

A series of unfortunate events...

Speedwell in the North Sea

Christopher Hamblin



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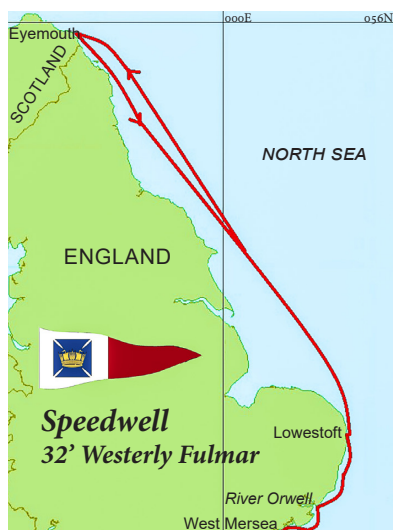
There is a flat calm, disturbed only by *Speedwell's* gentle bow wave and her spluttering exhaust. It is not yet dawn but the visibility is good. I can see the triple green flash of the Bench Head buoy a mile and a half astern and beyond that the double red flash of the NW Knoll. Ahead of me lies Mersea Island, asleep. A high light appears, at first green but then red. A yacht comes close on a reciprocal course, motoring. No steaming light. No sail set. No sign of the crew.

Speedwell is heading for the Nass beacon, a few miles away in the approaches to the Mersea Quarters. The beacon is not yet visible. It could appear very soon, dead ahead, but I am going to throttle right back and loiter, to wait for dawn. It will be more relaxing to

motor through the crowded moorings and pick up my buoy in daylight. Now is a good time to put on the kettle.

By 0600 *Speedwell* is on her mooring and I am sorting things out in readiness for going ashore in the club launch. This is on duty from 0830, so I have plenty of time for tidying up and for reflecting on the cruise.

About six weeks ago, I was ready to set off for the Orkney Islands, en route for the Outer Hebrides and maybe St Kilda. Various new bits of gear had been installed, including a windowed cockpit canopy which can be zipped onto the sprayhood and a demountable mainsheet track which frees the cockpit space and allows the canopy to be erected. As a young man I would have



Christopher Hamblin

scoffed at the cockpit canopy, but I know now that it can add enormously to the comfort of the boat when in harbour or at anchor.

A few days before the scheduled departure date there came the unwelcome discovery that, after the engine had been running for a few minutes, the overheating alarm would go off. The engine has direct seawater cooling, the water pump was working and there seemed to be plenty of water coming out of the exhaust. It was a bit of a mystery. An engineer worked on the problem for 19 hours and, after expensive replacement parts were ordered from Denmark and fitted, he reported that he had now run the engine for over an hour without the alarm sounding. I repeated the test: no alarm. We were ready to sail.

I was joined by my long time crew, Peter who was impatient to get some miles under the keel. He was not impressed when I told him that on our first day we would only be sailing from the Blackwater to the Orwell – a shakedown passage. We both enjoyed that first day and our quiet anchorage that night, but Peter was irritated by my refusal to commit to the idea of a non-stop passage from the Orwell to NE Scotland.

The weather next day was rather grim and as we passed through Harwich Harbour on our way out to sea we were called up by an incoming yacht. We were warned that it was pretty rough outside and that southerly gales were imminent. We reassured our kindly caller that we would be going downwind under a headsail and he sounded relieved on our behalf. Once we had crossed the busy shipping lane we started our passage northward up the Sledway. We reduced sail progressively and by the time we had reached Orford Ness in a very confused sea, Peter was an unhappy person. It seemed sensible to spend the night in Lowestoft, rather than to press on.

It was rather crowded inside the Royal Norfolk and Suffolk marina. The first vacant berth looked a bit tight so we went to the far end, where there was just enough pontoon space beyond a very beamy and brightly lit motor cruiser. The



Speedwell

A series of unfortunate events...

most practicable approach, it seemed to me, was to go past the cruiser, make a three or four point turn and advance very slowly downwind toward the cruiser, with Peter ready to step onto the pontoon with a midships line to secure us. It did not go well. The cruiser's lights and a single pontoon light, far from making it easy, instead created a chiaroscuro effect, like something out of a renaissance painting. I was dazzled by the lights and could not see the pontoon. I do not know how much Peter could see. Next morning the harbourmaster said "I see you have broken a pontoon light", adding for good measure, "I know it was you, because it was recorded on video." He was quite kind about it, though, and said that this happened at least a dozen times per season.

After an excellent breakfast in the club, Peter and I had just returned to *Speedwell* when he announced that he would not be accompanying me any further on this cruise. He intended to catch a train later that day or on the following day. If I wanted, however, he would stay aboard to help me sail back to West Mersea. As the whole cruise had been planned on the understanding that Peter would be with me throughout, apart from perhaps a week in the middle, this came as an unwelcome surprise. Peter assured me that he still had complete confidence in me, but he had decided the cruise was too risky. I still have not discovered what he meant by this, but it made me think very hard. Would it be irresponsible of me to press on, single-handed? Was I too old at 83, to be cruising on my own? Might it not, in any case, be more enjoyable if I had company? I had no answer to the first two questions but the answer to the third question was pretty clearly 'Yes'.

