

South-west from the Bohuslän Coast

The 2016 cruise of *Fera*

Nick and Stella Charman

Fera is a Tanton 43, in other words a 43 ft cat-ketch, with unstayed masts and wishbone booms. Built in 1985 in Taiwan, she has been in our family since 1987, since when she has carried us quickly and safely for many comfortable miles, mainly around Western Europe.

Our cruise in 2015 was interrupted suddenly by being struck by lightning in Lake Vanern, Sweden, May 2015 which I reported in last year's Journal. Until the spring of 2016, *Fera* was out of action, sitting in a shed near Vanersborg. I became very familiar with Gothenburg airport and car hire, in the deep-frozen Swedish winter, when most of the repair work was being done. In the end it seems we were lucky to an extent, as other than that in the main mast, little of the boat's wiring had been damaged. No hull or mast fabric damage was evident, but much of the electrical and electronic equipment had to be replaced, and a lot of the repair time was spent diagnosing problems, where repairs were a possibility. It is now clear that the strike's Electro Magnetic Pulse (EMP) had accounted for much of the damaged equipment, rather than direct over-voltages in the wiring. In the search for reliable replacement wind/depth/speed instruments, independent advice led us to refurbish the thirty-year-old

Stowe electro-mechanical ones, rather than choose to install one of the new generation of computer-based instruments. It seems the modern instrument packages are likely to be far less reliable than the older type. As I do not see a strong need for high functionality,



Fera's Swedish deep winter quarters

networked instruments aboard, I decided to keep the older technology, which is said to be more reliable and longer-lived, rather than replace them with the more expensive state-of-the-art.

On a financial note, the insurance company has been supportive, and played with a straight bat, which was a relief.

April 2016 saw *Fera* finally being re-launched and put alongside in

South-west from the Bohuslän Coast

Vanersborg for sea trials of all the changed, and retained equipment. One particular puzzle was the compass, showing strange variances, apparently affected by the lightning, but with oddly variable effects. Initially, thinking I was in need of a compass adjuster, and being slow-witted, it took me a while to spot that the compass variability changed with the



passing electric trains only a short distance from the berth. Once away from that berth the compass settled into its usual reliability. I had not realised that the big electric motors on trains had such a large magnetic field. Fortunately we do not often encounter electric railways at sea.

We were now far from the UK company from which we annually hire our liferafts. In view of our disrupted plans, the difficulty and expense of shipping such objects, we decided that this year we would take an alternative policy and sail only with the dinghy inflated, whether on deck, or under tow. I had no plans to be far from shore this year, and took a

Nick and Stella Charman

calculated risk to rely on our own dinghy should we need independent floatation.

West Sweden in May had excellent weather for the first two weeks of our cruising so rudely interrupted in 2015. The Trollhatten lock management were kind, when it was explained why we were rather delayed in using the 2015 canal licence, and let us use the locks and canal to Gothenburg free of further charge.

An interesting seamanship lesson was taught me during the descent in one of Trollhatten's deep ship locks. I usually use a bowline to the cleat at the bitter end of warps for mooring. I reasoned that it leaves more room on the cleat for the returned working part of the warp. In this case, the warps were to be surged around a rather small rusty bollard set in the wall of the lock, and as the lock-water level fell away rapidly, the stern line, now leading vertically upwards and back around the bollard high above, started to jam up in the fairlead; so I became unable to surge more warp. Very quickly the stern started to rise out of the water, and the greater the weight applied, the better the friction and the locking jam in the fairlead. The image of *Fera* hanging above the water by the stern cleat suddenly became a serious possibility. As I was reaching across for the companionway

knife to cut the warp, the weight of the warp, the weight of the boat overcame the strength of the warp, which snapped. The stern dropped back a metre or so into the water with no damage.

I am sure no other RCC member would make the same error, but it



Fera underway

was lesson-time for me. That is, if the possibility of needing to release it under load, very fast, is real, I will use a simple figure-eight wrapping turn on the cleat for warps, with no locking half-hitch. The problem would have become far more serious if the warp had been too strong, with no sharp knife to hand.

