

What Goes Around Comes Around

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Back in the beginnings of time or, more prosaically, 1974 when I bought my first sailing boat, Iain Scott was my key man. In 2017, the tables were turned and I had an opportunity to repay earlier sailing debts.

Picture the scene, Shoreham and an idyllic mooring outside a pub. From its terrace the slim blue and mahogany lines of a YM Senior could

be fully appreciated. All this for £300 and £3 a year for the mooring. In no time at all a deal was struck and the ship was mine.

One of the high points of early ownership came in February shortly after my purchase of *Aquarius*. Iain and I found ourselves trapped a little downstream of the mooring on the River Adur when the anchor fouled on some underwater obstruction. Such was the *esprit de corps* on this ship that we tossed a coin



Aquarius

to see which of us, clad only in underwear, would dive into the icy depths to retrieve it. I think Iain must just have finished reading *Scott of the Antarctic* to have consented to such a plan, but he did and he lost the toss. It was with much admiration that I saw his noble frame cleave the waters as he plunged into the murky depths. From this point on he was known as 'Iain of Shoreham' and thus joined Laurence and Clive in having that rare distinction of being associated forever with a place and time.

My ambition knew no bounds and in next to no time I had bought the hulls of a 30' Piver Trimaran. *Aquarius* had to go, but she was destined to return. The tailor friend who bought her, sank her and I bought *Aquarius* back for a song. My centre of operations was now Richmond, so I decided to sail her back, Iain volunteered for this, my very first passage on a sailing boat.

By now I had read every book in the local library that had anything to do with boats. From this reading I had learned that preparation was very important and from the copious notes that I made before the trip I can see that I took this to heart and left nothing to chance. For example clothes were so important that I thought it necessary to include my fridge suit, a garment acquired from a jumble sale and previously used by deep-freeze workers. This should cope with the cold nights and days. I also carried my



trusty cagoule to serve as my oilskins. I clearly expected frequent dousings, according to the listed six jumpers and sweaters I lugged aboard. You can see from all this that I was well prepared sartorially and the navigation was equally well served. Projections

of tides and distances went hand in hand with bearings and landmarks that, hopefully, we would encounter on the way to the London River.

The late evening of that 28 March found Iain and myself quivering with excitement in our bunks. We were due to start at 0400. With the freezing cold adding a shiver to the already quivering flesh, sleep was out of the question. 0400 finally arrived and we cast off into the dark and onto the ebbing waters of the Adur, placing our lives and our trust once again in those fates that support the newcomer to this fine sport.

The sails were quickly raised, but there was little wind, so the Ailsa Craig buzzed away in what seemed like a contented fashion. The harbour walls slipped by in the darkness at 0415 and the course was set for Beachy Head some 21nm distant. The forecast was for light, variable winds at first, but with fresh winds from the south-west later. We had picked up the forecast at midnight, so was this now 'later' or halfway to 'later'?

With such thoughts in my mind, I steered in the moonlight until hunger overcame my philosophical leanings and I asked Iain to take the helm so I could prepare the eggs and bacon. There are benefits to being the cook, if your stomach can take it. For example there is the lovely warm air flowing up from the cooker to warm your hands and face. There is also the testing of the food. I can normally justify the consumption of an extra three or four spoonfuls of baked beans as I patiently wait for them to heat up. Also, in my experience, at least one piece of toast is burnt and unsuitable for

crew consumption but is, at the same time, a pity to waste. I hate waste, or so I tell myself as I spread a thick coat of butter on the charred remains and gulp them down. The best thing about being the 'doctor', however, is that it is your crewmate who does the washing up, while you steer the boat with an approving eye on the activities below.

By 0530 we had Brighton pier abeam, 4.5nm in an hour and a half, but of course the east-going stream had not yet begun. The dawn never did quite arrive. It so rarely makes a spectacular appearance at these latitudes, and on this murky day the ambient light increased so slowly that one could never say, 'Dawn has broken', or 'The night is over.'

By 0700 such light as was going to spread itself on the waiting earth had done so. By 0800 the harbour of Newhaven was to port and we decided to pop in for a drop of petrol; the thirsty Ailsa Craig was clearly going to need more than the four gallons of petrol we had loaded to get us to London. 0840 saw the intrepid voyagers on *Aquarius* saying goodbye to Newhaven petrol-less. The engine took the opportunity to show a little temperament on the way out, but soon settled down to its duties.

