

The Art of Coarse Boating

By

Jeff Dray

*Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business in great waters;
They see the works of the Lord,
And great wonders in the deep.
For He commands and raises the stormy wind,
Which lifts up the waves of the sea.
They mount up to the heavens,
They go down again to the depths;
Their soul melts because of the trouble.
They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man,
And are at their wits' end.
Then they cry out to the Lord in their trouble,
And he brings them out of their distresses.
He calms the storm, so that its waves are still.
Then they are glad because they are quiet;
So he guides them to their desired haven."*

Psalm 107 - The unofficial Coarse Boater's Prayer.

Introduction.

No, please stick with it. I know you always flick past the introduction but bear with me. It isn't much of an intro and it will hopefully help you make sense of what is to follow.

Deep in the soul of many Englishmen is a passion for the sea. Although we know less and less about it these days what we do know is tinged with a false romanticism and a playboy image, which doesn't sit well with the real feel of the sea.

The sea is a wild, dangerous, untamed living thing that can change its mood at a moment's notice. So often these days we treat it like a playground; people who venture onto the sea and fail to return alive pay the price of such contempt every year. Nowhere is this more evident than here in sunny Dorset where every year people die because they fail to understand that the sea is a wild natural element and not a Disney water park.

However thinly it might be diluted, the blood of Alfred the Great, Sir Walter Raleigh, Nelson and Sir Francis Drake still flows through our veins. Years ago we relied far more on the sea for our commerce, our food and our defence. Nowadays fewer people rely on the sea for their livelihood. Goods travel in fewer and larger ships with smaller crews.

The appeal of the sea can be observed by the strange magnetic pull that it has for people who spend their lives chained to an office desk, operating a machine in an industrial landscape or driving along clogged and turgid motorways. When these people escape from their normal lives for a few weekends or a fortnight in the summer they often gravitate to coast, where they stand and gaze at the wilderness that surrounds our shores.

The enjoyment of the water is something that we can all appreciate, whether it be an idle moment spent skimming flat pebbles whilst enjoying an ice cream or basking on the deck of a luxury yacht, we are all experiencing the same thing, it's just that some people can afford to spend more on the experience than others. Sadly, I can't count myself amongst the latter category. When I went to look at the sea as a youth I could do no more than gaze longingly at the horizon and imagine what it would be like to be out there enjoying the breezes and the easy movement of a deck beneath my feet. When the opportunity to move to the coast came along I seized it

with both hands. I left the Thames Valley, my home for forty years, and found a small house near to the quay at Poole in Dorset. From my bedroom window there I could see, between the Thistle Hotel and the old buildings of Poole Pottery, the harbour where ships and boats passed. Seagulls screeched their mournful cries and the air was so refreshingly clean and fresh that for the first three months all I wanted to do was eat and sleep.

We learned to appreciate the remarkable countryside; we found ways to get afloat on the stunning waters of the Harbour and started to appreciate the slower and quieter side of life that is to be found in Dorset. It was there where I built my sailing dinghy, which allowed me to get afloat for the first time under my own power.

It was not ideal, building a boat in the open air, every time it looked like rain I had to hurriedly pack all my tools away and cover the construction work to avoid getting it spoilt before it was finished. It took over eight months to build, in between enduring full time work, as described admirably by Phillip Larkin in his poem "Toad". We decorated the house and managed all the things that every other householder has to manage.

It was a very satisfying day when I wheeled my finished vessel to the slipway next to the old lifeboat shed and slid it into the water. To my amazement it floated. Not only did it float but also it floated the right way up and with both sides the same distance out of the water. From there I never looked back. I have plans to build another larger boat but I vowed never again to build a boat in the open air. Now that I have a garage, currently home to my boat and its trailer, I can plan to build again and maybe get something that can take more than one person aboard without worrying about water coming over the side.

Coarse boating is a reaction against the "posh" image of boating. Such enjoyment is not just for the well heeled but can be enjoyed by anyone who is prepared to put in a little effort and doesn't mind roughing it a bit. When you get used to the idea of coarse boating it is far more enjoyable than "Yotting".

Coarse boaters have more in common with those who use boats as a tool of the trade, the fishermen, shell fish harvesters, crabbers, pilots and surveyors. Their boats are not luxurious but spend a lot more time under weigh than the vast majority of leisure boats.

When we had been in Poole for three years the world that we had grown to love started to turn sour. Poole Pottery decided to demolish their factory and develop the site for luxury flats, some selling for seven figure sums. The building was to be nine stories high, totally removing the daylight from the street where we lived and replacing our view of the water with one of the back of a block of flats and a multi storey car park. Given that the entire area is officially designated as a Conservation Area we, like many others, felt this was a rather heavy handed development. When I bought the house we received a letter from Poole Borough Council, outlining the nature of the Conservation area scheme and giving us a long list of things we were not permitted to do, in order to maintain the character of the area. The development there is more in keeping with Docklands or the more tasteless areas of the Miami waterfront.