Although the Lilla Bommen marina in Gothenburg is centrally convenient for seeing this lively city, it proved rather dirty, prone to wash from the ferries and not very secure. So, in search of a place to leave *Fera* for a few days, we moved on after our first crew departed for the railway station and airport. On the south bank of the estuary to Gothenburg, at

Langedrag, is the home of the Goteborgs Kungliga Segel Sällskap (GKSS), the Gothenburg Royal Sailing Club. This is the much calmer, hospitable and cleaner marina, and with a tram stop just outside the premises, it is very convenient from which to visit the city of Gothenburg.

However, the lure of lovely weather, a gentle southerly, and a little more time left in the diary, saw us sailing north along the coast, among the lovely Bohuslän islands. We chose to leave *Fera* for a few days in Marstrand.

This is a port with excellent bus communications for Gothenburg airport. Marstrand is a small island with a rather dark forbidding castle and a town with a varied and colourful island feel. After we came home, we received a call from Chris Russell (RCC), who



Stella watching Bohuslän islands sliding by in the May sun

by chance, had moored his new Sweden 38 *Associate* there, and found it was alongside *Fera*. Sadly our hope of meeting in the Swedish Bohuslän islands later never materialised.

Exploring the Bohuslän coast north of Gothenburg this summer has opened another lovely cruising coast to us. There are many delightful anchorages and small harbours, and this area is the home of some famous boat-building yards (Halberg Rasse, Vindo, Malo, Naiad), many on the island of Orust. To explore this coast, as well as the invaluable RCC Pilotage Foundation *The Baltic Sea* pilot, and our own FPI, the local harbour guides are also valuable as a detailed resource, as well as the electronic charts now on our computer tablet, and on the chartplotter. To do proper justice to exploring this coast a full summer could easily be spent between the Norwegian border and Gothenburg.

It is an area of rocks, deep water, and many islands in which there are many small marinas. At times it is a little hard to find a quiet anchorage for the night, but there are opportunities for the Baltic rock-moor, deep in islet-surrounded, narrow channels, rather like the better known Stockholm archipelago. A further advantage of this coast for the UK-based sailor, is that it is the 'right side' of Sweden for a summer cruise from the UK and back, and every bit as pretty as the more famous eastern Swedish and Finnish archipelagos.

Nick and Stella Charman

On the north-west corner of the isle of Tjorn, we encountered our first severe thunderstorm and strong squall, since being struck by lightning the previous spring. Look at this face. Was it worried? Well, trying to be realistic, not really, but I have to say that, given our shocking experience the previous year, I was uneasy directly under the storm cloud, among close-by lightning and the loud thunder crashes – more than I had been in past years. It came upon us very fast, and in an attempt to keep the helmsman dry, as he had not had time to don the proper oilies, we handed him our ship's umbrella, as a stop gap measure. Unusual a sight as it was, helming with a large red umbrella, it did a good job until the strong gusts of wind blew it inside out. But by this time, I had donned the right rain protection and was able to relieve him at the helm. Like such squalls, it was gone as quickly as it arrived, without incident.

We spent Midsummer Day, an important Swedish holiday and celebration, in Uddevalla, not because it is a pretty or interesting town, which it is not, but because it was a good place for a crew change, or in my case, a quick trip back to the UK for a couple of meetings. It was also a day to reflect on the shocking result of the previous day's Brexit referendum. When I came to the Swedish immigration counter at Gothenburg just after the referendum vote had been announced, proffering my passport, I asked if I was now 'allowed in'. That poor joke was met with a warm smile, and the word 'Always!' It was some comfort, I suppose.

One lovely, long, June evening was spent in the old fishing port of Gulholmen with the crew of *Hepzibah* and Ranald Campbell (RCC), who were on their way north to visit the Oslo fjord.

As we also wanted to explore the Danish southern area this summer, we turned the bow southwards late in June. A period of strong winds and rain lengthened the time for our journey south to Helsingfors and Copenhagen. So, as is common with such coastal cruising, we found ourselves stuck for a few days, in this case in Falkenberg, on the western Swedish coast. It was also a good place to await a new crew member, flying into Copenhagen.

