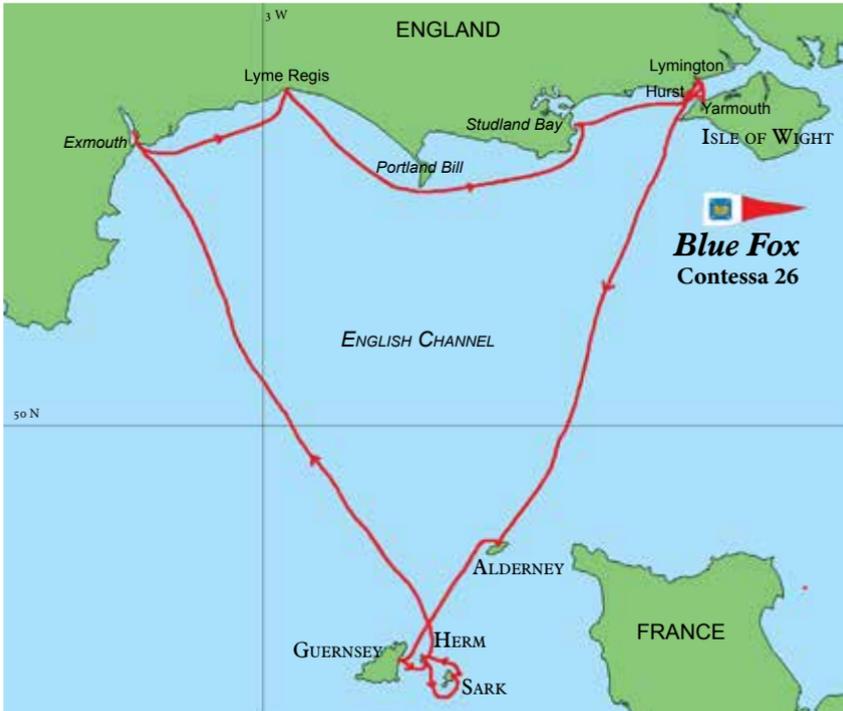


## *Blue Fox's Birthday Party*

Doug Byatt with Rhiannon Wescott

The adventure had been a while in the planning, ever since we heard that there was going to be a Contessa 26 50th anniversary rally in Lymington at the end of July. An internet search revealed that Lymington was also host to an extensive salt-water inflatable obstacle course, so my co-skipper Rhiannon and I built our main summer sailing around the rally: from our mooring on the River Exe, up to the Solent for the Contessa rally, then across the channel to explore the Channel Islands before sailing back home to the Exe.

*Blue Fox* is moored at the very friendly Starcross Yacht Club, whence we departed with great anticipation on Wednesday 27 July. We were set to have a building W/SW wind behind us for the next few days to carry us up to Lymington, so we were excited at the prospect of a fast passage to our



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first stop in Lyme Regis and beyond.

First things first, no voyage would be complete without a few unromantic hiccups from the off, so sailing down the river, I went through the motions of unclogging our seemingly permanently blocked log impeller. Exe water does an excellent job of bunging it up. A gybe around Bull Hill Bank at the river entrance brought an immediately impeded view and a moment of confusion as the main halyard shackle let go and the main come tumbling down around us, much to the amusement of passing ferry passengers. A brief spell on a mooring and a trip up the mast for Rhi thankfully dealt with our hiccups and we were off again.



Approaching Studland Bay

The sail up to Lyme Regis was wonderful; we made good time broad reaching under full sail and the sun was out. The log notes that at 50°39.0'N/3°2.5'W, we performed a MOB drill to pick up a stray tennis ball - delighted to help clean up the sea while adding to the bag of beach toys



The authors, refreshed, post bucket shower

At 1900 we tied up to the new pontoons inside the impressive Cobb breakwater at Lyme Regis. There are now three finger pontoons instead of the old single one, which fortunately means a few more, deeper berths. Lifeboat week was in full swing, the main event of the evening being a yard of ale competition, on stage at the waterfront pub. An invitation to compete was swiftly declined. A nondescript van on the seafront served up some of the best fish and chips we've had in ages, and we enjoyed them sitting on the Cobb with a tippie. Returning to *Blue Fox*, we saw the most amazing mackerel boil inside the harbour; the fish were jumping onto the pontoons! We rescued a few.

The next morning started windless but more friendly south-westerlies were forecast for later. Breakfast involved the unusual but surprise addition of some small easter eggs. We had an Easter egg hunt onboard on

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the Easter weekend and to our amazement, were still finding them months later! Infinitely more pleasant than finding the remnants of a loaf of bread tucked away and long forgotten.



Rhi, Imo, Shaun

Timing our 0750 departure for a fair tide around Portland Bill, we soon had fair breeze and approaching the outer passage for the Bill, our SOG climbed and climbed, almost into double figures. We were approximately 4nm off the light, but next time I would leave more sea room as the sea state was a tad uncomfortable.