We decided to move and found a house a couple of miles away in Hamworthy, across the bridge. The increase in the value of the property on the quay meant that we were able to move into a larger house, giving us the room to expand. I had a room free for an office, a garage, uncontested off road parking and another view of the harbour, a different part of the harbour but one that is unlikely to be obliterated by development.

Early on in my residence in Poole I joined the Maritime Volunteer Service, an organisation dedicated to the preservation of Britain's maritime skills. I got plenty of opportunities to get afloat and to explore the Harbour and occasionally float further afield. Sometimes these events had a funny side. They always showed that there was an unglamorous side to boating; it is far too good to be a mere matter of glamour.

In this volume I hope to convey some of the more rewarding aspects of coarse boating.

Chapter 1

In which is described the Romance of the Sea - As captured in popular poetry and as debunked by me.

So who was this John Masefield anyway?

"I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky,"
Thus opens one of the most evocative poems about the sea that I know.

We are, it is said, a seafaring nation; the blood of the Vikings, Alfred the Great, Drake, Raleigh and Nelson is in the hearts and history of this small and stubborn island race.

There are many other such poems and tunes, such as "Hearts of Oak", "A Life on the Ocean Wave". Although we may not know all of the words, most of us can hum them in the bath.

There is a magnetic attraction in the sea, which compels us all to go to the coast to stand and gaze out on what is basically a hostile wilderness, capable of snuffing out a human life with less effort than we would use to swat a fly.

There is a popular image of life at sea that has a whole series of sounds and smells associated with it. The sounds include the creaking of ropes and the mild groan of timbers; the smells are of tar, brine and canvas. The truth could not be more remote. The modern ship has no timber in it, except for some very fetching teak effect veneer on the cabin table. The ropes are all synthetic fibre and those heavy comforting spars are now nasty looking shiny aluminium poles which ping in a most irritating fashion when halyards and shackles tap against them in a wind. Even from this you would think that you could still recover some of the romance of the sea.

What about the next line of the poem:

"And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by..."

What rubbish! The modern sailing boat has so much electronic hardware aboard her that the cockpit looks like the flight deck of a jumbo jet. Most modern sailors would not even be able to see the Pole star over the glow of the instrument panel, let alone know how to use it. In theory the equipment available to today's budding

Nelson could take the ship out to sea, steer her around a bit and bring her home again whilst her lucky owner was safely at home in the warm watching Neighbours.

"And the wheels kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,"

Well, this bit could still be true, the wind still blows. The air is more polluted than when the poem was written, but the sails are very often white to start with, although it has to be said that they are not canvas any more. This is a huge boon to the handlers of sails who no longer have to have muscles like Garth to set and strike sails. No one who has had to deal with wet canvas will mourn its passing.

As long as they aren't tempted to rig old ships with it.

"And a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking."

This line will only mean something to the real sailor, the sort who sleeps on board his craft and gets up early to make the most of the day and the tides.

Many sailors, alas, do most of their cruising in their imagination, they buy the right gear from expensive chandlers shops and wear it to quayside pubs where they tell taller stories than anglers.

I visited a chandlers shop in Cornwall a couple of years back only to discover that the definition of the word "chandler" has been rewritten. Originally it was a place where you could go to buy essential supplies for your ship, including candles, from which they took their name. This shop had a few pseudo-nautical souvenirs for sale but was mostly devoted to very over priced fashion clothing for people to be seen in whilst hanging around yacht marinas and Rick Stein's Fish restaurant.

It was at the London Boat Show, where I saw a father and son gazing wistfully at a rather expensive yacht that was displayed in gleaming glory alongside the pool. Son was just in awe of the size and splendour of the craft. Father's eyes were on the deck; his mind's eye had decorated it with some bikini-clad beauties that would be wooed by the rugged skill of his seafaring prowess.

Father turned to son and with the inbred knowledge of a thousand years of naval supremacy remarked on the clever way the "Barnacle" that housed the compass was moulded into the cabin. Surely that man had the makings of a great coarse boater. He was a dreamer, he had as much chance of being able to buy that yacht as I have of going to the moon yet he could stand there and imagine being afloat. When it comes down to the wire, coarse boating is all

about being able to dream. I often suspect that being able to realise all those dreams would be the end of a wonderful romance with the sea.

Chapter 2

The Luckiest place in England

In which are described the masters of the air and nature's superglue.

Seagulls are the source of the strongest adhesive known to man; they haunt the seaside and are the avian equivalent of rats. What is less known is that they are severe critics on the ineptitude of human beings. The ululation that is the signature of any trip to the seaside is, in fact, cruel mocking laughter.

When there are no humans to laugh at seagulls can sound quite sorrowful and depressing.

