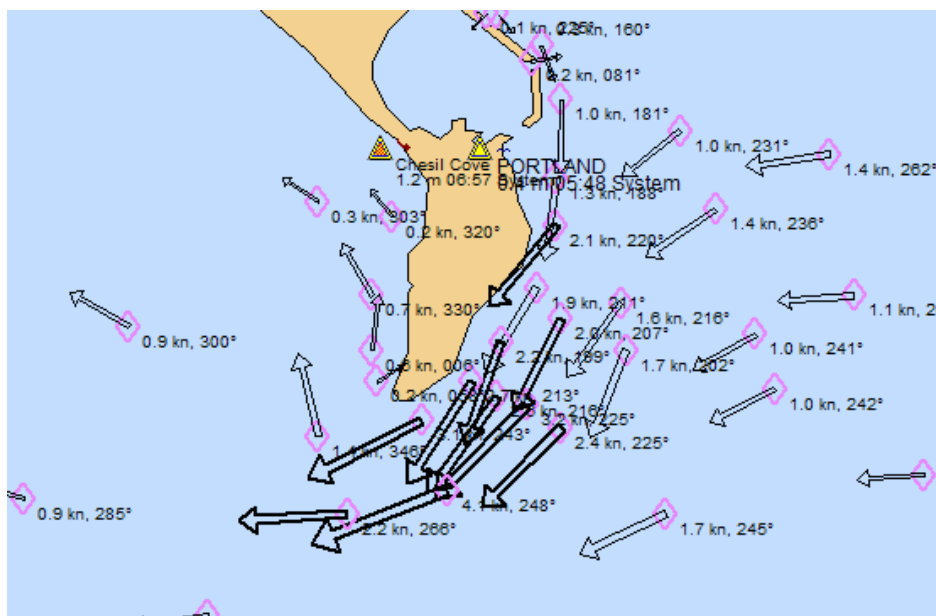


PLUMBING NEW DEPTHS

I planned a trip to the Scilly Isles, hoping for a bit of luck with the weather as they are exposed to the vagaries of the low pressure systems that regularly cross the Atlantic. So it was that I left Portland with the intention of making Falmouth and a desire to spend a couple of weeks in the Scillies if the weather allowed. If you are planning a similar trip this chronology of my experience may prove useful in planning yours.

Leaving Portland at first light on 8 August I was nearly 3 hours behind the recommended time for a decent tide (HW Weymouth +4 hours) at the Bill. However, I wanted to make the Lyme Bay crossing in daylight and waiting another 3 days for an ideal tidal window would see me caught in the aftermath of storm force winds which would not make for a pleasant crossing.

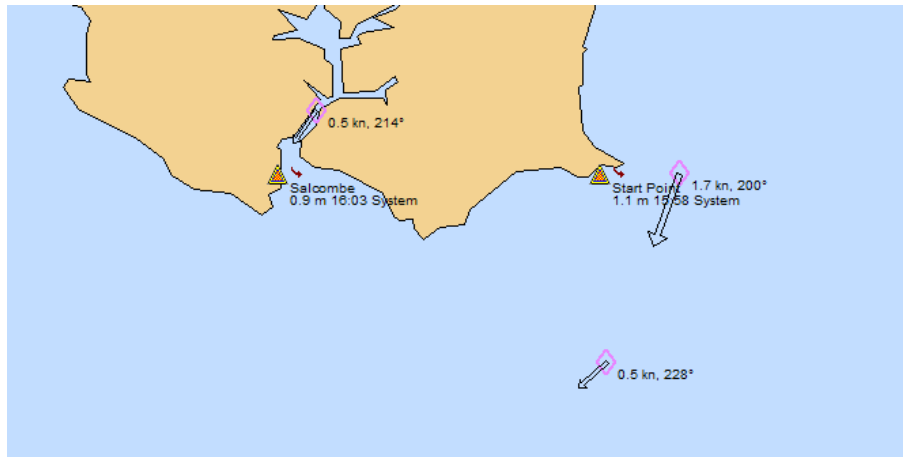
The transit down the east side of the Bill was swift with over 2kn of tide pushing me along. I stayed close in to avoid the worst of the overfalls, keeping a good lookout for pot markers that were submerged by the strong tide.



Plenty of current helping me on my way early on 8 August

Once round the Bill I was carried north into Lyme Bay by the tide, which was good news as I would be out of the main stream that soon turned foul and rapidly slowed progress over the ground. Six hours later I was glad to feel the tide turning in my favour and had a good push past Start Point just as the wind died and fog (which was not in the forecast) descended.