By 0900 the murk had decided to become a full fog and visibility was down to 100 yards. Crosses were jotted on the chart and our dead



The author

reckoning run around Beachy Head had commenced on a course of 119°M. It would have been nice to see the headland. After all, it's a bit of a landmark and the hazardous old lighthouse at its foot would have been a nice navigational feature. However, these pleasures would have to be saved for a later date. For the present, all we had were the dismal tones of the fog horn from the cliffs and the pathetic answering bleat of our own.

At 1130 we were sufficiently confident in our progress to alter course to 020°M. We had to do something, because the Sovereign Shoals lay on our present course and were a graver hazard than the shore itself. Our dead reckoning now put us 2.5nm south of Eastbourne and with luck, our new course would bring us in tangentially to the beaches of East Sussex. By 1300 the tide had probably turned against us, not that we would know it without a buoy or anchored vessel to relate our progress. Slowly we plodded on, eyes straining to penetrate the grey wall that was our world. Suddenly land was sighted in the form of a steeply sloping beach with some dimly seen groynes to keep it in place. Absurdly, on this desolate beach, whose attractions on this cold March morning were not looking their best, were three or four people within our 100yd range of vision. On the one hand, it's embarrassing to have to shout from the deck of your

ship, 'Ahoy! Where are we?' On the other hand, it's one of those rites of passage that occur with distressing inevitability and without which the compleat sailor can never be truly whole. These mysterious figures confirmed our position to be between Langney Point and Bexhill, and so with no more ado we flung out the anchor to await the east-going tide.

We had covered 31nm in 7¼ hours, so giving us 4.5kts over the ground, not spectacular, but steady progress and who knew, we might get some wind. The afternoon passed pleasantly as we ate, dozed and dreamt of the night passage that lay ahead. Slowly the visibility began to improve and the expanse of beach in both directions came out of the mist and into the day. Finally the anchor chain began to cut less of a wave and eventually just hung from the bows, it was time to be off.

I drew the final line and was pleased to see that it formed quite a tidy little cocked hat. I completed the ritual by inscribing the time, 2000, beside it. We were 2nm south-east of Hastings with 13nm to Dungeness ahead. Still the wind held off and still the little outboard did what it could to further progress. By midnight the rounding of the sandy cape with its nuclear power station had begun. Headlands like this are very frustrating, it's impossible to conclude their rounding in the log with an extravagant flourish, 'Cape left to port!' The headland seems to go on and on. In this case, when the course to Folkestone could definitely be described as the course to steer, that's when the damned thing was finally astern.

In the blackness of the night, Iain and I took turns at the helm until at 0330 when we crept round the breakwater of Folkestone Harbour and anchored among the fishing boats and yachts. This was the one and only time I have ever moored in Folkestone Harbour, but equally this was the one and only time I have been near there in a bilge-keel yacht. We took the ground like a dove and slept the sleep of the just and worthy until the refloating of the yacht woke us to our duties. The north-going stream ran from 1045 and Ramsgate was our destination for the day, so we wasted little time in getting underway. After all the lure of the Royal Temple extended its tentacles this far south and our ETA of 1700 could scarcely be timed to better advantage.

Fate, in the form of recalcitrant engines or vile winds did not intervene to arrest progress and Dover and then Deal passed slowly to port. We did arrive at 1700, and we did get up to the Royal Temple, and we did manage to down a few. All these things seemed to indicate that we had some kind of control over our progress about the watery world and this was encouraging. Tired as we were, we were full of confidence for the onward journey.

The flood ran up the Thames Estuary from about 1000 the next morning, so a departure around 0700 was indicated. It was hard that cold morning to stir ourselves, but stir we did. Outside the long-awaited south-

westerly had finally arrived, but too late to be of much use to us. Our thoughts were a little gloomy as we bowled along to the North Foreskin as the North Foreland is sometimes known. What lay beyond the Longnose Ledge, we wondered as we ran on.

It wasn't too bad on rounding the foreland, not too bad, but of necessity requiring much tacking back and forth while being swept on by the tide. I don't think anybody has claimed much for the windward ability of the YM Senior, and I would add my name to these silent ones. A piece of driftwood with no windage, but having a good grip on the water, would probably have made better progress westward than we did. We were sailing fast but, with leeway approximately equal to the angle off the wind, progress was slow.

