

Problems on the way to the Plymouth Meet

Guy Warner



Ruby Star team at supper in the Island Sailing Club

The batteries on my Victoria 34 cutter *Ruby Star* were new in 2015 and I had never worried about them but that was to change in July 2021. We were overnighting on a reserved buoy just off Cowes prior to the annual Round the Island Race when, on preparing to meander over for our early morning start off the RYS line, there was not enough battery power to start the engine. I had Simon Wilkinson (RCC), Alexandra Scott-Bayfield (RCC) and Paola, an Italian lady, with me so it was not



Problems on the way to the Plymouth Meet

a problem. After an enjoyable but slowish circuit with no collisions, we had a convivial supper in the Island Sailing Club. On the following day, a marina launch got our engine started for the trip back to Port Solent.

Nine days later on 13 July, with batteries fully charged from my marina shore supply, I set off for the Plymouth Meet, this time on my own. After stemming the tide through the Solent, a push from the Needles Channel onwards got me to Portland Harbour that night where I anchored. Alas, the following morning my batteries were flat again and I could not start the engine or work the windlass. Remembering that the incredible Smeeton's sailed all over the world for many years without an engine, I wafted down the short distance to Portland marina in a light northerly under staysail alone. It had taken me nearly an hour to raise my heavy anchor manually as the winch handle could only do partial turns due to the siting of the windlass and I did not want to risk any more of my fingers in trying to pull it up by hand. I was about to make the convenient fuel berth just inside the marina when a rib appeared to shepherd me into an adjacent berth. There I was able to charge my batteries enough to start the engine but the marina activity and one hour stay were relatively expensive.

I was underway again about 1300 and risked the inner passage off the Portland Bill rocks. This helped me make the Dartmouth Town Quay, arriving at 2030



after judicious use of the engine in benign weather. This time I was able to plug into shore power overnight. Next stop was the river Yealm for the first day of the RCC Meet. I soon espied the organiser, David Southwood (RCC), in *Tiger Rose* on a buoy with the Vice Commodore's *Wild Bird*. It was very crowded in the river and on enquiry he asked me what my berthing plan was as only two yachts were allowed on each buoy. I had mistakenly thought that the harbour master would be around

Inshore passage at Portland Bill

Guy Warner

to guide me to a reserved spot but he was nowhere to be seen. After a brief grounding on pressing further up river, I persuaded a passing dinghy to find the harbour master for me. He appeared eventually to tell me that there was no reserved berthing as the river was topped up and my best hope was on a pontoon further up on the north side but rafting up was limited to three yachts. Having got there I managed to squeeze in adjacent to the shore and rafted up on two others. After I had sorted myself out, I received an invitation to drinks and supper on *Swaraj* with Angus Handasyde-Dick (RCC), moreover a dinghy would be sent to pick me up. This managed to find me, piloted by an enthusiastic cadet, Henry Pearson (RCC). We regarded ourselves as two groups of six in the spacious cockpit in line with the Covid guidelines in England. Andrew Pool (RCC) and his two crew left after cheerful drinks, as did Becky Trafford (RCC) who had looked in by dinghy from ashore, but we were still nine for a marvellous supper produced by Tessa Mackenzie-Green (RCC), standing in for her missing sister Bridget, Angus' wife. It was a most convivial evening, much appreciated by all. Henry took me back to my yacht afterwards.

Next morning the batteries were again unable to start my engine. After some pleading, the yacht next door produced long leads which just reached between our respective banks and enabled me to flash up my engine. On the way up the



Smoke from my engine

sound making for the Lynher river, *Wild Bird* overtook me in the Drake channel, contacting me to say that smoke was billowing forth from my engine and then sent a photo. On looking at the engine temperature gauge, I saw that it was well in the red. I reduced immediately to a trickle speed and considered the multiple possible causes of overheating, most of which required a stop. The temperature needle was just off the red at about 1200 revs (about 3.5 knots) but well in the red at 2000

Problems on the way to the Plymouth Meet



Conviviality onboard *Wild Bird*

revs, my normal cruising speed giving about six knots in flat seas.