So it was down with the sails and out with the fog horn as I motored towards Salcombe. I practised my trumpet blowing as the fog lifted slightly and I passed a fleet of yachts, a bit late for the East going tide past Prawle Point, none of which were sounding out their presence in the poor visibility.



Mid Afternoon and the tide was just turning in my favour again

I anchored for the night off the Salt Stone and woke to a clear morning as the weather front that brought the fog yesterday had moved away to the East. Another early departure to take the tide west to the River Yealm, where I was to shelter for a couple of nights, sitting out the storm that arrived as forecast.

Utilising the RNSA buoy (£10 a night, payable direct to RNSA Central) I was nice and snug in tranquil surroundings as foul weather screamed overhead.

Leaving the Yealm a couple of days later the sea state was still challenging so I motored for an hour to get into the lee of Cornwall and headed for Cawsand where I picked up two crew, Keith and Carly, who were joining me for a few days. Staying in the confines of Plymouth Sound we enjoyed some superb sailing in the protected waters whilst near gale winds continued from the South West.

With the Newton Ferrer's water carnival planned for their last day my crew were keen to head into the River Yealm, to enjoy the spectacle of locals enjoying high spirits on the water and join in the celebrations ashore. We managed to enjoy a lovely meal in the Yacht Club, which made us very welcome despite being extremely busy, before heading back to Touchdown which was sharing the RNSA buoy with a local boat for the night.

Being under no time constraints we sailed back to Cawsand the next morning in brilliant sunshine, making good speed under fully reefed main and genoa as the SW'lys continued to blow hard. Arriving in Cawsand we made for the Cross Keys pub just before they stopped serving lunch and enjoyed a lovely Mediterranean Fish Stew which is highly recommended. My guests departed for home and I returned to Touchdown to enjoy a relaxing afternoon in the sunshine, snug at anchor in the lee of the Rame Peninsula.

When the local radio mentioned that the Plymouth firework competition was starting that night I headed over to Barn Pool where I was joined by many local boats out for the spectacular display that has become an annual event. The fireworks were launched from near Mount Batten so, although a fair distance away, Barn Pool was an ideal location to enjoy two 20 minute displays of stunning pyrotechnics. Almost as entertaining was watching a local

boat trying to set their anchor on the steeply shelving seabed, success coming just as the last of the fireworks faded in the distance.

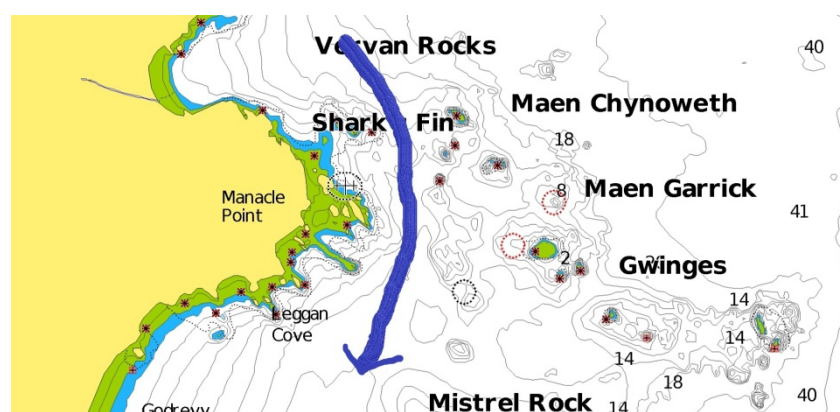


Too engrossed in the spectacular fireworks I nearly forgot to take any pictures!

Most of the local boats headed back to their marinas leaving me to have a peaceful night in Barn Pool. In the morning I headed out into a westerly that made for a few hours of hard beating to windward as I headed towards Falmouth. With a wind veering I managed to make a decent track towards the Helford where I decided to anchor for the night, joining one boat already in the Voose as SW'lys were again forecast overnight.

Luckily the shifting wind also brought a reduction in strength so I decided to head out the next morning, hoping to make for the Scillies but having the option of diverting into Penzance should the sea state prove too challenging.

As I was early for a favourable tide I took the inshore route through the Manacles where there was little counter current but plenty of pot markers to keep me alert as I lined up the transits to confirm the safe route through the rocks.



A safe route inside the Manacles – check the transits!

Having dived the wrecks on the Manacles many times I am well aware of the threat they pose to shipping and I am very grateful that we now have electronic aids such as sonar to make navigation a lot easier than it was only a few decades ago.