Although you might think from a chart that the Kattegat is relatively sheltered water, as *The Baltic Sea* pilot says, the wave pattern can be very uncomfortable and difficult in strong winds. I believe, like the entirely fresh water of the Baltic, the shallow and brackish water there can make for high frequency, steep and tumbling waves, albeit in the absence of any underlying deep water swell. In any case, as a result, we know more than we had planned about the history of Falkenberg, which, it turns out, was a popular spot in the 19th century for English salmon fishermen.

In Sweden we had been struck how often businesses, such as shops, ports and cafes are very lightly staffed; you transact with a machine, and pretty much everything, including taxis, are paid for by credit card. The problem with this, while it may be very efficient, is that the opportunity

South-west from the Bohuslän Coast

to have friendly chats with local people to hear about local colour is very much more limited, in contrast with the French ports and towns we know so well. Refuting this generalisation, Falkenburg's riverside mooring facilities for yachts are provided by a small sailing club, manned by friendly volunteers, and we enjoyed much chat and information about local places and events with the very hospitable team there. The free loans of their bicycles was very handy for exploring, and whiling away a few days.

Helsingfors (Elsinore) castle, and its Shakespearian connections as the scene of Hamlet, was not to be missed. Mooring in the shadow of this impressive castle, we noticed another RCC burgee across the water, on *Sea the Stars*, David and Suzy Watson. Sadly they were not aboard, and so we were unable to meet them. Next stop was Copenhagen, a visit enriched by meeting one of Stella's Danish cousins who happened to be an accredited city guide, and who gave us a very privileged tour of the sights and history.

We spent much of late July and August among the islands of the Danish Little Belt, an area of shallow water, and channels narrowed by mud, in stark contrast to the rocks and deep water of the northern Swedish coast. A short, sharp and unpleasant summer cold at the end of July put me hard aground in my bunk for a day or two in Flensburg, but then, with a new, young crew aboard, we set out towards home. Knowing that motoring through the Kiel Canal lay ahead, we topped off with fuel in Sonderborg, before leaving the Flensburg estuary. We had been advised by a



View from the cockpit in Flensburg

German neighbour in Flensburg that the Danes still sold “proper” marine diesel, whereas in Germany the diesel has a higher proportion of bio-fuel, which is a fine habitat for the diesel “bug”.

A fun and fast 8 or 9 knot reach south in F6 westerly winds off the Jutland shore close to windward took us south to the Kiel estuary, and then into the Kiel canal at Holtenau. I discovered that this canal transit would be free of charge, as there had been an accident earlier in the year, when a yachtsman fell off a quay ladder he had been climbing in order to pay the dues, in Holtenau. As a result, they had made the canal transits free of charge for yachts, until a safer charging method had been developed: a case of another's misfortune becoming a benefit for us. After she has read

Nick and Stella Charman

this here, I expect I shall get a flea in my ear from the FPI Secretary for not reporting this data at the time.

At Rendsburg, stopping for a night in our progress along the Kiel Canal, we found a group of yachtsmen, both Dutch and German, who felt they did not want to progress further west, as they had heard that the continuous strong westerly winds had ‘stopped up’ the Elbe for yachts, and the marinas of Cuxhaven were now all full. We ignored their advice, and carried on. We felt justified, as it turned out not to be so, but was one of those rumour mills where people feed on each other’s anxiety. When we arrived in Cuxhaven on the Elbe we went into the City marina, to the east of the more commonly used SVC marina that has easy access to the Elbe. We found it to be a calmer, better sheltered spot than the SVC marina we had visited three years before. It had, however, become clear to me that the continuing, strong westerly winds forecast for the next week or so were going to make an Elbe departure very difficult in the near future. Pilotage advice is not to leave the Elbe estuary with the ebb into a wind which has anything west in it, above force 4; the steep wind-over-tide seas in the Elbe estuary have a dangerous reputation for small vessels. In order to avoid this Elbe ‘trap’, I had considered diverting north off the Kiel canal to use



Staande Mast Route

the Eider, and thence into the North Sea with Helgoland as a convenient stop a little offshore. However, this escape route was closed to us due to a broken bridge mechanism on the Eider.

