

“Perhaps I should buy a motor boat” – The log of a trip aboard Summer Breeze

Northney Marina, Chichester Harbour to Darthaven Marina, Kingswear, River Dart and back. August 22nd - 28th 2017 aboard my Crabber 26 “Summer Breeze” - Julian Biggs

Part of my sailing plans for the summer of 2017 included making a trip to Dartmouth, with the idea of taking part in the gaffer racing organised for the latter part of Dartmouth Royal Regatta in late August.

My first challenge was to find a crew willing, and with the time to spare to do this trip - a journey of some 112 nm each way. After a few emails and phone calls I had one crew for the westbound leg and another for the eastbound. And so it was Jim Reid, an experienced sailor with many offshore miles to his credit, who joined for the outbound trip. My brother-in-law Oliver Bishop agreed to crew on the return leg. Jim and I had not met before but were introduced by another mutual sailing chum. Any concerns about sailing with a complete stranger were quickly allayed on meeting. Jim was great company and of huge help as the trip unfolded, of which more later.

August 22nd

The agreed departure date was set for August 22nd. I had provisioned the boat with basics, and topped up fuel and water levels the previous day. I had even taken the boat out of the water for a mid-season scrub. As an aside I was very impressed as to how little “muck and mess” had attached to the hull whilst in Northney in comparison to that when Summer Breeze was moored in Bosham Channel.

We arrived at Northney Marina at 0800hrs well in advance of our planned departure time of 0900hrs. Jim had not sailed on a Crabber before, and I spent useful time pre-departure in literally “showing him the ropes” both on and below deck.

We set off from our berth at 0900hrs and proceeded down the Emsworth Channel towards the exit from Chichester Harbour. We raised sails immediately as we took advantage of the Easterly wind blowing up Sweare Deep. Skies were grey, the wind was blowing F3/F4 E, SE.

Outbound conditions bode well for a cracking sail to Yarmouth which was to be our first port of call. We left at the top of the Spring tide and were able to take good advantage of the Westerly ebb through the Solent. Our course from West Pole having left the harbour at 1015hrs, and where we turned off our engine, took us towards the north shore of the Isle of Wight really aiming for Osborne Bay across and avoiding the main shipping channel. As we progressed West with a strengthening wind, and faster flowing ebb, our boat speed steadily increased. Just off Cowes we encountered the strongest wind, with the customary huge ebb running off Gurnard. I recorded 9.2kts of SOG with 16knots apparent wind as we ran past. Summer Breeze was flying! Suddenly the wind dropped to nothing, the boat stopped dead in the water and we were in some land protected hole. It was a good ten minutes or so before wind speed and direction returned to something normal and we continued our run towards Yarmouth, where we arrived at 1455hrs. A 4 hour 40 minute sail from West Pole to Yarmouth we considered pretty good going.

The very efficient Yarmouth Harbour berthing crews showed us to our pre-booked berth. I do recommend pre-booking if you know when you are going to be anywhere. Yarmouth was particularly busy and later in the day boats were being turned away, while we had our own finger berth to ourselves with no rafting up!

It was time for a cup of tea. This is when a major problem manifested itself. Having turned the gas on, the flow to the burner was very weak and slow. At the same time Jim who was in the cockpit said he could smell gas. Immediately we turned everything off and began an investigation. It did not take long to find out that the gas pipe from the bottle in the aft locker had perished in a number of places following the circumference of the pipe. Clearly this needed fixing urgently if we were to have any tea or hot food on the next leg of our trip. I remembered hearing from another owner Chris Pryke that he too had had an almost identical problem earlier in the season. I spoke with him, and he gave a number of useful pointers as to how to sort the issue - the easiest of which was to see if there was enough slack tube in the locker which could be pulled through and re-attached to the gas bottle. We tried that and sadly there was not enough leeway to make this work. Jim and I then worked on Plan B. We had to cut out the damaged length of tube and replace it with something. We decided that if we could find a length of copper pipe and insert one end into the main piece of tubing, and the other end into a new piece attached to the bottle regulator, we might have a solution. But we had to find the parts in Yarmouth that afternoon. There is a small chandler in Yarmouth who was able to help us partly. They supplied the jubilee clips that we would need to secure the tubing ends to the copper pipe. Worryingly they had neither the pipe nor any copper tubing! They did suggest however that we might try Harold Hayles, the old boat yard in the South Western corner of the harbour. Bingo! They had boat tubing and copper pipe. We were in business. An hour so later it was "job done" - albeit a temporary repair, but a secure one which we hoped would last our journey - it did. We celebrated our repair with large cups of tea!