In the winter they hang about the shopping precinct like gangs of kids bunking off school. The squabbles and minor fights are exactly the same. They pounce on discarded burgers and carry them off. They see our efforts to master the elements with our clumsy attempts to harness the winds and tides, they observe our clumsy efforts to move from boat to pontoon and laugh themselves sick.

Then they shit all over us, our boats, our cars and over any anti-seagull shit devices that we misguidedly believe can save us from the effects of this vicious caustic chemical. Seagulls should come with a health warning.

A few years ago the belief was spread that gulls would avoid rival species and, as a consequence, a great number of plastic owls were sold for people to fix to their boats to scare them away. The first time I saw one on a boat, I was rowing up the Fowey estuary in Cornwall, there was a herring gull sat on its head and it was covered with white streaks. Obviously nobody told the gulls that they were supposed to be scared.

Later it was believed that a sting of supermarket carrier bags flapping in the breeze would deter gulls from landing and befouling boats. At the end of a hard day's sailing or fishing many a boater would string bags from one end of their boat to the other, making it look like the fence around an industrial estate. The rustling and flapping was successful at first but the gulls soon learned to ignore

them. They soon held no further fear for those airborne sewage dispensers. I have often seen them perching on the lines between the carrier bags.

The latest device is CDs. String a load of those free Internet set up disks around the boat and the flashing of the sun reflecting off the disks unnerves the gull and sends him packing. Strangely, given the amount of sunshine we have here, this is the best device so far and, as I work in the field of IT, I usually have a good number of free CDs of one sort or another to offer to the boating fraternity. Whenever I mess up a CD that I am burning it goes in the pile, along with magazine cover disks, Internet setup disks and anything that is no longer of any use and away they go for a new lease of life.

It may be that if you visit a moored craft in Poole Harbour, you might be able to obtain a copy of a time expired backup of mine from it and read what I was writing about last year. I am very curious to know what we will be using to entertain the gulls next year.

You may conclude from this that I am not a great fan of the seagull. Nothing could be further from the truth. If people don't want to be shat upon the answer is simple. Don't discard your food or throw it to them. They get quite enough to eat as it is. They are opportunist creatures and, like us, will not work hard for a meal if a free one is handed out.

One summer morning we went aboard the Tom Sherrin at her swinging mooring in Holes Bay to find it covered with chicken bones and seagull splatters. The bones were picked clean and had been dumped there by herring gulls after they had scavenged them from the quay, where they had been tossed out of car windows by those who should have been drowned at birth.

One sunny Saturday afternoon I watched a chap getting red in the face because his windscreen had been bombed repeatedly. He only had himself to blame, he had hurled his burger box out of the car window, scattering chips and lettuce. The gulls had done a good job of clearing away his scraps.

Whenever I hear them calling it brings back to me the wonderful feeling of living by the sea. When we were in the process of moving here I was speaking to the estate agent on the phone from my office

in Reading. I heard the sound of gulls in the background and it finally sold me the house. Even now, nearly five years later, though I have become accustomed to the sound, I still hear them and feel good about being here.

Any one with an interest in aerobatics can only marvel at the way that gulls fly. It is said that R J Mitchell had been observing them when he designed the Spitfire. To see them sweeping along with seemingly little or no effort, to watch the impossible dives and pinpoint landings is wondrous. When you've been at sea, out of sight of land, they are often the first sight and sound of land and as such have provided for many centuries the kind of comfort in an hour of need that is worth a lot of windscreen cleaning.

Just one tip: clean the splatters off as soon as is physically possible, the stuff is not only highly adhesive once dry, it is also quite caustic and can blister paint work and strip polish.

In the winter months the gulls are less in evidence. They are still here but they lose the habit of hanging around people because there are no people to hurl food at them. Come Easter and the first coach parties of pensioners arriving on the quay they will be back in force, feeding on discarded chips and pinched off corners of sandwiches. Back too will be the complainers with white streaks on their hair, coats and car bodywork.

Gulls have found that our towns are a far easier place to live in than cliffs, it's warmer, there is far more food lying about and life for a town gull is far less effort. They still have the same natural instincts and this can lead to conflict.

As with any living animal Gulls are very protective towards their young and will attack anything that they feel is a threat to them. In recent years there have been some nasty attacks by gulls, several small dogs have been killed and they have injured people as well.

It is said to be lucky to be shat on by a gull. If this is true come on down and spend a day in the luckiest place in England, buy a bag of chips and share them with these avian wonders. Just don't complain when you catch a nasty disease.

Chapter 3

On Poole Harbour no one can hear you scream

In which is described a trip on the harbour when the weather changed for the worse and I had to wait for the shopping.

Boats. Love 'em or hate 'em, there's no middle ground.

They seem like a great idea when you are sitting at home during the winter looking forward to those elusive long summer days of leisure on the water.