On one dive in 2014 I was lucky to find a sounding lead lying on the seabed just off the main Manacles rock. Given the clean state of the weight it would appear that this example had not been used to plumb the depths and was probably part of the cargo of one of the many ships that have foundered on this notorious site, spilling the contents of its hold as the wreck drifted away from the rocks and it sank to a watery grave. As it weighs 22 lbs, sounding with this lead would have been a strenuous affair, as it was hauled back on board deck to examine the seabed material stuck to the tallow that would be placed in the bottom indentation. I am grateful that all I have to do to find out the depth of water is press a button on a digital sounder. I wonder if there will be the same fascination with our sounding instruments a hundred years into the future?



A fine example of a “sonar device” from the 19th Century

My arrival at the final west bound tidal gate at the Lizard was timed for the start of the West going tide. The extra speed over the ground was very welcome but having left the lee of the Lizard peninsula the increase in sea state was not, as the wind over an increasing tide made for a couple of uncomfortable hours.

Luckily the forecast of easing winds proved correct and I did not need to divert into my bolt hole, Penzance, and continued a fast passage towards the Scillies. The sea state improved once past Wolf Rock as the tide turned from a west going stream to a more southerly flow and as the sea state reduced I was joined by porpoises and dolphins playing in the bow wave as Touchdown settled into a more comfortable motion.



Cetaceans are always welcome visitors

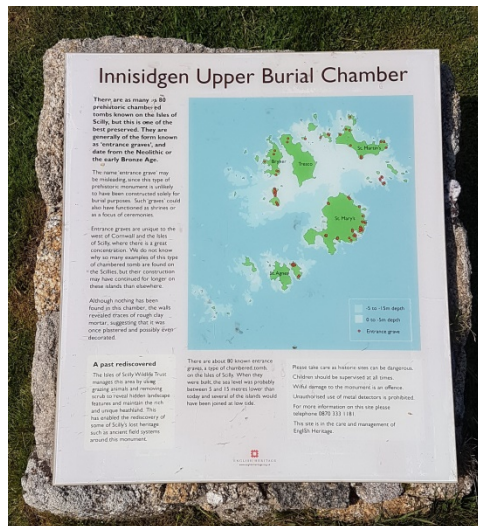
As the previous week of strong SW'lys had generated a decent Atlantic swell I decided to anchor on the east coast of St Mary's, heading for Watermill Cove, rather than my usual choice of St Helen's Pool.

There was already one yacht anchored close in to the beach so I stayed out of his way, settling down for a quiet night as the evening developed into a beautiful calm night.



Fantastic sunsets are one of the attractions of the Scillies

The next day the other yacht departed for the mainland and I headed ashore to explore a part of the main island I had not seen previously, and to get a phone signal so I could check in with command back at home. While exploring the island I came across a Neolithic burial chamber, one of 80 spread across the islands and, more interestingly, a rope swing hanging from a tree that provided the opportunity for the 6 year old in me to have some fun for 15 minutes as there was no one else around!



A Neolithic burial chamber was interesting but not as much fun as the rope swing, complete with fantastic views

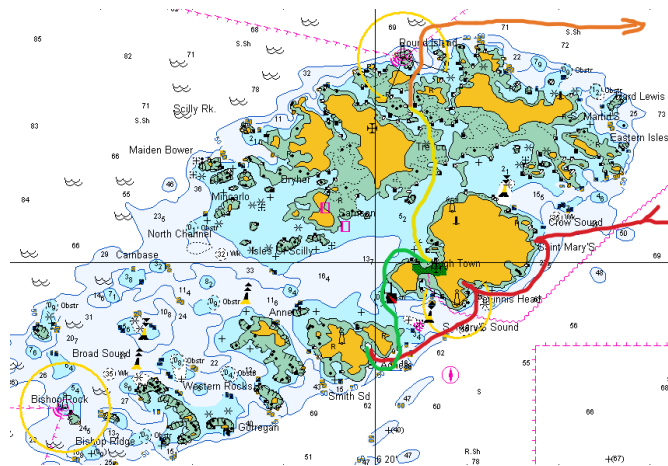
The lanes on the island were almost deserted although, I was nearly taken out by a couple of cyclists who were obviously not expecting a walker coming up the hill as they headed down at high speed, totally out of control. I decided to head back to the safety of the coastal path, discovering that a cruise ship had decided to join me in the anchorage. Evidently they avoid anchoring in St Mary Roads when the swell would make (dis)embarkation of their passengers too challenging. This provides a nice little earner for the local boats that were constantly picking up tourists from the ship and transporting them round to the islands for the day.



Touchdown is the small vessel in the foreground.

