

The Great Escape of 2020

Across Lyme Bay with the Virus at my Heels

Paul Heiney



Wild Song nestled comfortably in Northney Marina, Chichester harbour, having just been launched after a sparkling repaint on Hayling Island over the winter. I was very happy to be afloat again, fiddling with all those little fitting-out issues that the new season brings. She felt in good order, and so did I. But out in the real world, where it was now late March, all was not well. I was soon to feel the pressure.



Wild Song with her new livery ready for a mad dash westwards

But for the moment I was in a safe enough marina, even if my berth was costing more than I expect to pay for a hotel room, but there's no shop close by for even basic supplies - not one that I found, anyway - though there is a garage which is branded 'Applegreen'. Strangely, it neither sold apples nor anything with any greenness about it from a nutritional point of view. But it did have a coffee shop, as small compensation.

I had been in there most days while fitting out, but on the third day the atmosphere changed. Tables and chairs were taped off as if the place had become a crime scene, the girl now spoke to me sternly through a white mask with the look of someone fresh from a tough day in an operating theatre. Overnight, the COVID

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threat had started to be taken seriously. Customers scuttled in and out, unwilling to breathe other people's air, viewing every other human with suspicion.

Fitting out a boat alone is very nearly a perfect exercise in distancing and isolation, so although I'd been following the growing crisis on the radio, I hadn't allowed it to affect my thinking in any way; certainly I couldn't see how it would disrupt my plan to leave in a couple of days and return the boat to her paid for mooring in Dartmouth. But now I had to think again. The word 'lockdown' was now being used and it had a chilling feel to it, not unlike a 'gale force 8, imminent' coming through the VHF. And there were financial implications too; at the nightly rate I was paying, the cost of a few months imprisoned here brought me out in a sweat.

Fitting out was abandoned, tools put away, sails bent on. I checked the weather; light, possible fair wind later! I checked the tides and found them conveniently running to the west in the Solent that evening. Everything looked good to go. An old sailing chum, Alasdair, lived a short drive away, and he was hastily phoned and told to grab his sleeping bag, prise himself away from his roaring log fire, and get

himself onboard as fast as he could. We were going to sea.

He had been onboard a few days earlier to give me a hand down the ridiculously shallow channel that leads to and from the Hayling Yacht Company. I should feel at home with liverish mud on either side of me having done all my early sailing in the Thames Estuary but I fear too many years



Mud, mud, glorious mud as far as the eye can see - Hayling Island at low water.

in the deep waters of the west country have eroded my nerve for ditch crawling. Although it was nearly the top of springs, the echo sounder was nudging zero for very long periods of time as we weaved our way out, should we have gone aground I wondered if my first action should be to get the anchor down, or perhaps the Commodore's flag should be struck first. When the needle eventually nudged up to show two metres depth, I gave thanks.

Having entered Chichester after the previous year's Beaulieu Meet to find it dead low water on the bar, but just high enough for us to scrape in with no sea running, I felt I had the measure of this place. Confidently, we dropped the lines in the fading light of the day and waved a glad farewell to that marina, and headed for the Solent.

Solent sailing is another of those habits I have got out of, but the one nagging

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doubt that I remembered from years gone by resurfaced. I could never be certain which fort was which in the long line of them that marches outwards from Portsmouth. It matters, so I spent the early part of the evening running up and down from cockpit to chart table. Why did I feel so nervous? Was there something nasty creeping up behind me?



Paul

the kettle to calm things down, then sat at the chart table and started to do my sums. The race was now on; Dartmouth before the virus strangled my plan, or bust. 'Feels a bit like the Great Escape' I said to Alasdair. He nodded in agreement, his mouth full of tea and biscuits.

Had I calculated a fair tide at the Needles on our arrival, I would certainly have carried on that night and headed straight for Portland Bill. It was flat, oily calm and I had just sufficient diesel to cross Lyme Bay. But already we were riding the fair tide westwards and I reckoned that by the time we were at Hurst it would be turning foul, as it was a big tide there was no point fighting it. With the Beaulieu River now out of bounds for anchoring, tucking ourselves in behind Hurst remained the only option.