In reality there are a few snatched hours when you drag the boat down to the nearest slip, launch and sail away, often having lost some skin from your knuckles and knees whilst trying to ship the rudder, step the mast and get the sail set, fit oars in rowlocks and keep everything from trailing in the water/ Or dropping overboard and sinking. Eventually everything is set, you get clear of all the hazards such as quays, moored craft, onlookers, children throwing stones, channel marker posts, buoys and breakwaters before you can settle down to enjoy a sail. A few minutes from even the densest crowd and the harbour takes on a freedom and a loneliness that can't be rivalled anywhere. There are simply miles of good sailing to be had, especially in a small boat. The harbour is shallow over most of its area and much of it is not accessible to larger boats.

The return trip involves running the same gauntlet so the temptation is to leave the quay in the wee small hours and stay afloat until long after everyone else is tucked up in bed.

The problem with this is that you get a combination of sunburn, hypothermia, wind and salt burn, bored, hungry and dying for a pee. The latter can be resolved if you find a quiet corner and you have a sculling notch. It would be nice to have one's own jetty to sail from, in the same way that swimming would be nicer if you had your own private pool.

Once back at home there is the maintenance to do, there might be a small modification to the rig that you thought of when crashing through the surf.

This is always a good excuse for not decorating the living room. After a few days and a few visits to the local boat bits shop you will notice that there are lots of extras that you can lavish on your craft. Resist the temptation. You can on the whole live without these extras.

The most useful thing I now own for the boat is a pair of waterproof stowage bags. One is big enough for a change of clothes and will float if necessary, the other is used to contain such delicate valuables as my camera and my binoculars, more of which in a later chapter.

A decent watertight sandwich box is the other "must have" accessory.

Buoyancy aids and life jackets are generally considered to be a good idea. They keep you warm and pad you from the hard edges in the boat. Apparently they are also quite good at keeping you afloat when you fall in.

Mine is very good for keeping out those cold sneaky draughts that plague small boats.

Out on the water, in the open part between navigation channels there are ample opportunities for you to get stuck for hours at a time on the mud. This can be a very relaxing affair, so long as nobody notices you and tries to rescue you. It is pointless to get out to try to push the boat back into deep water; the mud only allows one-way movement and any attempt to fight it results in the boat being filled with more mud than you can imagine. If pushing off with an oar or a spar fails, settle yourself down for a sleep under the sail. No one can run you down so there is no risk. The sail is useful for keeping sunburn at bay.

It is, apparently, not acceptable to lounge in a small boat. Simply lying back staring out over the water leads to suspicions of loitering with intent, voyeurism and every unsolved crime since the disappearance of Shergar. You can overcome this by taking a fishing rod with you. Don't worry about taking tackle or bait, just tie a small pebble to the line and fling it over the side. Doing this causes far less trouble, if you use a hook and bait you may have to wake up and deal with a slimy messy fish.

Moving around in the boat can cause some unexpected convulsions. Remember that pushing against things will not push

large objects away; it will push you onto an obstruction that you have not seen yet. You are constantly reminded of Newton's third law of motion. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a small boat when struggling to extricate oneself from a tight corner surrounded by projections that threaten to hole the boat or even yourself. Coming alongside another boat is always a tricky time. Common sense tells you that, if you are both being affected by the same waves, you should both rise and fall in the water together. Coming along side any other craft in open water for the first will clearly dispel this illusion. Nothing could be further from the truth. Get up close to another vessel and you might as well be on a different bit of sea. Watch out for your fingers. The only certainty is that the point at which the two boats make contact is where your fingers are. Standing up, shaking your fingers around and swearing takes you back to the earlier point about Newton's third law.

When you are a good distance from land, you encounter the sensation of not moving at all. It seems to take ages to cover the distance between shore and that small island that looks like an ideal spot for lunch, yet when that huge iron channel buoy comes into view and you realise that the tide is sweeping you sideways onto it, it approaches at the speeds of light. The ground you lose avoiding the collision takes ten times longer to recover, yet when you finally arrive at that lonely beach; you are on the shingle and aground before you know what has happened. Every one has seen the comedy sketch where the person gets into the boat but leaves one leg on the shore. I've done it but, to my credit, managed to extricate myself without getting wet. This kind of evolution is always performed when there is a large audience.

One Sunday morning I was down at the slipway preparing to launch the boat.

A coach load of grannies from Manchester stood there, licking their ice creams, tugging at the corners of their cardigans and shouting encouragement:

"Oopsy dear, mind you don't split your difference!"

"Bit wobbly innit love?"

"All aboard for the skylark!" (Apparently this was a catch phrase from a radio series in the 1950s)

I recovered my dignity, such as it is, and sallied forth across the sparkling waters of the harbour. It was a perfect day, the sky was blue, gulls wheeled overhead and the wind was perfect for the trip. I

had arranged to meet a friend on the island, we plan to share a couple of beers and perhaps light a barbecue. A few yards from shore the plan changed. The phone rang. I know I should have left it behind but it comes in handy.

