Cawsand.



A wave rises behind us

Due to the rocky beach we anchored off Cawsand and Tom C discovered that a drysuit can easily double as a wetsuit if you leave the convenience zip unzipped when you confidently plunge into deep water. He also discovered how hard it is to get back into a wayfarer as cold water pours into your midriff and you have a phone in one hand and a book in the other. Changing trousers under a drysuit in a small public convenience is not a simple feat but eventually refreshed and rehosed we gathered in conference with our cruising companions to work out a plan of action.

During our lunch the wind had abated and the waves seemed much smaller (a phenomena known as the "sitting on the beach effect"), so we decided to head outside of the breakwater straight across the bay to the river Yealm where we would stay for the evening. Our contingency plan was to gybe round the Eastern end of the breakwater and head up the Tamar on the incoming tide to see how far we could get before the tide turned.



Osprey sailing towards the Sound

Setting off it became apparent that, while the wind was indeed lighter, the sea was much too rough for Wayfarer's to run before. We dropped our mains and raced along the outside of the breakwater. Haling the other boat on the VHF we decided that we would go with plan B and gybed round the breakwater into the relative

calm of the sound. With the main back up we flew back up the Tamar, flying over the still water we felt like we were back on the Danube, going through a patch of glassy water our GPS recorded a speed of 9.5 kts SOG which was our fastest of the trip. Our anemometer turned out to not be as waterproof as we had hoped but the Plymouth Meteorological Station recorded a gust at Force 8 at that time.

Because we had decided to invest in some proper slab reefing we were able to practice shaking out reefs in the safety of the river before our main coastal passage. Although expensive the system was very effective as it only required one person to take in or shake out a reef.

Cruising gently up the Tamar enjoying the evening sun and calm water we said goodbye to Trevor's crew Will who left us at this point. As we tacked up river in the dying evening breeze the tide began to turn and soon we were completely stationary relative to the bank. The sun had set so we were eager to find somewhere to make camp. We rowed over to a pontoon by a beautiful boathouse but the tenant was anxious about us camping on the pontoon. We saw on the chart that there was a public quay further upstream and with Osprey in tow (due to Trevor's outboard failing to start) we motored up towards it. As we approached the quay it seemed as if there were fireflies dancing above it, these luminous green lights bobbed and danced rather prettily. It was not until the first whistle and splash that we realised we had disturbed a congregation of night fisherman who were not enamoured by the prospect of sharing the quay with us. With no real objective in mind we continued to head upstream in the dark until we chanced upon a sturdy mooring buoy just out of the channel. We moored up to it and Trevor tied Osprey to our stern. Tom C sat on the nose with the gas stove and heated up some Irish stew for dinner while Tom B set about improvising a boom tent out of a piece of tarpaulin that turned out to be much too large. Eating the stew without cutlery was challenging and the experience wasn't helped by our discovery that our bread rolls had been marinating in a few inches of sea water for most of the afternoon.



Wind over tide



Tom C preparing for a bad night's sleep

Ensconced in our improvised tent we settled down for the night but sleep did not come easily despite our exhaustion as the wind was going against the tide so periodically the tent (which was open at the back) would fill with wind and it would assume cathedral esque proportions before rapidly deflating and slapping us in the face. Still it kept the drizzle off and despite waking up in the early hours of the morning at an alarmingly jaunty angle (we had settled on a mud bank) we did manage to get a few hours of sleep.

Sunday:

After a mostly sleepless night spent aboard Egret, we crawled from our sleeping bags to find Trevor fresh faced and eating breakfast in the immaculate Osprey. By the time we had dropped the boom tent Trevor was sailing downriver, he had to beat the falling tide to get home by the evening before his work started on Monday. As we prepared Egret for the day ahead we realised how fortunate we had been to experience our first coastal passage in the company of another Wayfarer. Trevor's advice and guidance had been invaluable in preparing for and completing this adventure, and as he sailed from view we were both looking forward to sailing with him again.



Breakfast

Raising our sails, we cast off and were soon drifting fast downriver. Passing the public quay and beautiful boathouse we were reminded of our adventure on the Danube. Meandering through the countryside the Tamar carried us rapidly towards Plymouth. Our plan for the day was to venture beyond the breakwater and if the conditions were suitable then sail on to Salcombe. Having planned our route breakfast became a pressing issue. At first weetabix seemed an insurmountable challenge without a spoon, until Tom B realised they could be eaten dry and washed down with UHT milk. Fuelled and ready for the day ahead we had a great sail back towards the breakwater. Unlike the day before there were fleets of sailing boats enjoying the wind and we cruised downriver dodging chain ferries and frenzied sailing schools.



As we sailed into the Sound we realised the sea state was still too severe to attempt a coastal passage to Salcombe. The wind may have dropped but the waves were as large as the day before, remnants of Storm Ellen they towered over Egret shielding the wind and giving us the sensation of bobbing like a cork to their tall crests. We decided to sail to Cawsand in the hope that the swell would drop over lunch. After an amusing upwind sail over the large waves we anchored off the beach before swimming ashore for a much needed fish and chips.