The weather continued to settle down and with it came a reduction in the swell that allowed me to move around the islands, selecting different anchorages as the wind veered from SW through NW to the NE and finally the SE. This was fortunate as I had to be in Hugh Town to

join a dive boat for a few days of underwater exploration in the cool but clear water of the Scillies.



My route around the islands, moving as the wind dictates

The first dive was on a fairly modern wreck, The Italia, which at nearly 2700 tons, was a large cargo ship that foundered in fog on the Wingletang Ledges in May 2017. She is still relatively intact and provides an easy dive from 12 to 40M+ depths. With only basic SCUBA equipment on board Touchdown I was not able to go any deeper but having the opportunity to explore the underwater environment in the ideal conditions of the Scillies was not to be missed.

My final dive was helping the local dive operator locate the site of “The Old Wreck”, something I failed to do. In having proved where the wreckage wasn’t I allowed him to follow a hunch and find the proper site which he stored for future reference when he takes dive groups out to explore. Although I failed to find any sign of the wreck site I did discover another sounding lead, this one a more usual 6lb in weight and misshapen, indicating that it had been used for taking actual soundings.



6lb sounding lead lost on the seabed

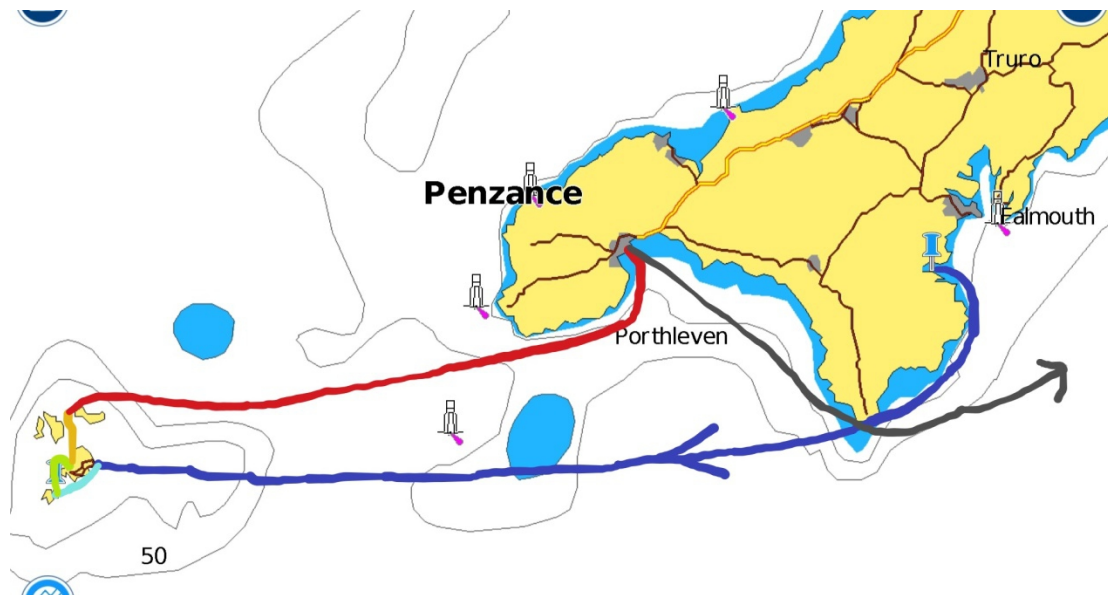
Although reported to the Receiver of Wreck it is unlikely that the origin of the item will ever be discovered but it shows that the sea holds the evidence of the use of the Scillies as a destination for sea farers' dating back many centuries.

For the last few days I was again joined by Keith and Carly who enjoyed their first visit to the islands and like most, wanted to stay for more. However, they had to get back for work commitments and so, with the wind settled in the East we headed out for the mainland. Half way across the TSS off Lands End, Keith asked for the binoculars as he thought he could see a submarine periscope.



I had to admit that Wolf Rock (on the right) looks nothing like a periscope

With my head down below doing some navigation I told him that it was probably Wolf Rock which was a few miles ahead. When Keith pointed the bino's astern I realised he had not mistaken the light and sure enough a submarine feather was heading towards us. As it got closer the submarine surfaced and after tracking in our direction for a while turned North and started heading towards Seven Stones, leaving us to carry on towards Penzance where I could refuel and re-victual after running low on supplies whilst in The Scillies.



Touchdown's route to and from the Scillies

Leaving Penzance as soon as the harbour gate opened, two hours before HW allowed us to carry the east going tide round Lizard Point but as we beat into wind the tide turned which brought calmer seas but slowed progress over the ground. Luckily the tidal stream is not too strong, so long as you remain offshore past Dodman, and Rame Head soon loomed into view, marking the turning point into Plymouth Sound.