"Jeff, have you got your front door key with you? I've locked myself out"

"Yes dear, meet me on the quay next to the bloke who sells crabs from his boat"

I arrived at the quay to find The current Mrs. Dray (hereinafter to be known as TCMD) looking agitated. I passed my keys over and made as if to veer off again.

"Are you coming back for lunch?"

"No I've got sandwiches; I'm meeting Tom over on the island."

"Huh! I suppose you'll be all day!"

"No I'll be back for tea"

This is apparently the wrong thing to say. What I should have said is:

"Oh what the hell! I can't be bothered with sailing, why don't I come home and spend the afternoon dragging around the shops with you?"

Finally I got across to the island, hoping Tom hasn't been waiting too long.

On the beach there was a stick wedged upright between some stones. It had been split and a piece of paper inserted into it. It's a note from Tom:

"We waited, but had to leave as
We just heard the weather forecast.
Hope you don't get too wet!"

I ate my sandwiches, noticing that the sky is not so blue and the wind is not so warm. I set sail again. So much for the forecast that promised: a moderate south-easterly all day, temperatures in the mid 70s and no rain.

Many people may remember the famous BBC weather forecaster Michael Fish in October 1987 assuring people that, although winds would be quite strong, the rumours of a hurricane were entirely groundless. Twenty four hours later Southern England had lost an

estimated 5 million trees and several hundred houses were no longer habitable.

The wind got colder and weaker. I heard a popping noise as large drops of rain started to hit the sail. The rain gathered in strength as the wind failed. Over in the distance I could see the quay, about four miles off. There were no other boats moving now, just me and sheets of water. I donned my waterproof and lean over the stern to raise my rudder. In doing so I scooped up a bucketful of cold seawater in my sleeve and shuddered as it ran down inside my coat. The Minn Kota electric outboard motor came into play and soon I am rippling along, the mainsail wrapped around me to keep the rain off.

Back on shore some kind soul had parked his car across the top of the slipway. Caring nought, I dragged the boat out and across the bonnet of the Ford, covering is with scratches and sand; I wheeled the boat home, planning to take a nice warm bath.

When I got there she was still at the shops with my keys.

I spent the next hour in the back yard, washing the grit and salt off my gear and watching our three cats inside, enjoying the warmth of my expensive central heating.

I love sailing.

Chapter 4

With a motorboat they still can't hear you scream.
In which we find ourselves tackling the bottom of the harbour and learn a bit about tides.

After sail comes motor. Motorboats are similar in that you can get into all kinds of scrapes with them; the difference is that it all goes wrong a lot faster and into any point of the wind. The added factor of MECHANICAL THINGS that can also go wrong at random add to the spice of motor boating.

When somebody spots some thing going wrong with your sailing craft they can bellow a warning and you can usually hear it. In a motor boat with a wheelhouse and an inboard diesel engine you can see the panicked look and see the lips moving but all you can hear is the steady hammer of the engine. Distracted by their silent cinema type gesticulations you take your eye off the plot and run into what ever it was they were warning you about.

The same provisos about jamming your fingers between the boat and the jetty or another boat still apply; the only difference will be in the level of injury sustained.

Poole Harbour may be the Northern Hemisphere's largest natural harbour (beaten in size only by Sidney Harbour down under) but it isn't the deepest. Much of it, at high tide, has only a light covering or water to make it look nice. Out of the dredged navigation channels there is a particularly good line in mud, some of the heaviest and stickiest I've ever encountered.

As such the risk of running aground is always at the front of one's mind, at least it should be. In a previous piece on the subject I mentioned my friend Tom. Tom has a lovely fast motorboat and, being an ex chief engineer from the merchant Navy, does all his own maintenance. I encountered him one day, his boat standing high and dry on the mud with him covered in mud scuttling about under the stern of his vessel.

He was waving and gesturing wildly so I slowed down and turned to approach him. His waving and gesturing increased to fever pitch. I thought there must be something wrong so I went in as far as I could and stopped the engine so that I could talk to him.

"What's up Tom?" I bellowed

"Eh?" comes the reply, blown like thistledown upon the wind.

"What's up? - Oh Bollocks!"

I reach for my mobile phone, yes the same one that ruined my last boating experience and dialled his number.

"Hi Tom, are you OK?"

"Yes Jeff. What I was going to say was: don't stop the engine on that, the starter is playing up, it will only start from cold, for some strange reason"

"Oh Shit, why didn't you put it in the log?"

"It's in the maintenance log, the one that no-one reads"

"OK I'll give it a try."

