



## An Autumn Cruise Around The West Solent

September 2016

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Autumn is one of the best times to spend a week in the Solent, it's usually a time when you can enjoy the places that are normally crowded, when it's less busy and when people have time to chat.

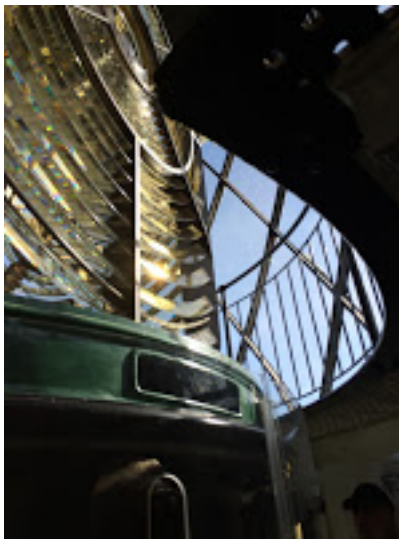
This year we left a bit earlier than we have done, at the end of September, with eight days to spend in favourite places. We chose to stay in the Western Solent to have shorter trips in the hope of more sailing and planned on having several lay days for some good walks.

When the day arrived, the weather had been unsettled for a while and the forecast was not good; our first day was windy and wet so we decided to stay in Gosport for the night and leave the following morning. We sorted the boat out, had a leisurely lunch and gradually the rain eased up so a trip across to Portsmouth was on the cards. Old Portsmouth is always attractive even though you have to pass through Gun wharf Quay so we made our way there to Spice Island. It's not easy to pass by the Camber without seeing the fishing fleet and stopping at Viviers, where they always have wonderful fresh fish. After stocking up, a walk and a pint at the Bridge we headed back for a quiet evening on board.



The following morning the weather was much better with sunshine and a fresh Westerly. Once clear of the Hamilton Bank the sails were up and the engine was off, that magical moment! Our first tack took us over to Ryde then another across towards Lee On Solent, we seemed to have the sea to ourselves. That is until we neared Ryde Middle when we got tangled up with some Challenge Yachts, all reefed down, racing towards a mark. The only boats out there but they had to cross just where we were going and completely took our

wind away for a while; we just hoped that as it was probably a Corporate Event it made some money for them. We held on to the wind and had a glorious beat right up to Cowes Roads where we dropped the sails and went in past the new barrier to moor at West Cowes Marina. With more rain forecast for the next day and arriving early we took the opportunity of walking into Newport along the track of the old railway taking the bus back as there wasn't enough time to make it into a circular trip. It's always good to see the Medina as it meanders past Island Harbour ending up by the quay and then finish up with a welcome cup of tea at the Arts Centre in the old Mill at the end of the creek.



It did rain the following day and it was windy, so we stayed put in Cowes High Street for the morning existing on coffee until it cheered up after lunch. There was enough time to take the bus to visit Niton and St Catherine's Point lighthouse which we'd seen so many times from the sea but never close up. Lighthouses are fascinating places and this was no exception, it may not be that high but has some impressive optics as well as great views east and west. Niton is a pretty place too with an attractive walk down to the

lighthouse where there is a particularly good pub, the Buddle Inn where we just had to sample some of their excellent beer.

The forecast was for the next day, a Friday to be fine but with more wind and rain for Saturday so we planned to go to Lymington. Naturally we were aghast to find that on calling to

reserve a berth we found both marinas fully booked for the

weekend! It seemed that every club in the vicinity wanted to organise a cruise to mark the end of the season this weekend. A call to Yarmouth Harbour found that there was still some space there providing we got there quickly, because 60 boats from Christchurch were expected shortly. Despite the wind and tide being against us we set off straight away and motored there as fast as we were able to. How nice it would have been to sail in a more leisurely fashion, but the thought of being stuck outside all weekend spurred us on at full speed. We did get there in time and did get a good inside berth on one of the walk ashore pontoons although within a few hours we were well and truly blocked in with boats rafted all around us.