I continued under engine but at slow speed and arrived in the Lynher river at about 1330, too late to dinghy ashore for the Meet Ince Castle visit. Anyway, I had anchored well short of the RCC fleet conscious that I would have to run my engine at intervals to keep the batteries up. On checking I found the engine raw water filter was clear and the engine

cooling water was topped up. I changed the impellor although it looked in pristine condition and decided that there was not much more I could do immediately about the overheating as it was probably a blockage somewhere and I could just manage about four knots under engine if necessary.

Later, in the late afternoon, I was pleased to receive an invitation to drinks and supper on board *Wild Bird*. Nick Chavasse (RCC) would pick me up in his dinghy as I had expressed reservations about pumping up mine. One of the great things about single-handed sailing in the RCC is that the generous members take pity on you with invites to their cockpits. There I found Angus Handasyde-Dick with others and was able to thank him personally for his hospitality in the Yealm river and reminisce about Oxford days although he was somewhat after me. After a delicious supper, produced with great aplomb by the accomplished Margie, I was given a lift back to *Ruby Star* as I needed to charge my batteries before they ran down too much. Despite isolation my engine battery was never sufficient to manage a start on its own and I needed to be in parallel with the domestic batteries. However, I was back in time to charge and all was relatively well except for a salutary event on the following day's passage down the river.

That day (Saturday) was the date for the GP Racing in the Sound which the Meet yachts were scheduled to watch. However, I decided to go to the Mayflower marina instead as I was host for a long standing luncheon party for old naval friends onboard in the marina on the Sunday. I wanted to be sure of wangling a berth in the ostensibly full up marina; also, I could examine my engine further, get fuel and fully charge my batteries. Still in the river, I was putting a waypoint for Mayflower in my chart plotter at the binnacle when there was a bang. I looked up to see I had

Guy Warner

gone straight into the starboard quarter of an anchored yacht as my autohelm had failed to engage. There was nobody onboard and I was undamaged but my anchor on the bowsprit had ploughed into the other yacht. As far as I could see the damage was minimal as I was going fairly slowly. The collision was observed from ashore and I saw a couple noting down the name on my dodgers. I was sure they would inform the owner so I pressed on, cursing my stupidity. I was well aware of the need to stay alert inshore when single-handed, unlike in the open ocean where one can be more relaxed. I came alongside the Mayflower outer pontoon briefly and was pleased to see Gillie Green (RCC) who took my lines. She was at the Meet in a power boat with her crew. The damaged yacht also accosted me there while I was seeking a berth, having got underway and followed me on AIS. I apologised profusely, accepted liability and we exchanged details.

Sunday luncheon was a riotous occasion on a berth I had managed to secure in the marina. Nevertheless I was fully recovered to slip about 0900 on the Monday bound for Dartmouth. There was not much wind but the engine temperature stayed just out of the red at 1500 revs giving some four knots. I had not succeeded in finding the cause of the over-heating. Shore power was available at the Town Quay where I arrived in the late afternoon. Next day fortunately there was SW3. I was not up to flying either my spinnaker or cruising chute but the yankee goose-winged successfully with a preventer on the main. Also the staysail supplemented the headsail despite the partial blanketing. I have never liked Lyme Bay and it was another boring crossing. I eventually arrived at the Portland marina in the early evening, with shore power available.

I left early the following morning as Port Solent was a somewhat longer trip at over 65nm and there was the need to time the Needles channel. I also knew



from previous experiences that trying to pick my way up the badly lit Port Solent channel in the dark would be a nightmare. Sunset was soon after 2100 and I was limited to four knots if I needed to use the engine. I made the Portsmouth harbour entrance in time and visibility was just about tenable for the passage up to the lock.

I managed to get into my berth in the dark and turned in ready to contemplate solutions to both my battery and engine problems the next day. It had been a mostly enjoyable trip but unusual in that *Ruby Star's*

Guy back in Port Solent with plenty to contemplate

Problems on the way to the Plymouth Meet



batteries and engine had always performed faultlessly in my six years of ownership.

Postscript: a 30 minute lift out was enough to get rid of the gunge blocking my engine raw water inlet in the hull, and the only cause of the overheating problem. Maybe I should have been brave enough to dive down during the trip and inspect the hull and inlet. The battery problem was solved by replacing them.

Apparently sealed gel batteries are only guaranteed to last five years. I had been reminded about not being complacent when setting out on a sailing trip however straightforward it may seem.

Ruby Star in Port Solent