



# Down Wind All The Way

**July 2017**

**Crew: Chris Allen**

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June and the early part of July had been rather frustrating due to Lynda's unwelcome bout of sciatica resulting in the cancelation of the summer cruise planned to the Channel Islands amongst other trips. Typically the weather had been ideal for sailing, one of the warmest, sunny summers for years; we were worried that the good sailing weather would run out!

Chris and I had the middle week of July reserved for several months and originally planned to go around Normandy but when the long range weather forecasts showed that it was going to be unsettled our hopes were reset to a quick hop across the Channel to St Vaast via Cherbourg.



The day before we set off the fine, settled weather did come to an abrupt halt with major storms forecast; it was always said English summers end with a storm. Not wishing to be caught in mid Channel with a yellow severe weather warning we set off for Portland with the intention of getting there before the worst of it arrived from France.

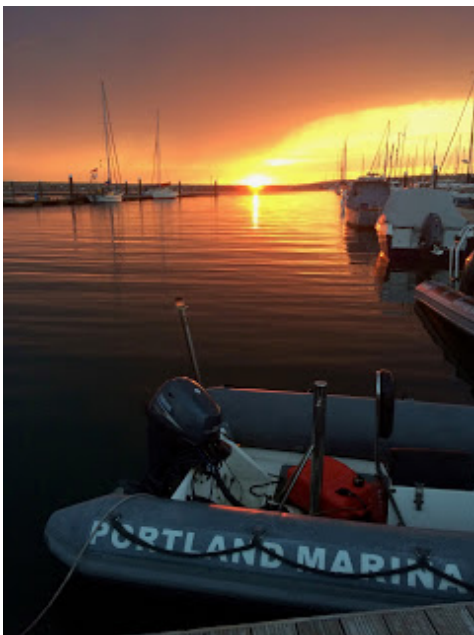
## **Monday**

Setting off at 5am from Gosport with the tide just turning and a fresh easterly breeze we had expectations of a fast passage. Conditions were excellent to go west. With white sails up we shot over to Cowes driven by the breeze blowing nicely on the starboard quarter. Lively Levante was stable enough to be able to have breakfast on the way, all very



pleasant and civilised. At Cowes with the tide building we turned dead down wind and set the genoa goosewinged, with the genoa poled out we were soon making 7 increasing to 8+ knots over the ground. The relatively smooth, protected water of the Solent made it was a fast, comfortable sail to Hurst and then into the Needles Channel to gain maximum advantage of the tide.

Knowing that the ranges would be active inshore we shaped a course to avoid the St Albans race as well as the inner range which meant that the breeze was comfortably off our quarter. With 15 to 20 knots of wind and a longish leg ahead we hoisted the cruising chute with out incident and were soon blasting across Poole Bay. We soon ditched the main unlike is shown in this snap, it just got in the way. Letting the halyard slip away from the top of the mast was not such a good idea though, the head of the sail swung around much more than it should have. That and the seas state made helming quite hard work, the nausea inducing rolling dismissed any thought of lunch. We should have snuffed the sail and set it properly but unfortunately didn't; must do better next time.



Naturally the wind soon increased to over 20 Knots and the sea state increased but we held on to the chute all the way gybing round the race. This was where it became interesting, we hadn't gybed the chute before and soon got into a bit of a muddle; lesson learned - once the sock is down all parts of the sail need to be reset on the other side. We found out the hard way that with a significant swell running you need watch what you're doing. We were chatting away and a moments inattention was rewarded with a tight wrap around the forestay. I hadn't sorted one of those out for several decades but after a worrying moment or two remembered what to do and soon got it sorted out in the lee of the Main.

The dismal arms of Portland Harbour with its ruined forts was still a welcome sight when it came into view; although exhilarating the sail had been hard work due to the sea state. Dousing the chute was a relief. It was just 2pm, 65 miles travelled in nine and a half hours which made an average of 6.8 knots; satisfying to say the least. We were soon tied up in the marina and heading for refreshments when the first rain drop started to fall, brilliant timing, just for a change.



Fortunately, it was only a shower so we had a pleasant evening eating on deck in bright evening sunshine until about 9pm when the first of many thunder cells rolled in from the south over Chesil beach. These grew in intensity during the night with one mighty flash and simultaneous clap of thunder almost shaking us out of our berths. The rain was torrential. Supposing we had carried on to Cherbourg as intended... A possibility that wasn't to be contemplated.

## **Tuesday**

The easterly wind was forecast to swing round to the south and back further the south west later in the morning so it was a tad disappointing to find that at 5am it was still blowing strongly from the East. Even worse the visibility was so poor the bill only just visible from the marina. We motored out through the east channel after getting permission from Portland Harbour Radio, put the sails up for a while. Attempting to go east away from the Bill and the Shambles to avoid the tide was challenging, it was already against us, building and we didn't have the favourable wind expected. The realisation soon dawned on us that getting to Cherbourg was futile, by the time we'd have got there the restaurants would have closed and we knew we'd have to leave the next day as strong winds were forecast for Friday. A tough passage shortly followed by another one without some fine dining in between was not particularly attractive.

We slunk back in through the North entrance, not wanting to admit to the professional seamen at Portland harbour radio that we'd given up. Any unhappiness was soon banished though, by a splendid breakfast courtesy of the delightful ladies in the cafe at the end of the marina.