With the end of the journey in sight there was no time to relax as the instruments and autohelm all went off line. Having extra crew on board to steer meant the loss of Georgina was not a problem but getting used to sailing dinghy style, without any depth or wind information, was a good brain exercise. Sticking to marked channels seemed like a good idea rather than cutting corners and risking unknown depths, accepting that this would add extra time to the journey but at least keep us in safe water as we were heading in just after LW.

As the tide turned to the East the sea state at Rame was boisterous but short lived as we passed behind the breakwater and the relative quiet of the The Bridge, the short cut to the West of Drakes Island, heading for Mayflower Marina.

Mayflower presently offers a discount for RNSA members and is a good stop off point for crew changes and victualling with easy access, via a short walk and bus ride, into Plymouth city centre. It can be a bit exposed to W'ly winds but as the SE'lys continued for another 36 hours it proved a peaceful stopover.

The rest also allowed me to take the boat apart as I searched for the problem with the instruments. After removing nearly all the panels in the boat and tracing all the relevant wiring I discovered that a wire in the autohelm controller had shorted, blowing a fuse in the main computer, and so taking out the whole system. Replacing the fuse took a few seconds but putting the panels back took most of an afternoon, but at least I have gained a bit more knowledge of my boat!



The Fleet was heading out as I departed Mayflower to hide up the Lynher

With the boat now fully serviceable I felt confident in making a Lyme Bay crossing solo but as more SW'lys gales were on their way I had to take a rain check and head up the River Lynher for a couple of nights as another depression passed through, soaking Devon and creating some localised flooding in surrounding areas. Ever the optimist I was pleased the decks were receiving a fresh water wash but all the recent wet weather was doing nothing for the running rigging which was turning a nasty shade of green as algae took advantage of the constantly wet surfaces.

With the wind easing I headed out into a SW'ly F5 although the sea stayed lively for the first few hours with more wind over tide. I was planning on making Start Point as the tide turned in my favour however, remaining offshore at Prawle may have been a mistake as it was a lot smoother close in as I made for Start. This was probably due to the tide turning a half hour earlier close in, as advised in the almanac.

Taking the inshore passage and aiming to stay to the West of the Skerries, the transformation in the sea state once in the lee of the Devon countryside was most welcome and the last few hours sailing towards Brixham were most pleasant. The tranquil progress gave me the opportunity to inspect the sails and rigging after several hours of heavy weather pounding and I discovered a mainsail slide fitting had detached itself from the sail. No doubt the NCI staff at Berryhead wondered what I was up to with the main dropped halfway as I worked to correct the problem before arriving at my anchorage, still making 5 knots through the water.



Rounding Start Point as the tide turned with the wind made for a calm sea at last

Brixham makes for a good starting point for a Lyme Bay crossing but if I'm only stopping for one night I much prefer anchoring just to the West of the harbour when conditions allow. In these environmentally concerned times I discovered a buoy in the anchorage and took up the invite of free use to avoid damaging the seabed. This gave for a very pleasant night although, hooking up without any pick up buoy was the usual faff being singlehanded.



The free buoy in the anchorage west of Brixham

An early start the next morning and a couple of hours of pleasant sailing under half genoa before losing the protection of the land. The forecast near gale made for a fast crossing but a heavy swell saw Touchdown surfing down a the waves before having to fight her way back uphill to the next crest before starting the whole process all over again. Having clear skies and sunny weather made it a lot more pleasant than yesterday's dreary overcast affair and the whole crossing was made a whole lot easier by having the autohelm working so that I could take a break as needed to prepare food and check the navigation when needed.

The pleasantness ended on entering Portland Harbour, having to head back into the Westerly F7. Thankfully the pounding was short lived as I'd already stowed the sail and started to motor in the lee off Grove Point where it was flat calm. Given the strong wind I contemplated anchoring behind the marina breakwater until the wind abated but Kevin, from Tin Tin, offered to take my rope making the securing of Touchdown after 50 miles and nearly 9 hours a fairly simple affair.



Rock and roll motion in Lyme Bay with the autohelm doing all the hard work



Rapid progress, even with just $\frac{1}{4}$ Genoa exposed – even if I was climbing a hill towards The Bill

So in conclusion, I hardly had much luck with the weather as late summer proved the usual wet and windy event that we all experienced on the south coast. I guess the luck comes in having the time to amend the plan and not be pressured in having to meet fixed agendas. So if you are planning to go to the Scillies, have plenty of time to get there and back and also to make the most of your time there, they are well worth the effort.