The further weather outlook was for a complete change of wind direction. It was to move to SW and was forecast to be F3/F4. I thought it sensible to reef the main while in the comfort of Yarmouth Harbour just in case the wind was to be higher than forecast. So we put two reefs in, and waited for the morning. We had an excellent supper at the so hospitable Royal Solent Yacht Club before turning in.

August 23rd

The day dawned with grey skies, and a fresh breeze from the South West. We started the day with a proper cooked breakfast of eggs, bacon and all the trimmings. Again we wanted to max out with the ebb tide, which meant leaving Yarmouth at around noon, which we did having topped up with fuel as we left. As soon as we left the shelter of Yarmouth Harbour it was clear that the winds were going to be more than forecast. I left the sails furled as we proceeded through Hurst and on to Bridge where we arrived just an hour after leaving Yarmouth. The sea became very choppy indeed, even rough as we carried on further West.

I had planned a course that would take us some 8.5nm South of Portland Bill for our first waypoint. The further plan was to make a night passage, arriving in Dartmouth on the 24th August morning. The weather continued to deteriorate. The wind got up. The seas became very rough and very short with no real direction to the waves, which appeared to come from anywhere. The spring ebb served us well and we reached a point at 1900hrs South East of our waypoint by a few miles before the tide turned. As the light began to fade, the flood began, and then followed a period of extremely uncomfortable sailing. The seas became rougher. We were taking big spray right over our sprayhood into the cockpit. The bowsprit on many occasions was dipping under water right up to the actual bow of the boat! This was not fun - but an endurance test - as one jammed one's body, arms and legs into positions to brace against the next bang as Summer Breeze pitched and tossed.

We had been heading directly into the wind all of this time - and I had decided to continue under engine. What a reliable engine Yanmar produce - it never missed a beat for the entire trip, and was so economical. We used 78 litres of diesel over the whole 224nm journey, with engine revs between 2200/2600rpm.

Whilst we were using our compass and GPS to navigate, I was plotting our course on a paper chart down below, and making continual calculations as to when we might reach Dartmouth. I tended to plot every couple of hours or so. Conditions were so uncomfortable, it was impossible to boil a kettle or make any soup. Jim's wife had prepared us a delicious looking stew. It remained untouched until we were safe in Dartmouth. After a few of these trips below, I did begin to feel a bit queasy. But I am one of those fortunate chaps who is "never seasick". Well I can't say that anymore, after queasiness won, and I did spend a few awkward moments hanging over the rail feeding the fishes during the night! I have always felt very sorry for those that are seasick - oh dear I now know why!

Fortunately it was just the one brief period that I felt unwell, and I was able to assure Jim that I was now "feeling fine". During our night time sail we religiously handed over tiller responsibility to one another every hour.

Many readers will have sailed the offshore passage south of Portland and will know how strong the tide can be even as far South as we were, particularly at spring tides. The speed over the ground slows to impossibly slow rates, and one begins to doubt one's calculations of likely progress. Between 1900hrs and 2300hrs we progressed 5 miles west before the current eased and we were able to make better progress.

Our journey into the night and out the other side into dawn continued much the same. At times we felt that conditions were improving only to be corrected as another crash and splash hit us. The Crabber 26's self-draining cockpit came into its own, as did our foul weather gear. We wore life vests at all times and at night we attached ourselves to the boat with our safety lines. A liferaft sat in the very large cockpit. The strongest wind we recorded was something over 30knots - but for the whole journey it was always bang on the nose.

August 24th/27th

We arrived on the River Dart at 0900hours on a clear and quiet morning. We motored in against "all" of the regatta yachts making their way to their respective start lines. My last entrance to Dartmouth some two years ago was made in thick fog - so at least this time we could see where we were going!

Before berthing we refuelled Summer Breeze at the mid river fuelling station, and then made our way to Darthaven Marina who were very accommodating and found us an excellent berth. It was time for a hot meal. The last was that breakfast in Yarmouth 24hours earlier. We had had the occasional biscuit throughout the passage to sustain us with the odd glass of water. The repaired gas supply worked well and Jim and I regained some strength with another fry-up, and then had a good nap!

Both Jim and I over the years have done a lot of passage sailing on all sorts of boats in different parts of the world, in not always perfect conditions. Whether it was our relatively small boat or what I am not sure, but neither of us can remember such an uncomfortable passage as the one we had just completed.

Would it have been better in a motorboat?!

Our stay in Dartmouth was great fun. Regatta week assures all visitors of much excitement. There are countless shore displays of this and that. The RNLi put on a show in the river. There were two massive firework displays while we were there, and the highlight was a flying demonstration by one of the RAF's Eurofighters - an extraordinary aircraft capable of what appeared to be gravity defying manoeuvres - and very very noisy. We spent a fair bit of time at the Royal Dart Yacht Club whose views over the river are second to none. The beer isn't bad either!