My nephew Angus was enthusiastic about joining me for a few days but would not be able to spare more time than that. Also, he could not join me immediately. I had to wait five days for his arrival but it was not difficult to find make and mend jobs to do aboard.

The day before Angus arrived, I was helping the crew of another yacht to berth alongside *Speedwell*, when a blue Nicholson 35 made a spectacular entry to the marina under genoa. Things could have turned very nasty when her cast off genoa sheet fouled a mooring cleat on the pontoon, but fortunately there were several helpers standing by and all went well. The yacht was *Fidelity of Devon*, with owners John and Liz Langdon (RCC) on board. Apparently, their dramatic entry was necessitated by a complete engine failure.

Angus after a hard day



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One of the first things that Angus did was to observe that the EPIRB battery was a week past its expiry date. After a brief struggle with my conscience, I decided to have the EPIRB serviced before going any further. The nearest place offering that service was Charity and Taylor in Great Yarmouth. Over dinner in the club that night, Liz offered to drive us there next morning. She had travelled south soon after *Fidelity's* arrival in the marina, in order to collect their car. Thanks to her, Angus and I were ready to leave harbour after a delay of only half a day, with a newly serviced EPIRB.

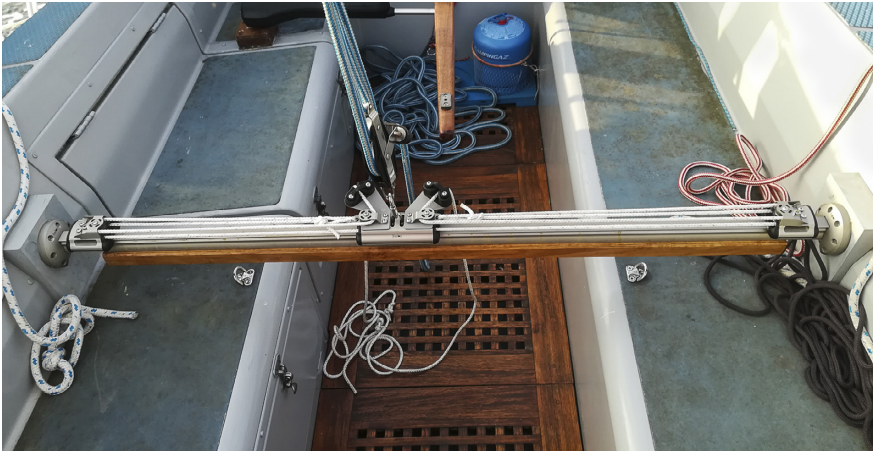
There was a brisk southerly and the ebb was racing northward. We had just cleared the harbour entrance when the engine overheating alarm began to scream at us. It was not realistic to make sail and re-enter harbour without the engine, so we gritted our teeth and slowly clawed our way back into harbour and the shelter of the marina. After sitting in our berth for a while, we restarted the engine and ran it for an hour, without a squeak from the alarm. We went off for a fish and chip lunch and then tried the engine again. This time, the alarm started within minutes.

It was time for advice from an engineer. He could not come to us until the next day and when he did arrive he could not give a definitive diagnosis. The thermostat opened as it should when tested in a pan of hot water. He recommended that we buy an infrared thermometer and point it at various parts of the engine while it was running. The thermostat was intended to maintain a running temperature of 60°C, so ideally we should not see parts of the engine registering higher temperatures than that. If the alarm sounded while the engine temperatures looked OK, this would indicate a faulty sensor.

When we tried the thermometer test procedure we found that the engine temperature was mostly in the 55-60°C range but that there were two hotspots at about 80°C. Partially reassured by this, we set off again.

The weather had changed and we now had very light airs from between west and south. There followed a day of motor-sailing before a proper sailing wind came in. In the middle of the night we were trying to take a third reef in the mainsail but there was an inexplicable jam in the reefing lines, so we simply dropped the sail for the rest of the night. It was easy to sort out during the hot, quiet morning that followed, but the wind increased again as evening approached. By 2000 we were running under mainsail only, because the tiller pilot was having difficulty with the seas and the genoa had frequently been taken aback. A few minutes later, two big seas threw us first one way and then the other. We gybed twice and there was a very loud bang. I had not tensioned the gybe preventer sufficiently. The demountable mainsheet track had been wrenched from its end fittings and had flown straight across the cockpit in front of me. It had gone right through the mainsail, and torn it almost from leech to luff. It was now rather important that we should not gybe again while trying to recover the mainsail, because flailing from the end of the boom there was a metre and a half of alloy girder track mounted on a 50mm x 50mm oak spar of the same length. When we had got this sorted we examined the

A series of unfortunate events...