Over lunch the swell began to drop, and as we could not make it to Salcombe before nightfall we decided to sail to the River Yealm. Setting off from Cawsand we had a relatively peaceful sail downwind towards the Yealm. Egret would occasionally surf down the faces of the large rolling waves, but compared to the day before

we felt the conditions were much more manageable. Using our compass for the first time we navigated by dead reckoning, and rounding the Great Mew Stone sailed into the mouth of the Yealm. After a challenging bit of sailing through the narrow channel at the end of the bar, we sailed up the Yealm on the incoming tide.

The Yealm is incredibly beautiful, and its wooded cliffs meant it was totally sheltered from the wind. Due to this, and the large number of moored boats making sailing almost impossible, we had soon resorted to rowing Egret. Having vowed to camp in our tent that night we were looking with increasing despair for somewhere to pitch it. All the beaches would soon be



Enjoying a peaceful sail

underwater in the spring tide and the cliffs meant camping above them would be impossible. As the sun was setting we spotted a small grassy quay, and despite a search for the owners to ask permission to stay the night no-one could be found. As it was dark we decided to stay and leave first thing in the morning. Tom C set up camp and began to cook whilst Tom B organised an unnecessarily complicated tripping line for Egret. After a questionable meal of chicken curry drunk like soup without our cutlery, we collapsed into our tent grateful for the chance of a proper night's sleep!



The grassy quay in the morning

Monday:



Route planning

After a comfortable night in the tent we got up at 7 am to try and catch the outgoing tide. Putting our newfound navigation skills to practise we planned our route to Dartmouth but were slightly concerned by the weather forecast. Force 4 rising to force 8 in the late evening. Our weather window was narrowing as Storm Francis was approaching rapidly from the Atlantic.

After a quick breakfast of slightly salty Weetabix we packed up and realised we had just missed the tide. As we motored slowly through the sheltered calm of the Yealm

we had no idea how challenging the day ahead was going to be! We soon arrived at the bar at the mouth of the river. The only incident being the brief failure of our perpetually temperamental motor, which had resulted in a mad scramble and some unintentional spinning, brightening the day of some laughing onlookers! Dropping anchor on the bar we raised our sails and then crept out of the river mouth, tacking against the tide.

We cleared the headland and with one reef in the main began a beautiful downwind sail across Bantham Bay. The conditions were perfect and we were skidding down waves with spray flying; Egret was humming happily and she felt balanced and responsive at the helm. We had initially planned to stay close to the coast but we soon realised that to make Start Point by 2 pm we would have to head straight there. We had never sailed so far from the shore in Egret and it was great to see the coastline getting smaller on the horizon until it was only visible from the peaks of the rolling waves. We were soon amongst a group of yachts and as we were averaging 7 kts we kept pace with them, much to our surprise and pride in Egret.



Spot the mast

As we approached Bolt Head the wind rose significantly and white horses began breaking all around us. We put a second reef in the main and were incredibly grateful for slab reefing as this was an easy task despite Egrets bouncing and rolling. Even with the second reef we were still surfing down the waves and to add to our worries the overfalls off Bolt Head had begun to form. The sea state continued to deteriorate and large cross chop made Egret buck and bounce unpredictably and the self-bailers were working hard as a lot of water was coming over the side.



As we skirted the edge of the overfalls we decided we needed to seek shelter in Salcombe as the conditions around Start Point would be well beyond our capabilities. When the yachts before us turned for shelter in Salcombe we knew we had made the correct decision. We were aware that the Salcombe bar would be particularly challenging in these conditions, but we were reassured by a conversation with the Salcombe harbour master who had mentioned a channel across the bar that ran just below the headland. As the bar came into view we could see large waves breaking



over it in the distance, but the area beneath the headland appeared calmer. At this point the waves around us had become steeper still and were beginning to break with alarming power. We began luffing up into the steepest waves but we soon realised that we needed to drop the main to reduce the risk of broaching. Under the jib alone we jibed and started surfing towards Salcombe.

This was our last photo before we reached Salcombe

Out of all our sailing experiences the next hour was the most terrifying and the one that required the most intense concentration, but because of this we have never worked better as a team. The waves were so steep and breaking so often that even under the jib we were forced to continually luff into them. This meant Tom C was constantly trimming the jib, whilst balancing Egret and keeping a watch for the larger waves behind us. Meanwhile Tom B was clinging to the tiller, trying to anticipate the confused waves whilst sailing towards Salcombe. At one point we failed to luff into a wave in time and the crest broke over the side filling Egret with water. Remarkably she barely flinched and in no time the water was sucked out by the self-bailers.

Ahead of us we could see large waves breaking on the bar so we sailed closer to the headland until we were just below it. Thankfully the breaking waves were less frequent, but the wind also dropped as we were sheltered by the cliffs. We couldn't raise the main as all our attention was focused on the waves and the motor was stuck in the stern locker. With only the jib we were barely making 1 kt against the strong outgoing tide, and so began possibly the slowest bar crossing ever witnessed at Salcombe. Half an hour later, having dodged the worst of the waves, we were across the bar. However, we failed to realise how quickly we were being dragged by the tide towards Bass Rock and its large marker buoy. Despite some frantic rowing by Tom B we were pulled right over it until the buoy was just inches away. To make matters worse a large set of waves were rolling towards us. Tom B could see the first wave rearing well above Tom C's unsuspecting head and Egret was picked up and surfed wildly down its face for 30 meters, while it broke over the stern.