My brother-in-law arrived in Dartmouth on the Friday evening as scheduled ready for racing with Jim and me on Saturday morning. However our plans to race were sadly curtailed. The first day's racing for us on the Saturday was cancelled altogether due to no wind. Bright blue skies and warm sunshine prevailed. So Saturday was a day of enjoying Dartmouth in "regatta mode".

August 27th

Sunday's weather had a similar forecast to Saturday and a discussion ensued as to what would be the best plan. Since we also learned of some land based change of plans during the following week, Oliver and I decided to return to Chichester early.

It was time to leave, and make sail for Chichester. We left Dartmouth at 1030hrs on the Sunday morning. We hoisted our sails and were able to sail for a few hours before the wind just died to zero. The sea became as flat as a millpond. The contrast against the outbound passage was extraordinary. There was nothing else for it but to furl the foresails, and continue under motor. Which we did again for the entire journey. The good news was that we were at least comfortable. I was hoping this time to go non-stop from Dartmouth to our berth at Northney - a long slog but easier in the prevailing conditions.

We planned the tides well and made good eastbound progress from Dartmouth with a few hours of favourable tide before the change. The springs had eased now and we were heading towards neaps - such a change. As we progressed across Lyme Bay in gorgeous weather we were joined by a pod of about 5 dolphins who entertained themselves and us for an hour or so, with their antics of racing the boat, swimming underneath and beside the boat, as well as jumping high out of the water. What a treat that was, and with a good chunk recorded on the ubiquitous Iphone. That really was one of the highlights of the return leg. Another was being able to heat food and make tea/coffee while on passage - and consume it all without penalty!

We arrived at Hurst Narrows at 0230hrs with a couple of flood hours left. This made for an easy entrance to the Solent. I must admit though, it has been many years since I made a night time entry to the Solent. It did concentrate the mind. In fact all the way up the Needles Channel we had to keep our wits about us. I would never use the main shipping channels in the Solent during daylight hours, but I must admit it was quite useful using them in the dark. We only encountered one enormous cruise ship heading for Southampton. We passed each other safely port to port, and no rude foghorn noises either!

We continued through the Solent. As dawn broke we were off Portsmouth Harbour. The early ferries were beginning to emerge, traffic was building up. By this time too, the ebb had set in, and our progress towards Chichester was hampered slightly. We entered the main Chichester Channel between West Pole and Bar Beacon, with the lifting keel slightly raised we had no difficulty there at all. It does save a bit of time, but do check your depth gauge. As we got closer to the Harbour entrance the ebb was running furiously and we made very slow progress until we eventually broke free of the current and made for Northney. We

berthed at 0900hrs some 22.5 hours after leaving Dartmouth. Another journey made under motor.

Would it have been better in a motorboat?!

In summary it was an excellent, if frustrating trip. However one cannot fault the Crabber 26 for her seagoing qualities. Summer Breeze took a bashing going West and held together very well indeed. A boat to give one confidence, of that there is no doubt. Both my crew said they enjoyed themselves too, so it wasn't all bad!

Julian Biggs

September 2017

An additional note from Jim Reid -

As Julian's crew on the Westbound leg, I felt it important to give due credit to the overall planning and especially the passage plan which Julian produced. As anyone who sails around the Solent and Portland Bill will appreciate these tidal "gates" are critical in the overall route plan.

The fact that we had the worst of the sea and wind conditions before Portland Bill and still made good headway thanks to the ebbing Spring tide was a fundamental part of Julian's plan. If we had encountered those conditions for more than six hours without making reasonable SOG our determination would surely have been severely tested. As it was, later on when the tide turned and the weather and sea conditions abated somewhat, in line with the forecast, our reduced speed was much easier to bear.

As Julian said, we have both experienced considerably rougher (larger) waves but none so untidy and unpredictable. To give some extra sense of the forces involved three examples may help to paint the picture:

1: During the worst of the conditions, a strong plastic strap holding the fire extinguisher in place, snapped, sending the extinguisher crashing around the cabin sole.

2: Soon afterwards, the kettle parted company with the gimballed cooker and found itself a place behind the cooker, despite having been secured with retaining brackets.

3: The plotter on deck became unusable as a check for compass heading. Although the bearing to destination was accurate the instantaneous heading of the boat varied widely, on two occasions swinging through 720 degrees and several times through 360. Those who understand the reasons for this will appreciate the boat movements that would cause this.

It was in retrieving the above objects that I had to go below and stow the items in a locker, bent over and struggling to retrieve the kettle. I have also never been or felt seasick before but I certainly experienced it then. Julian spent much longer down below.

The boat felt more than secure throughout and was never a source of concern for me.

As for getting a motor boat, I hope not!!!