Leaving Baltic waters, we reflected on being impressed with the high-trust Swedish and Danish societies. By this I mean that the attitude



The iconic windmill in Wilhelmstadt, and *Fera*

and culture of the huge majority of those we had met there was one in which most people would automatically assume an openness, a respect and a trust for you, attracting the same in return. This was true during our lengthy stay in Sweden working with the small team who repaired *Fera* after the lightning strike. Dick and Anne Netterlid who run the marina in Vanersborg, Sweden, and who had taken care of us after the lightning strike in 2015, became good friends. They insisted that when visiting *Fera* under



Maltese Falcon in Rotterdam – mast handling

repair, instead of using a hotel, I should stay, as their guest, in a small cottage on their farm. I was often invited to join them for dinner, and had good conversations into the evenings; I felt very fortunate to have come into the company of such warm people, but am inclined to think their kindness was not unusual in these lands of civilised Scandinavians.

With no immediate prospect of a weather change in late August, I decided to leave *Fera* in Cuxhaven, and went home. A week or so later, in early September, the weather pattern changed finally, but I was then unable to leave the UK, and take *Fera* out of the Elbe. Cindy Abbott (RCC), a very experienced delivery skipper, who owns a sister boat to *Fera*, came to the rescue and with a crew of her husband Philip, and my young friend Tom Young, kindly shifted *Fera* into the Dutch canals for me, and left her in Groningen. Apparently the change in the weather pattern had been rather like a cork in a bottle being removed, and there was a flood of previously held up, small vessels leaving the Elbe after a long period of strong westerlies in German Bight.

Nick and Stella Charman

The final days of this summer's cruise have been spent motoring through the well-travelled Dutch canals, along the *Staande Mast Route*, to Middleburg, where *Fera* will spend this winter. The Dutch canals are a place to have friends aboard, who do not care to go to sea. And what pretty towns there are in Holland. Notable examples are Haarlem, Dokkum and Leeuwarden, and of course Wilhelmstadt, where the uncrowded lateness of the season let us moor alongside that iconic windmill. While passing through Rotterdam, awaiting a railway bridge opening, we were witness to a fascinating super-yacht operation, where one of the three masts from the 88 metre yacht *Maltese Falcon* was being craned back into position. *Maltese Falcon* is famous for her efficient square rig with unstayed masts, called a Dynarig. *Fera* also being a yacht with unstayed masts, if slightly smaller, I was tempted to check with the yard team if they needed any advice in stepping such masts, but fortunately the bridge opened, so we had to go through before I could embarrass either my crew, or myself.

A final note about the lightning strike damage: During the year, certain electronic equipment that had passed muster in April began to fail. I was warned that lightning damage can weaken equipment, which fails a little later. A conversation with my insurance company contact confirmed it to be their experience too. So, during the year we have had to replace the electronic connection box for the log, the electronic barometer and also the entertainment system, which developed an irritating hum whenever any part of it was connected to a mains power source. Is this the end of it? I cannot be sure!

The Long Boat-Hook Bow-thruster

Fera does not have a 'normal' bow-thruster. I have rather arrogantly held that such devices were for those who had difficulty with boat handling. Heavy expensive things they are too. I was amused to see a bow-thruster on a small yacht become immediately clogged, when momentarily used in a weedy harbour in Vordingborg, Denmark. The yacht had to retire to deeper water, where the skipper dived to clear it. Ho-ho, I thought.

In the tight box-berths of Denmark and Sweden, and in the locks and canals of Holland, however, I admit that it is invaluable at low speeds to have a means of pushing the bow, and sometimes stern, sideways, particularly in stronger winds. I always have a long (3 metre) boat hook aboard, and, in the hands of a clearly instructed crewmember, it does great service as a close-quarters stern and bow thruster, so long as there is something to push against. It also only costs £50 or so, even if the long ones are a little hard to find. The only disadvantage of this device is that it is prone to answering back.