Problem mainsheet track

track and its spar and the end fittings on the cockpit sides. There were no signs of breakage or twisting so we could not understand how the gear had failed.

Our nearest port was Eyemouth. We arrived there in the early morning and were directed to a berth next to another *Speedwell*, a fishing boat from Leith. Brendan, the deputy harbour master, was welcoming and helpful and said that Gordon, an assistant harbour-master, would advise us on where to find a sailmaker.

After breakfast, Angus and I wandered around the little town, watching the well fed seals, who were charming the day trippers, and the anglers coming ashore

The other *Speedwell* in Eyemouth



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Eyemouth Beach

from their fishing trips. One of the anglers succeeded in getting a very large seal to take fish from his hand. A local entrepreneur had set up a seal feeding station on the harbour wall, where for a modest fee you could hire a pole, a line armed with a clothes peg and a small supply of fish. We observed family groups on the expanse of sandy beach, gradually shedding their clothing, with some brave souls actually dashing in and out of the sea. We sat on a bench and ate some enormous ice creams. After buying bread and milk and made our way back to *Speedwell*, where Angus embarked on a marathon session of electrical fault finding and repair. The least I could do in return was to take him out for dinner in Eyemouth's best restaurant.

Angus left next morning and I was visited soon after by Gordon, the assistant harbour-master. He told me that the nearest sail repair facility was in Port Edgar, a suburb of Edinburgh. This would mean hiring a car or a taxi. Either way, I would be facing a transport bill of several hundred pounds on top of the cost of sail repair. Meanwhile, Gordon wanted to introduce me to Simon, a local yachtsman who had just bought a new mainsail and would be happy to give me his old one. Simon owned a UFO 27, so the mainsail was very small but he thought it could be helpful in either getting me home or to Port Edgar. He brought the sail to me next day and we fitted it to *Speedwell's* mast and boom. It had a luff rope rather than slides and the rope, being rather stout, made hoisting a bit difficult. With liberal use of silicon grease, we succeeded. There followed an hour or two of yarnning with tea and fruitcake.

The sail had no battens, so after Simon had left, I pulled it down and set about cutting my own mainsail battens to size. When I had fitted them all, I tried to rehoist the sail to see how it looked. The job was impossible. I could not hold the gate open, feed the oversized luff rope into it and haul on the halyard at the same time. I had just ruined about £100 worth of battens. My enthusiasm for this cruise

A series of unfortunate events...

was now seriously diminished and I decided to sail for home next day. However, next day saw fishing boats coming into harbour because of the weather. They managed to trap me on the inside berth, so I stayed put.

The day after that was glorious and I got away after filling up with diesel and paying my harbour dues. The wind was very light and variable, sometimes non-existent, so motor-sailing was necessary. These conditions prevailed for the rest of my passage back to Lowestoft, where I called in for diesel and a night's rest. It had taken 52 hours during which I was never in my bunk for more than 15 minutes at a time. During the morning of the second day, the engine had started 'hunting': slowing right down and then picking up speed again. After a few minutes, it had stopped completely. Dipping the tank showed that there was still more than a gallon of fuel left, so I suspected that there was an intermittent blocking of the tank outlet. I poured 20 more litres into the tank and restarted the engine. The overheating alarm sounded immediately. I stopped the engine and tried again an hour later. This time the alarm sounded but the thermometer showed the engine temperature to be generally OK. The alarm stopped after a few minutes.

In Lowestoft my arrival coincided with the annual prize-giving ceremony, so I was unable to refuel that night. Next morning, access to the fuel berth was still not allowed, because lots of the local Broads boats were being craned out in that corner. It was not until late morning that the harbour master took pity on me and called for a pause in the craning operations.

The south going flood did not start until nearly 1800, so *Speedwell* was punching the tide all afternoon and making slow progress against the predominantly southerly breezes. By 1830, we were still only opposite Orford Ness. A couple of hours later, as we were nearing the busy entrance to Harwich Harbour, the overheating alarm went off again. The thermometer showed that several parts of the engine were at temperatures of over 80°C, so I stopped the engine. There was no wind and the flood was carrying us toward the shipping channel at about three knots. However, I knew that I could anchor, if necessary, before reaching it. I was monitoring the harbour radio traffic and knew which of the enormous container ships were on the move. The harbour authority makes it clear that it does not want yachtsmen to call it up, so it was up to me to decide when, where and how to cross the shipping channel. After waiting for a huge ship to pass ahead of me, I started the engine and with the overheating alarm screaming, crossed to the other side. Whereupon the alarm immediately stopped.

What followed was a peaceful and completely uneventful passage down the coast to the River Blackwater and to my mooring at West Mersea. It had been a voyage rich in incident. Perhaps next year, things will go more smoothly.