Finally safe we rowed to South Sands Beach and after lunch formed a plan to get Egret out of the water before Storm Francis hit. The slipway on the beach was perfect for the task, so Tom C set out to retrieve the car and trailer from Bere Ferrers whilst Tom B packed and looked after Egret. The only problem was that Tom C's phone was dead because he had forgotten his charging cable, so it was decided he'd take Tom B's phone.



Relieved at reaching Salcombe.

Tom B's account:

Tom was soon zooming off on his odyssey to go and collect the trailer, which left me alone with Egret and no method of communication. He planned to be back by 6 pm so with a couple of hours to spare I began to slowly pack Egret. However, at 5 o'clock the large sea tractor which takes passengers to and from the ferry parked on the slipway, totally blocking it. I ran to talk to the driver who told me that because of the storm it would remain there all night and that there was no way we could get Egret out of the water. Fortunately he mentioned the public slipway in Salcombe where it would be possible to collect Egret. With this change in plan I tried to find a way to contact Tom to let him know what was happening.

With no other option I walked to the hotel on the beach and I was pointed in the direction of the reception. Wearing my soaking drysuit I felt very out of place, but the receptionist began laughing when she saw me, earlier someone had called up to leave a message for a man on the beach wearing a black suit! It was a message from Tom saying he would now be getting there by 9 pm. The receptionist kindly let me use her phone and I eventually got through to Tom. Having planned to meet at the public slipway I rowed Egret over and by 8 pm had emptied our gear onto the pontoon. It had begun to rain so I sat smugly in my drysuit, knowing I only had an hour to wait till Tom arrived. By 9 pm Tom had yet to arrive and the rain was getting worse, but I couldn't leave Egret and our gear to seek shelter. By 10 pm the true downpour began and even the men working on the fishing boat next to Egret had finished for the night. I was beginning to think Tom was having a large dinner, or might have given up on collecting Egret altogether. By 11:30 pm the wind was howling and the rain was monumental, but at least in the drysuit my clothes were dry. At midnight something amusing happened, someone had obviously seen me waiting in my drysuit and had called the police, because a police car came zooming towards the slipway before stopping with a screech. Winding the window down and shining a bright torch at me the policeman asked me to explain myself. A little on the spot I told him what was happening and how useless Tom was, and satisfied he zoomed off. By 12:30 am I was struggling to keep myself from falling asleep in the puddle I was sitting in when Tom finally drove up. We packed Egret in record time and by 2 pm were asleep at a friend's house.

Tom C's account:

Getting to ride the sea tractor was very exciting but due to its sedentary pace I ended up missing the train from Totnes to Plymouth. Due to the rather relaxed nature of the public transport system in Devon this set me back two hours. I made the most of the opportunity to buy a replacement charging

cable for my phone but this meant that while I had two phones Tom B had none! At a loss at how to contact him to tell him that I would be considerably later than I had anticipated I tried to find a business near the beach with a publicly available phone number. Eventually I found a rather nice hotel on the beachfront and I called them hoping they would be able to find Tom B on the beach and pass a message to him. They were slightly unsure how they were supposed to spot him but I assured them that in his drysuit he would be very hard to miss. They told me that if they saw him they would pass on my message.

After a bus, a train and another bus I arrived at Plymouth station where I then had a two hour wait until the train to Bere Ferrers where our host from the first night had kindly offered to pick me up. The receptionist called me back and I managed to pass on my message to Tom who was turning their reception into a sandpit. By the time I was on the train Storm Francis had well and truly arrived. Force 8 winds and driving rain buffeted the carriage and as soon as I stepped outside it felt like I was back on board Egret in the Salcombe channel. Running on very little sleep I was willingly force-fed scalding hot tea and dark chocolate (for the caffeine of course) and was on the road, trailer in tow by 22:00. According to google maps the drive from Bere Ferrers to Salcombe should have taken around an hour and fifteen minutes but due to the combination of lashing rain, flooded roads and hairpin bends it took me over two hours to reach a very bedraggled Tom. He and all of our kit were so wet that if he'd gone for a late night dip he would have made the sea wetter. Upon seeing him I was overcome with a wave of emotion (which I now put down to physical and mental exhaustion) and tried to hug him. He took my approach as an act of aggression which rather ruined the moment. All the wet gear went in the boot of the car and before too long we were enjoying the wonderful hospitality (and feather beds) of the Newmans.



Breakfast on the terrace the morning after Storm Francis

On the drive back home we decided this adventure had felt like the longest weekend of our lives. This may have been partly due to the lack of sleep but also because we had done a huge amount. We had experienced and learnt so much about the joys and challenges of sailing coastal passages in a wayfarer, and we had found the upper limits of the conditions we were happy sailing Egret in. The Scilly's are still very much in sight and hopefully we'll be able to sail Egret there soon.



Cleaning our drysuits.