The bits of spray that occasionally flew about did a lot to justify my extensive wardrobe and gradually an air of dampness began to permeate the ship. On we flogged, between the sandbanks and the Kentish shore, and all too soon we began to lose the advantage of the flood. Fortunately, we happened to be in the vicinity of Herne Bay and its pier was within range of our limited performance and offered the possibility of a run ashore. Eventually we came up with the pier and a line was hooked around it. A strange air of being in contact with the fixed world took over the boat, this despite the wild motion caused by the wind and tide. Iain volunteered to go ashore for petrol and weather info and was sent ashore by a kind of breeches-buoy arrangement. This was not entirely without hazard, if you can imagine him swarming up a rope 'twixt pier and water with rain and spray all about. He was gone for some time and I was getting worried, when at last he finally hove into view with a jug or two of petrol.

Complex calculations showed that there would be just enough water to remain where we were at the end of the pier. Anxiously we waited out the foul tide, tethered to the false security of the mass of iron in front of us. Our task was simple, when the wind no longer held us off the pier, then the tide was weak enough for us to get underway. This we were very anxious to do because ahead of us lay a night passage over some of the most hazardous ground in the country with its shoals and sandbanks that had claimed innumerable fine ships in the past. The lure that made all this worthwhile was to be found off Gravesend on the relatively calm waters of the Thames. We hoped to get as far as that and remove ourselves from this heaving jumpy sea. We were getting tired.

It was nearly 2100 before we got away from the pier and night had already fallen. The wind was still fresh from the south-west and steady. The visibility was good and we could see the bulk of Sheppey in the moonlight. *Aquarius* sped off on a beam reach with only the rare dash of spray to take your eye off the compass. After a while the swell from the mouth of the Swale began to lift and then drop the little ship into the

troughs. For the first time on this voyage the little boat had found her ideal conditions and in such a magical place. Silent, except for the rush of water, dark except for the flashing of the waves and distant buoys, she sped on and the crew sat in silent joy as the Island of Sheppey drew abeam and little by little the dark and desolate shore smoothed the water.

All good things must end, and with the flood now reaching its full strength we hardened our sheets to head up Sea Reach. The wind had now eased a little and we were able to lay our course westward. Gradually the banks drew in from being distant horizons to friendly wind-breaks and after a little tacking in the Lower Hope Reach we found secure quarters off Gravesend. It was 0300 and the back of the job had been broken. Now that we were here on the river, even without an engine or sails, arrival in Richmond was guaranteed. In olden days, laden, 'dumb' barges would be cast adrift with a lighterman aboard equipped only with a large steering oar and a packet of sandwiches and told to take his load to anywhere on the tidal Thames.

Bill Tilman, the renowned mountaineer and sailor, wrote an account of the first ascent of Nanda Devi in the Hindukush with his friend Eric Shipton. On describing the arrival at the summit after a particularly gruelling climb he wrote, 'We so far forgot ourselves that we shook hands.' You probably have to be English fully to understand this reluctance of the Englishman for self-congratulation and it was with shy looks and awkward phrases that I thanked Iain for his efforts and he in turn mumbled some thanks in return. It was nothing, our little voyage, but it had been challenging and it meant something to us.

Part Two

One day the ethernet brought interesting news; Iain had bought the old Cork pilot cutter and hoped to bring her home to Holy Loch on the Firth of Clyde. This vessel had been built at Tyrell's yard at Arklow in 1972 of iroko on grown-oak frames and served for 25 years bringing pilots to ships at sea in fair weather and foul. At 45ft in length and 20 tons net, she is no lightweight and with the Gardner 6LX, 4in prop shaft and 30in prop, no slouch.

It was glorious to whiz by Drakes pool, just above Crosshaven, where in the 80s I had briefly kept a six metre, and to pass the Royal Cork YC, where I have still not taken drink, to find *St Nessan* hanging in the slings at the Crosshaven boat yard. Iain and his son, Alasdair, were scraping off the mussels that had made the ship their home. I had not seen my old friend for 25 years, but as I approached the 25 years of ageing, at first a shock, slipped away to reveal exactly the man I remembered. I think the process was mutual.