A hastily revised passage plan was conceived to leave at 10am in order to get to the inner passage at St Albans when the tide turned at 1pm then continue on to Poole with the flood. Naturally the wind had gone right round to the south west by then. Range control was consulted and it was confirmed that activity was limited to a mile or so off the coast

as had been the case yesterday. With full sails up we set a 90 degree course for St Albans and were soon making good 6 knots as we were able to avoid most of the tide. This was fine until the Range Control Launch came into view and requested that we sail on 130 degrees until 3.5 miles offshore; reluctantly we complied and kept watch on Ch 8. Half an hour later there was a confused



dialogue between range control and the launch which then contacted us and requested a change of course to 120! I replied asking if they really wanted us to go inshore, they withdrew the request and chased after someone else. Moral of the story, they are really rather nice guys but you can't depend on what they say.

Naturally going further offshore mucked up the plan so we had to go outside the race in our little grey world, unable to see anything apart from the odd yacht that came nearby. The wind had increased from 20kn to 25+ with gusts considerably higher. The sea state was a bit uncomfortable but we were going fast once the tide turned clocking up 7 then 8 and eventually 10 knots SOG. The boat was superb with it's strong directional stability and the ability to take the waves in her stride. We did see occasional yachts going in the same direction and overtook every one, very satisfying!



When we came close to Anvil Point we could just make out the headland in the murk but stayed on a course of 080 degrees for a while before gybing to make sure we missed Pervril Point. In the event we went by so fast that the next thing we saw were the Old Harry Rocks which was quite a surprise. It was not far then to enter

the fairway, past the chain ferry and into the harbour mooring up at Poole Yacht Club before 4pm.

Poole is always an interesting place to visit so despite the harbour bridge being out of action we did eventually make it to the Quay and the Poole Arms for a pint. Watching all the wonderful seafood being served up made us feel hungry, how times had changed for this venerable pub that used to be just a watering hole. At PYC it was race night, for the optimists anyway, with appropriate food on offer. It's great to see so many of the next generation of sailors having a tussle out on the water. The club was outstanding value and well above average for club food, despite the £1.33 per ft mooring charge.

## Thursday



A leisurely start for a change; as the tidal gate at Hurst would not open before 1:30 there was no point in leaving before 10am. Breakfast on board this time though, the club couldn't compete with the Cafe at Portland. With high water only 2 hours ago we were clear to use the Looe channel to get out into Poole Bay with at about a metre beneath the keel. Naturally for this trip the wind was still behind us, a 20 knot westerly that was forecast to stay that way

during the day but who believes forecasts when it's as unsettled.

Keeping close inshore to cheat the tide we were soon off Bournemouth with all it's beach huts and Pier. The weather had clearly taken it's toll, very few people were out on the beach. Although against the tide was against us we made good progress making at least 6 kt over the ground over relatively smooth water. Before we knew it we were off Boscombe where we headed out to go a bit further off shore to avoid the lobster pots and Hengistbury Head. Here the wind started to build and we soon had 25 knots and sustained gusts of 30 kn, with a rising sea the sail became a bit more exciting.

Throughout the journey we'd used the wind vane to steer as much as possible, only resorting to the electric auto helm when motoring or when there wasn't enough wind to drive the vane well enough. It needed at least 5 kn apparent wind to hold a stable course, not a problem on this trip!



We'd found by trial and error that it worked quite well down wind providing you kept the wind at least 30 degrees away from dead astern, ideally more if there was any significant swell or sea state. Once set, which often

took a while, it was remarkably stable and silent. None of that guur guur which made the electric one so annoying down wind. Windy George had certainly proved to be a much better companion on a long leg than Sparky George.

Having gybed around Hengistbury it was one continuous leg to Middleton on Sea where we gybed again to go through the North Channel and on to Hurst. The wind seemed to be funnelling into the narrows along with the tide creating a lively sea. Now the flood had kicked in and with the wind up to 30kn it was quite exhilarating sailing past Hurst and entering the Solent at 8 knots over the ground. Once past the castle we gybed once more, the sea flattened out in the lee of Keyhaven and it became comfortable enough for lunch.

The speed, however, hardly dropped so it was quite a spectacle seeing the 7 miles of the Western

Solent flash by in less than an hour. Once clear of Cowes only a slight variation in course was needed to put us on track to Gilkicker which came and went past all too quickly; the trip was just about over. Slipping around the Hamilton Bank with just under a metre clearance was a bit tense, there should have been a bit more maybe the bank had shifted a bit. We entered the harbour without incident which was strangely quiet where the wind dropped to more manageable levels giving us an easy time to down sails and get moored up.

After tidying the boat up we sat outside the Licenced Victualler with a glass of wine and had a moments reflection on the voyage. The weather had not been on our side and many forecasts had proved to understate the wind strength. The only one that was reliable was the Shipping Forecast, it seemed that in unsettled conditions the maximum wind forecast is better to use than the average that most highlight; Meteo Consult has this which turned out to be a better guide.



We may not have got to France and the trip had, of necessity been scaled back somewhat but we had done well over 100 miles of quite exhilarating sailing. To be repeated next year, hopefully with better weather.