The engine wheezed a bit when I pressed the starter but nothing happened. I rushed onto the deck and used the pole to push the boat into deeper water. Once clear of the mud I lowered the anchor. Tom arrived in his inflatable dinghy.

"You bloody fool, I was saying keep away, there's a mud bar here that's shifted, you were right on top of it and the tide's falling, you could be stuck here for hours."

Sure enough I felt the boat start to settle. I raced up on to the deck and let out more anchor chain. Using the pole again I felt around for some deeper water and shoved the boat into it.

Feeling pretty smug I joined Tom in the dinghy and went to see what help I could be. With Tom it's usually a matter of passing the right spanner and hanging onto his braces so that he doesn't fall in.

After a while I looked back. I had found a patch of deep water and the boat was floating freely in it. The trouble was that it was a hole surrounded by mud so there the boat had to stay for a few hours. Tom finished his work on his outdrive and was waiting for the tide to free him. We sat in his cabin nursing our sandwiches and a bottle or two. Many hours later and with a good deal of harbour mud on our clothes we arrived back at our respective moorings. A good day out on the water, totally unspoiled by any threat of shopping.

Chapter 5

Coarse boating at the end of the year

In which I increase the moisture content of my shorts and fail to get away from the shore.

Snatching what was probably the last chance of the year to get the bottom of the boat wet, I took to the water one Sunday. It was a lovely day, a strong breeze and warm enough not to worry about being cold. I hitched up the boat trailer and headed for the free slipway, about half a mile from home.

The conditions seemed fair when I left home, indeed whilst hitching the trailer to the car I managed to raise quite a sweat. On the beach in Hamworthy I encountered several other like-minded folks who were eyeing the water with some suspicion. It wasn't that the breeze was quite strong, nor was it the running tide scouring across the beach. It was that both were running strongly in the same direction.

When I got there it was still warm but the breeze had strengthened and, fortified by a flooding tide, foiled any attempts to launch my boat, other than by dragging it bodily out to sea. This I did and when the water came to the bottom of my shorts I threw out the anchor, climbed in and set the sail. I wasn't quite fast enough. No sooner had I set the sail and started to move, the action of pulling in the anchor would interrupt the process and I would end up back on the beach. I tried paddling out further but the wind and tide were stronger than I was and I ended up on the beach again. The boat had a magnetic attraction for the beach so I decided that the best thing to do would be to return to the slip. I do not enjoy struggling and there seemed little point in prolonging the agony. The tide was still running very strongly, the wind showed no sign of easing so I decided to call it a day

Having resolved to do this I found it near to impossible to achieve. The wind was carrying me along the beach away from the slip. Deciding that enough was enough and remembering the lack of

water in this particular section of Poole Harbour, I decided to get out and walk.

Most of Poole Harbour is less than four feet deep and around the margins it can be considerably less. All afternoon I had been scraping along the bottom, unable to use either my electric outboard motor or the centreboard. It was a great surprise to me when I got out of the boat to find that I had arrived at one of the deep holes that sprinkle the harbour bed.

After the water had closed over my head I thought that it would be a good idea to keep hold of the painter, so I unerringly lost the end of it and started to flounder around. My wonderfully efficient top of the range automatic lifejacket added to my problems by deciding to inflate. In a split second it transforms from a narrow strip of red fabric worn around the neck into a huge pair of comedy pantomime-dame type breasts. With these cradling my head I lost sight of the boat briefly and by the time I had regained my footing the boat had taken itself off into deeper water.

How it managed this by itself when I had been struggling to do it all afternoon was a mystery to me but I floundered after it and managed to catch up with it. Grabbing the side of the boat I dragged the painter out from under all the other kit and started to tow the boat back. As I waded I felt eyes on the back of my neck. People walking their dogs along the beach were beginning to stare. In my furious struggle to regain my footing my shorts had become dislodged from their usual position and were halfway down my legs. I cut a fine figure of a mariner, Day-Glo boobs and bare arse taking the boat for a walk. Back on the slip I was able to sort myself out. The boat was soon on its trailer, I was modestly attired once more and predictably the sea started to settle. The wind shifted away from the shore, the tide turned and all seemed right for another attempt. Sadly time was not on my side. In less than an hour I was due to collect my wife from work. (I know, what a life!)

The next problem was the car. It was only just over a year old and I try to keep it as respectable as I can. Seawater is not a great thing for upholstery, especially when it starts to dry out. Clothing and seats take on the appearance of an adolescent's bedclothes. I had my posh sailing salopettes in the car; it was just a matter of slipping into them when nobody was around. I scanned the beach. All clear.

Off came the soggy shorts and pants.

Bang on cue, around the corner came the largest crowd of sightseers imaginable.

Now I have my pride, and cold seawater is no respecter of a man's vanity. Turning away from them I had the pleasure of presenting my shrivelled manhood to an elderly lady walking her dog. Within a split second I had shrugged myself into the salopettes and the drama was over.