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It didn't take long to verify the seaworthiness of the ship and two hours with the Karcher water-blaster revealed soundly attached antifouling. The evening passed in a blur of nostalgia, Chinese food and whiskey,



St Nessian as a pilot cutter

while outside Ireland went to sleep. By lunchtime next day, new batteries were aboard, victualing was complete and we were ready to leave. As our next stop was planned to be the Isle of Man and nothing was known of the electronics or the state of the engine and old fuel tanks, some anxiety was to

be expected. Three hours later and with satisfactory reports on filters and oil levels, we all began to relax and enjoy the moment. It was very cosy in the warm wheelhouse, with the soft growl of the Gardner the only soundtrack and the sea slipping by at an agreeable 7kts. From the skipper's chair there was much to admire, the mighty bows weaving their way through an only slightly disturbed sea, the always evocative coast of southern Ireland slipping by and more immediately to hand, the autopilot and other electronics still doing their job.

As evening drew on and the aperitifs did their work, Alasdair came into his own. Armed with a small bag of spices provided by his mother and otherwise poor components, he surprised us all by what famine had taught him at Uni.

During the night the corner of Ireland was turned and we flew up the St George's channel with a fair tide under us. With Ireland to port and Wales to starboard, land of some persuasion or another was always in view. The



Final touches Crosshaven

Isle of Man appeared ahead and, as ever, took an age to close. Darkness was established as we approached Port St Mary with a view to pick up

a mooring for the night. It should be noted that an approach E of N is extremely dangerous due to a drying rocky shelf to the south of the breakwater. The mooring buoy was very hard to spot, but picking it up gave a lie to the story that the *St Nessian* was hard to manoeuvre. Having overshot, the boat turned on its heel to bring the mooring line



handily under the bow. Port St Mary is one of my favourite spots, but Iain was not in a position to appreciate the view, by this time he was so in love with the boat he only had eyes for her.

One of my objects on this trip was to take in the Manx Grand Prix



George Formby on the Shuttleworth Snap

and particularly the Classic TT in which old Nortons, Ajays and Velos rally much as they did in the 50s. To this end we slipped next morning for Douglas, in order to be handy for the action. Tied up on the outer harbour pontoon it took no time at all for Stephen Carter, the harbour pilot, to come aboard for a gam. A man of many maritime interests, there was little he did not know about Irish Sea activities.

The motorcycle races proceeded much as they always do, delay due to rain, past, present and future. It's a miracle they ever get run at all and it can be a waiting game. On this occasion we got two good days in, the first where from the grandstand I thrilled to the sound of the great British single roaring down the Glengrutchery Road and the second from a vantage point at Quarter Bridge, accessible only via a crawl under the

bridge. All too soon it was time to leave with a less than favourable forecast for the weekend ahead.

Scotland hove into view in a surprisingly short time and Portpatrick in the early afternoon. Iain was slightly taken aback by the Irish Sea pilot's stern injunction not to enter two hours either side of low water. It was exactly low water at this time. There being 0.7m chart datum and it being neaps, I said we would have a couple of feet under us and in fact we had five. Inside, the sun was shining from an improbably blue sky and it was almost warm. We were the only visitor on the wall at this time, but with a folk festival in the near offing, this would soon change. Ashore, the pubs were busy and one or two musicians were getting their hands in. Aboard the *St Nessan* we had no need of such diversions, as Iain had brought one of his more robust flutes and spent much of his time in the captain's chair running through medleys of jigs and reels.

The run up to the Firth of Clyde was the hardest part of the trip, the NW F4 with the wind against tide showed just how much an old pilot boat could roll. It was only when in the shelter of Ailsa Craig that things smoothed out and surprisingly stayed smooth when out from under its lee. I was astonished at the size of the island of Aran. It was like a whole country, with wildly different geography ashore and islands off it. I was also astonished



Into the gloaming Firth of Clyde

by the length of the Firth. For hour after hour of our run up its 50nm length the open sea receded into what seemed like a river mouth.

All good things must end, and in due course we arrived off Dunoon and the entry to Holy Loch. Shorter and less inhabited than I imagined, we swung to port and tied up at the marina, less handily than hoped for, but that may have been due to the premature toast taken earlier. The knot in the loop of time had been tied, top and tailing 40 years of adventure.