

A Disastrous Voyage in 1958

Memories of sailing from the West Country to Holland

Colin Barry



Colin, then and now

I have sailed boats from the age of seven. After two years National Service in the navy in the mid-1950s, a fellow ex-National Service Midshipman Brian Nichols told me that he wanted to relocate his boat from Plymouth to Copenhagen and this seemed an admirable way of spending my two weeks summer leave away from an essentially dreary non-job in the City.

Brian's yacht *Blue Jenny* was a 25ft Vertue sloop rigged, a fine sea boat. The class designed by Laurent Giles had been made famous by Humphrey Barton's Classic Trans-Atlantic in Vertue XXXV. *Blue Jenny* was in moderate condition and Brian had bought her the year before. Our trip was her first venture that year, there had been no trial run, unfortunately. Early one summer morning in 1958 we set sail from Newton Ferrers with a fine westerly breeze. It quickly expired so we started



A 25ft Vertue sloop similar to *Blue Jenny*

motoring and our problems started to unfold. The petrol engine had a four to five-gallon capacity, but we discovered that the reserve cans had not been filled. After a few hours we ran out of fuel and spent the next twenty-four hours drifting off the Dorset coast. Light sea breezes eventually helped us make Swanage the following afternoon and we anchored off the pier.

The extremely small clinker-built dinghy had been stored upturned on deck for the past year. When launched it began to fill with water but that didn't prevent the third crew member, Adrian and I undertaking several soggy trips ashore to a local garage and eventually filling the tank and spare cans. Having dried ourselves off we

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up-anchored and continued our journey. Some twenty hours later we made it to Newhaven, and spent a relaxing night berthed in the harbour.

I should mention at this stage our cooking arrangements, a one burner primus stove. Our food tended to be a continuous stew, we lived largely out of tins and on potatoes. After each meal the saucepan was replenished. We were all 21 or 22 at the time and very healthy.

The petrol engine was inclined to fade and, for no apparent reason, would suddenly stop. The routine became one of us going below, priming the carburettor, pressing the starter button and away we would go. We also had to frequently top up the petrol tank. The tank was in a lazarette behind the cockpit. There was one screw top on deck, through which one had to put one's hand to take off another screw at the top on the tank. I do not think we had an adequate funnel, resulting in petrol frequently missing the aperture and finding its way into the bilge. These two factors slowly led to our most serious disaster.

The next sail was Newhaven to Dover, with no ports in between with the possible exception of Rye. We set off in a westerly wind which strengthened and reached F7, possibly gale force. It was dark when we reached Dover which at that time was only operating one entrance, the easterly one. We had to turn up wind at the entrance and hope the unreliable engine would start, then find a berth in the so-called facility for yachts, at the west end of the harbour, along with the ferry port. Fortunately, it all worked and at midnight we were tucked up alongside the coal wharf, their only mooring facility for yachts!

The gale continued to blow for a couple of days and we realised there was no prospect of ever making it to Copenhagen, so the revised plan was for Adrian and me to leave at Amsterdam. The weather finally improved, and we set off for Ostend where we found the harbour was marina style - mooring alongside a pontoon which floated with the tide, a totally novel experience for us; at that time there was nothing like it in the U.K. Ostend proved to be a disaster for our stomachs. A bad oyster each which caused me, in particular, to be ill for the next three weeks. I did not touch another oyster for 27 years, said to be the recovery period.

Onwards from Ostend to Flushing. We decided in light of the uncertain weather we would sail through Holland via the canal system. Attempting to find customs we floated about for a bit but as no one came near us, we decided to head through the first ten miles of canals to Veere.

In 1953 Holland had experienced major flooding resulting in plans to dam up the majority of the mouths of the river, including The Maas delta for the Rhine. This had not yet taken place, so the estuary was still tidal. We proceeded slowly towards Rotterdam, the engine proving unreliable and the tank needing frequent filling. For the second night we pulled alongside a working post war barge who made us very welcome.

At that time Dutch people were delighted to see the English and were very grateful for what had happened ten years before. This gratitude was manifested in two ways, the first was that the bargees entertained us with an excessive quantity of

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schnapps and secondly they said they would tow us as far as Rotterdam about 25 miles away, which they did by tying us alongside until we got to Rotterdam and our paths parted. Unfortunately, the effects of the schnapps were still with us.

Leaving the canal system, we set off down river through the heart of Rotterdam to find the waterway leading towards Delft and Amsterdam. The engine failed yet again as we headed for one of the main arterial roadways across the river, unaware that the bridge only opened twice a day. As we drifted steadily towards the bridge, Brian was despatched below and Adrian and I located the anchor, unfortunately stored under the dinghy in such a way we could not release it. Providence struck as the lock keeper realising our predicament instigated an emergency opening of the bridge and we drifted through backwards with only a couple of feet to spare.

During our sail through Rotterdam, we were apprehended and arrested by the Dutch Customs who wanted to know how we had evaded the entrance procedure at Flushing. Apparently they had been on alert for this British boat for the last two and a half days. They pinned us alongside the wheelhouse of the Customs Lodge and performed a body search. Suddenly three became two, Adrian was being sick over the side. They stamped all our papers and we made it into Delft for a relaxing afternoon and night.

We were badly behind schedule, so decided to press on the next day. Whilst Brian steered the boat I was designated to cook breakfast, the inevitable fry up. At this stage the engine stopped, routine by now, unfortunately. Brian and I changed places leaving the primus stove burning. He lifted the engine cover to prime petrol into the carburettor. Suddenly there was a major explosion and flames shot ten foot out of the boat. Brian emerged, his face totally black and bleeding, his clothes and cap in cinders. The locals were marvellous and in no time at all Brian was on his way to hospital and we went back to a suitable waiting place where *Blue Jenny* would remain until the skipper had recovered. A middle-aged English woman, married to a Dutchman came forward to 'act as mother' to look after Brian until he had recovered.

Time to reflect how much worse it might have been, Adrian had been about to unscrew the petrol cap to refuel when the flame shot up his hand which was poised above the tank. If the cap had been open this story might not have been written. Adrian and I continued to live on board in port, trying to sort out the mess of the engine and visiting the same restaurant every night. The proprietor was very sorry for us and used to overfill our schnapps glasses with a revolting brew. Rather than offend him, we would pour it into the potted plant container adjacent to our table. On our final night we noticed that the plant had died.

We left Holland after the doctors had informed us that the damage to Brian's face was not permanent and that he would recover in a few weeks. Arriving by ferry at Harwich a customs official asked me about the contents of my Naval kit bag. My reply that it was full of dirty washing seemed to satisfy him! We made it home a little older but probably not any wiser, although after our disastrous voyage Adrian's first act on boarding a yacht was to pump out the bilges!