The old lady approached:

"You want to try keeping them warm; they're no good to anyone in that state."

Chapter 6 Maintenance.

In which I suffer the perils of DIY, discover an infallible method for raising an unwanted wind and regret that last bacon butty.

Oh for the sickening sound of tool steel on human flesh. Yes the boating season is all but over. As the weather turns to mist rain and cold and the dark evenings draw in, thoughts of an ancient mariner turn to the dreaded M Word - Maintenance.

Salt water, sharp stones and good old wear and tear take their toll of a wooden hull and when you can't sail it's payback time.

All through the summer you see a variety of modifications to make but don't want to take the boat out of use for any time. In the winter you have the time but somehow the inclination isn't always there but if you thought that sailing held untold opportunities for danger and personal injuries then you have never seen me at work with power tools trying to make things better.

When I built my boat I did not own much in the way of power tools, any injuries I received during the building process were relatively minor, I think the worst was sticking two fingers together with epoxy resin, which would not have been too bad except for the fact that they were on different hands (but not, thankfully, different people).

Nowadays things are easier. I have more space, an outside power supply, hard standing and some big gates which I can close to hide all the mistakes.

Thankfully repairs are not a frequent requirement, the hull is as sound as such a hull can be. Epoxy is incredibly strong. I have been hankering after re-designing the sailing rig, the present arrangements are a little primitive and I feel I can get better performance from an enhanced sail configuration.

I took myself to the local sail loft where craftsmen ply their trade sitting cross legged on a huge open floor. I asked about making my own sail and looked around at the bits they had for sale. I bought

sail maker's needles, the cord and that most essential of sail making tools, a palm.

The palm is essentially a piece of reinforcement for the palm of the hand. The point of the needle is placed against the fabric then given a mighty shove from the palm of the hand to force it through.

Without it I would soon wear out the original equipment and would start to get blood all over my nice clean new sails. The sail maker apologised:

"I'm terribly sorry, I only have this left handed palm, if you think it is any good you can have it for half price, it's the last one I have."

Containing my bitter left handed disappointment, I paid the man and left elated, it doesn't take much of a bargain to cheer me up does it?

Being sure to make the effort to open the door with my right hand (how awkward is that?) I jumped in the car and went home. In my whole life I have scored very few left handed against right handed victories but the two most noticeable are my sail maker's palm and my left handed scissors. For years people looked at my efforts to cut things out left handed using right handed scissors. The result was usually derision. Now I enjoy the same Schadenfreude when I lend my scissors to the common herd. They complain about how impossible they are to use, I have found that I can handle right handed scissors far better than most right handed people can handle left handed scissors.

I wanted a gaff sail rather than the sprit sail I currently use. This would involve some cunning measurements and the use of string. I can now reveal myself to be the discoverer of another natural phenomenon. You may have noticed that it is possible to control rain by hanging out washing or washing the car. I can report a similar effect caused by trying to unfold large areas of sailcloth. I had to use the driveway as the inside of the house does not allow for such a large area of floor to be used in one go. It was a perfectly calm day so I moved the car into the road and took out the second hand sail that I had acquired for the purpose. With any kind of luck I could use some of the existing eyes and runners and save myself a bit of sewing.

I picked up the sail at a boat jumble, it was nearly new and very large, the main sail from a cruising yacht. It was nearly twenty eight feet long and at its widest about nine feet, affording me plenty of material for a small boat sail.

No sooner had I laid it out than a small gust of wind, no more than a zephyr, lifted the corner of the sail and flopped it down again, folded in on the area I was working on.

I straightened it out and held it down with a borrowed garden gnome.

No sooner was this done than the other end lifted up, as if it was on a piece of string. This received similar treatment to the first corner.

I went into the shed to fetch a straight edge and a Stanley knife.

When I came out again the sail was twisting itself into a rope. The gnomes were wobbling so I rescued them, it wouldn't do for our dog loving neighbour, Lady Poobag, to come home and find them chipped. Mrs P is a local legend; she has a thoroughly unpleasant little dog called Precious Poochums, who regards her as a kind of slave who exists to carry him over puddles, provide food and to pick up his faeces in scented nappy bags, hence her less than glamorous title.

As I returned the gnomes to their rightful homes the sail took off and glided off up the road.

I ran after it but it was thinner and fitter than I was. It turned left at the end of the road and headed towards bandit country (well towards the Co-op really but bandit country has more romance about it don't you think?)

I huffed and puffed along, regretting having that last bacon butty until I saw the sail heading towards an oncoming car. It was being driven by Mr. Poobag. Her Ladyship was in the passenger seat and Precious Poochums was in her arms, incandescent with fury at the large red bird that was threatening to engulf the car.

Mr. P got out and caught the sail as I huffed and puffed, red faced up to the car.

I blurted my thanks as we rolled the sail.