There was time in the afternoon for a walk around the Yar valley out across the fields almost as far as Freshwater Bay and back along the track of another old railway. It's one of our favourite walks and made particularly enjoyable when the sun came out together with plenty of wildlife; what was particularly notable was a large pack of wigeon that had recently arrived. In the evening we visited the Royal Solent YC and, once again, had a splendid meal at this fine club. It was the first yacht club we joined such a long time ago in the eighties where we had some very memorable evenings; it was good to see that it was still in such good form.



As forecast, the weather the following morning was miserable, but it passed through sooner than expected so we took the "Needles Breezer" Bus out to see the Margaret Cameron museum in Freshwater as there wasn't enough time to walk. It's pleasant to see the countryside from an open bus but the museum was a bit underwhelming, maybe we'd expected too much.

The bus passes the Needles on the way back so we stopped off there to see the fortifications and rocket engine testing site; which is such an impressive location. There's a stunning view of the Needles from up there and with gale force winds we were glad we weren't going past the Bridge where the sea was particularly rough.

Sunday was better weather wise but as it was so busy we thought we'd limit our sail to a trip to Lymington after lunch, hoping to be able to get out of Yarmouth and into a free berth by then. The morning was spent wondering around the coast to Fort Victoria where Hurst castle looked stunning in the morning sunshine. The wind had gone from one extreme to another so with hardly a breath to take us forward and a strong tide to contend with we had to motor over to Berthon Marina where we had a pleasant, relaxing afternoon and evening whilst everyone else rushed home.

Monday was a good day for walking so we went round the old salt pans and marshes to Keyhaven which is a haven for birds. We saw the first Brent Geese of the season as well as a host of waders and many duck taking advantage of the good weather to have a feed. It's mandatory to stop off at the Gun Inn which was a haunt of Col. Peter Hawker, the great wildfowl, who shot the marshes there; they're more interested in promoting Whiskey nowadays but still do some great crab sandwiches. Thus fortified we set off to Hurst to see the lighthouse



exhibition we'd been told about at St Catherine's and find out about the Association Of Lighthouse Keepers. This didn't disappoint and was made especially interesting by having a long chat with some of the volunteers who are still enhancing the exhibits. By the time we'd returned



to the boat we'd covered about ten miles and really appreciated a few beers at the Kings Head.

The weather then changed with a blocking high pressure system delivering strong winds from the east, just where we needed to go. That morning we we had 25 knot winds to contend with and as there was a strong desire on the part of the crew to avoid any foredeck activity we had to motor again to Beaulieu which was as far as we could go before the tide changed to become west going. Not too bad a trip and once in Bucklers Hard it was soon forgotten, it only took three hours to get there.



Plenty of time for a walk in the afternoon to Beaulieu along the river path which is such a joy, even when the wind is whistling overhead. A quiet evening followed as we contemplated the final return leg the next day when even stronger winds were forecast.

In the morning it seemed better but the reality was the wind had gone a little to the north blowing across rather than down the river. We had to leave despite the forecast or 6-7 with 8 off headlands but consoled ourselves that we could always divert to Swanwick or even Cowes if it got really bad. Unfortunately it did, as soon as we cleared the river we had a solid 28 knot easterly which rose to 32 knots off Cowes. The sea was particularly rough but also short, leading to a rather violent sea saw motion despite the magnificent stability of the Contessa. There wasn't enough time to rise over the waves so the bow tended to dig into at the wave ahead, one rogue wave was enough to tear off the bow navigation light. Eventually we did get through it into the lee of the mainland then around Gilkicker and into the harbour; progress however was slow, it took nearly five hours. Not a trip to be repeated.

So that was it, bit like the curates egg, good in parts. It was enjoyable staying on the boat and we had some good walks. Overall, however, we spent about 17 hours passage making but only 3 of these were without the motor on, some sailing holiday!