With a strong wind on the quarter we ticked off the miles to Studland Bay in no time. The wind was a solid W5 now and after a long day's sailing we were glad to be able to shelter here for the night. It was a sunny evening so refreshing bucket showers were enjoyed/enforced on deck.

Now within easy striking distance of Lymington, we kept our eyes peeled for other Contessas. Sure enough, in the morning there were two others, *Windsong* and *Anna Louise*, anchored nearby and heading to the rally. In a W4/5 we set off first, with *Anna Louise* hot on our heels. 3 hours 40 minutes later we were tied up in Lymington, with 22nm on the log. This was an exhilarating sail, surfing goose-winged downwind with dry decks. Things were quite different for those harrowed sailors coming from the east.



CO26s rafted and 50th balloons

When we moored at the Dan Bran pontoon on Friday afternoon there were already a lot of Co26s there and more arriving every hour. The target was 50 boats, and in the end I think the total was pretty close to that. The atmosphere was great, everyone immediately having two things in common, sailing and Contessas. *Blue Fox* was dressed overall with the 'party flags' (already in the correct order, thanks to previous owner and member Tom Bourne), and happily joined

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the fleet.

Our additional crew, Rhiannon's sister, Imogen, and her partner, Shaun, arrived on Saturday morning and were given a full tour of *Blue Fox*; the forepeak definitely counts as ensuite accommodation, right? Now we had a packed boat to complement the weekend's busy social and sailing schedule. We were later told by Kit Rogers that if you try hard enough you can fit at least 4 people in the forepeak alone.

Saturday afternoon saw us drift gently down the Solent to anchor at Keyhaven Lake, just inside Hurst Spit. Here we anchored



Anchored in Keyhaven, Hurst Spit

for lunch and spent a glorious afternoon swimming and skimming stones off the Spit. Dinner at the Royal Lyminster Yacht Club was planned for the evening, and we left Hurst in good time to fit in a splash and bash at the Lyminster Sea Water Baths. Total-wipe-out! Feeling slightly battered and very much elated, we scrubbed up and headed back to the Dan Bran pontoon where the Rogers laid on a superb drinks party to open the evening, before a fantastic and jolly dinner in excellent company at the Royal Lyminster. Afterwards, *Blue Fox* somehow found herself festooned with 'Happy 50th' helium balloons...

Sunday saw the conclusion of the rally with a short sail over to Yarmouth for lunch. Again we were spoilt with the sunshine, but could have done with a bit more wind. After lunch we potted back to the Lyminster town quay, to drop off Shaun and Imo. For Rhi and I, our minds turned to our passage across the Channel. Whilst the wind was currently in the NW, there were strong southerlies in the forecast for Monday evening. We wanted to be snuggled up in Alderney long before they arrived.

First denial, then the familiar sinking feeling, and finally excitement set in yet again. It was time for action – no night's sleep before the passage. We left Lyminster at 2000 on Sunday evening, carrying the tide out the western Solent. The sun set as we passed the Needles, and we were flying. Things were looking good. Seven hours later we'd logged 40nm in the right direction, and brunch in St. Anne was looking feasible. Of course, a Channel crossing never works out like that, at least in our experience and we were soon becalmed. The next 10 hours or so were spent gently motoring

our way across. The wind was building from the south as we approached Alderney, and we could cut the engine and use the phenomenally strong tide to good effect to boost our VMG upwind. At 1300 we welcomed the safety of Braye harbour and picked up a mooring.

By that evening, conditions were pretty turbulent, with waves crashing over the breakwater. As darkness fell Rhi heard cries of 'HELP!' barely audible above the wind and waves. I radioed the water taxi to relay, and he went to investigate in a rib. Some poor soul, having tried to row an inflatable back to their yacht in a near gale in the dark, and been swept off course. They'd managed to grab hold of the last possible mooring on their way out of the harbour and into the treacherous Alderney race.

The weather the next day was indescribably foul, so we battered our way



Soggy Alderney

ashore in the water taxi and had a brilliant beef sandwich at Jack's Brasserie – more than worth a visit if you're on Alderney. Waterproofed head to toe, we tucked our heads into the wind and scrambled along the coast path to see the gannet colony at Les Etacs and look out over a very stormy Swinge channel. The standing waves with a strong spring tide were impressive from afar, but not something I'm in a rush to experience close up.

Downwind back to the town and we washed up at the Alderney museum, populated by similarly bedraggled sailors.

The story of the Nazi occupation is very engagingly told, so it's worth a visit.

Unique in the Channel Islands, there's a train line on Alderney, comprised of old London tube train carriages. The route even goes past 'Swiss Cottage'. It would have been fun to see this running but unfortunately services are limited to weekends only. After drying out a little at the sailing club, we headed back to the boat and, though sad not to see the island in the sun, we were keen to be off and leave the sogginess behind.