In the still air and gathering darkness, mist filled in shortly after Newtown Creek was abeam and with no breeze it thickened into a light fog. We crept our way out of the deep water with no sight of anything ashore, not even the lighthouse, and were guided by the plotter, something I usually think of as an admission of failure. The anchor went down in three metres. I wondered how close to shore we were? I looked up. The Hurst Light was towering above us so we were quite close, if not too close. Never mind.

A robust, hot supper was stowed away and then I turned once again to the weather forecast. It was now showing with great confidence a strong wind from the north east by six o'clock the following morning. Perfect! Since the tide started to run in our favour from eight there seemed no reason not to have a night's deep and relaxing slumber.

It was getting dark by the time we were at Horse Sand, or was it No Man's Land? Better check, again. I listened to the gloomy six o'clock news and the pundits' voices were all speaking with great conviction of how life as we know it was about to come to an end. Then, just as my mind was beginning to wander, another nervous thought crossed my mind. I remembered how, some years ago, I'd nearly come to grief on the Ryde Sands and could remember the first hard bump to this day. Why do those cursed sands stick out so far? I felt twitchy, feeling the pressure, so boiled

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The wind didn't come. The following morning was as murky as the night before, the wind as absent. There were now the first hints of the muddy, ebbing tide running south from Keyhaven, just beginning to work in our favour, so we got up the anchor in haste. I listened to the news and the viral gloom sounded even more depressing. The enemy had not gone away and the race was still on.

Riding the fast, fair tide, engine running, we fled through the Needles and in no time at all we seemed to shoot past Anvil Point, and shortly afterwards the mist lifted just enough to reveal that hump of land so recognisable as Portland Bill. I did some more careful calculations. It was clearly going to be engine all the way to Dartmouth, and the diesel might just last out.

By lunch, Portland Bill was abeam five miles to the north and we were rapidly slowing in the now adverse tide. Then, out of nowhere, a breeze touched my cheek. The Windex had been lost in the boatyard over the winter and so I raised a wet finger to confirm it was out of the north east - a fair wind, and a freshening one! "We'll make it now" I said, with the renewed confidence of a man who saw glimmers of daylight as he tunnelled his way out of captivity.

By teatime it was getting seriously fresh and lumpy with a strengthening wind over tide, and chilly. The second reef went in the main as everything started to twang - a good 25/30 knots of fair wind now. I had earlier calculated on a dawn arrival but was now confident we might make it for supper and an early bed.

Then the military intervened. Friend or foe? A sombre grey outline appeared, far larger than anything I had ever seen in those waters. What the hell was it? A cliff face of threatening grey steel seemed to block our way. An aircraft carrier, a big one! The brand new HMS *Prince of Wales*, on exercise or there to arrest us for some Covid infringement? I overheard him on the radio telling another yacht that they were on exercise and he was now setting a course towards Torquay. Probably for a night on the town.

I have crossed Lyme Bay westwards many times and there is no greater satisfaction than to raise either the light on Berry Head, or Start Point, depending on how careful you have been with your steering. Both were now visible and white water tumbled around us and the boat powered on. With the Mewstone left to starboard, we crept up the Dart to find a river devoid of any traffic of any kind, the shops and cafes dark. It was creepily quiet. We were the only thing on the move as I groped into my berth.

I was happy to be there because not only had I beaten the virus, I had made my great escape from that marina and its threat of expensive imprisonment. If I'm honest, to have escaped that felt like a greater victory than to get one up on the plague.

And what happened next? That was the question on all our minds. What was going to happen now? It turned out that after I'd left her safe and secure on the Dart, I didn't return to the boat for another four months. Even then it was only for a modest jaunt down to Falmouth and back. A strange season.