On Wednesday we set out for St Peter Port, Guernsey under blue skies but with a SW headwind. The way the tides were, we ended up beating with the tide under us – a bumpy combination especially once we got closer to the Little Russel. This was a wet but superb sail; *Blue Fox* cut nicely to windward and we loved every second of it. The wind was forecast to build again that evening, so St. Peter Port was full to the gunwhales. We suffered a classic diesel problem shortly after entering the harbour – all that bumping around had stirred up some gunk/sediment in the tank and

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with dwindling power we were lucky to get to the pontoon. Fortunately a filter change and fuel treatment solved it for the time being, but a full tank removal and clean has been added to the list for next winter.

This was the second time we'd visited Guernsey this year, having done a long weekend dash on the May bank holiday weekend. That time, thick fog descended just after we arrived and effectively dashed our chances of going exploring. We'd seen the potential though and were delighted to be back now, with a few days of settled weather in the offing. We sailed over to Shell beach on Herm for lunch after refuelling and filling up with water. As we were on springs and this is a shallow sloping seabed, we were anchored about a quarter of a mile off the beach, but the setting was lovely. We made lunch and studied the tides for our short passage to Sark, where we planned to anchor for the night.

It was quickly becoming apparent that there is nothing simple about the tides around these islands on springs. Our tidal streams atlas showed predictions every hour, but what happened in between those points seems to be very variable, and slack water seems not to exist. We were aiming for Dixcart Bay for shelter from the forecast Westerly, but from a couple of miles off could see big boats rolling side to side on the swell, so thought that La Grève de la Ville further north might be a better bet. Whether this was actually the case, we'll never know, but we can safely say that not much sleep was had that night! At La Grève de la Ville, all of the few visitor's moorings were taken, so we anchored close inshore in about 14m, with 8m to fall overnight. On the rising tide in the morning, at about sunrise, we took the chance to move to one of a pair of freshly vacated visitors' moorings, as we wanted to go ashore



Swimming and jumping at Herm

for the day. This mooring was very close to its neighbour, and I found myself at pains to explain to a new arrival that we would be swinging very differently from him on the tide and a collision was highly likely if he took the mooring. He disagreed, and we eventually moved off, soon to be replaced by another yacht. He was later seen to be populating his quarters with enormous fenders. Enough said!

Sark is beautiful, with tranquil coast paths and stunningly clear waters in the bays. We walked down to the southern tip, across the perilously perched 'La Coupée' track between Big Sark and Little Sark. The coast is spectacular, and the way of life a world away from the relative hustle and bustle of Guernsey. We enjoyed a delicious cream tea at La Sablonnerie on Little Sark, and then descended the steps from La Coupée to a pretty beach on the west side. It depends on one's definition of a step but by all accounts there were a lot of them, and we're sure there were more on the way back up.

After the fun and games of launching the dinghy off a rocky beach in a swell with no soggy bottoms, we were back on board. We wanted to land on Shell beach at Herm, having only really caught a distant glimpse of it the day before. So we set off to sail around the north tip of Sark and back to Herm, again anchoring quite a way off the beach to allow for the huge tidal range overnight. Early the next morning on the high tide we nosed our way in close, planning only to stay for a few hours. This beach at that time in the morning was a highlight of the adventure. The tripper boats from Guernsey hadn't arrived, and we had 700m of pristine sand almost to ourselves. It was magical, the water was warm, and we really didn't want to come home.

By the time we left Herm to sail home shortly before midday on 6 August, the anchorage was relatively mobbed. It's understandably a popular place. We had a favourable forecast for the return passage, albeit with the risk of some fog patches at either end of the passage. Sure enough, we soon sailed into some poor visibility, but thankfully we had a clear transit of the shipping lanes as darkness fell. Boat-made flatbreads appeared on the menu for dinner; all that kneading is definitely worth it. To our delight we were accompanied by dolphins for much of the night, their trails swept out with arcs of luminescence alongside us as we broad reached through the night. In the early hours the visibility came and went, but the loom of Start Point light finally appeared, signalling the arrival of the English coast, followed by the short hop to the Exe, and up to the mooring. We were fortunate this time to hit the Exe tide window bang on, and did not need a pit stop in Torbay or Babbacombe. Mooring up at SYC at 0915 on Sunday morning, we were happy to look back on an amazing 12 days on board. We'd had a brilliant time, logged miles and fun in equal measure and *Blue Fox* had performed admirably, especially thinking back to that lively beat down to St. Peter Port.

That was the last extended trip of the season, but there were a few more weekends of fun to be had before packing up for the winter. *Blue Fox* is currently tucked up in the Exeter canal, awaiting craning soon. Planning for the Isles of Scilly next year has begun!