"You know," quoth Mr. Poobag, as he handed it over to me, "You should weigh the corners down with something. I use those ghastly gnomes she insists on befouling our lawn with, I can't wait for them to get broken so we can get rid of them."

Chapter 7

DIY coarse boating

In which is described the development of my somewhat limited boat building skills.

When I moved to Poole it seemed ridiculous to live so near to such a great body of water and not have a boat. In my previous life I had lived in Reading, on the banks of the river Kennet where in better times I had kept a couple of cruisers that I used to prowl the inland waterways. A divorce and a spell of unemployment left me with no boats, a mass of debt and no way to enjoy the water.

During this time I remarried and we looked for ways to clear our debts. At the time houses in Dorset were cheaper than those in Reading. Reading was rapidly becoming an unpleasant place to live; I had always wanted to live by the sea so it wasn't a tough choice. I started to look for jobs and houses in the town.

As luck would have it, we completed on the house and I started the new job on the same day, two days after my fortieth birthday, on the thirteenth of July 1998.

The difference in house prices meant that we could clear our debts and there was a little left over for us to enjoy. I wanted a boat but something told me that it needed to be a bit different to my previous craft. I saw an advertisement in a boating magazine for a kit for an eight-foot pram dinghy with a spritsail. It had the added bonus of having a wheel on the front so that it could be wheeled like a wheelbarrow, using oars as the handles, passed through two holes in the transom.

As our house was in a street just behind the quay this was an ideal arrangement. I ordered the kit and soon the great day came when it was delivered.

The whole thing came in a large cardboard box, eight feet by three feet by one foot. It was extremely heavy as well. All the planks, the oars, the mast, rudder, all the glue and even a small tool kit were all included. I found a home for it in the small back yard and, predictably, the fine summer weather ended at that precise moment. I endured weeks of rain, dashing out to the yard after work and at weekends always managing a few minutes of work on the kit before

rain forced me to cover everything up and put the tools away until the next time.

It took nearly a year to complete the job. Never again will I build a boat in the open. It takes too long.

Special thanks have to go to TCMD who came up with a good idea when we were gluing up the planks of the boat with epoxy. She went to the cake decorating shop in the high street and came bag with their stock of icing bags. We filled these up with the paste and extruded it into the joints. These saved hours and did a far nicer job than the by now very lumpy filling knife. I have to confess to trying to hurry this part of the construction process and at one point I mixed too much hardener with a batch of epoxy putty, I must have forgotten that I had added the small squirt and pumped another. We were working away on the seam of the boat when TCMD asked, in all innocence:

"is this stuff supposed to get warm?"

"Oh Yes," I said airily, "It does give off a bit of heat."

"But should it get this warm?"

Being the impatient soul I am I said:

"Yes its fine, don't worry."

"But should it be like this? I'm going to put this pot down, I don't like it."

I looked up to see her holding the mixing pot at arm's length.

There was a pall of smoke over it and it was hissing and spitting like an angry cat. Following the same procedure I use with tetchy felines, I took the pot from her and dropped it into the flower bed, where it smouldered for an hour or so before solidifying into a blackened mass, thus demonstrating the end of any similarity with the cat.

Chapter 8 Mud

In which are discussed the benefits of mud and the possible dangers to a young person's health and well being.

*Mud, Mud Glorious mud, nothing quite like it for cooling the blood
Flanders and Swann*

*“On yer Umpteenth day, he mixeth the land and the water and lo!
He maketh mud, and he putteth his beloved son, Gunner Milligan,
up to his neck in it”
Spike Milligan Italy 1943*

When the water recedes and boating is not possible, Poole Harbour takes on a new look, the muddy look. This provides a new aspect to the harbour, instead of a thousand small boats there are twenty thousand birds roosting and feeding on the rich store of wildlife that lives in the thick clinging stinking mud that makes up the bottom of the harbour.

One day it will be discovered that the mud here is good for restoring the youthful appearance of the skin. It also attracts human activity. It is not unusual to see the youth of the locality cycling along the main road with a plastic bucket swinging from the handlebar and a gardening fork tied to the frame.

In some towns some kids show enterprise by going out at the weekend and doing jobs to supplement their pocket money. Perhaps they will deliver newspapers or leaflets; they might even offer to wash cars. Here we often see them plimping across the mud in Wellington boots with their buckets where they become gloriously filthy.

Should you ever approach one of these youths make sure you have a strong stomach if you have a yen to look into their bucket. It will contain, if he is on his way back from his day's activity, the creatures that live in the foul stinking mud, creatures that appear to suit the

environment completely. These are sold to the local sea angling shops as bait and these unfortunate creatures are doomed to spend their last moments impaled on large fishing hooks in an attempt to lure the more wholesome fish of these waters to the dinner plate.

Recently I observed a curious sight. A young lad appeared at the end of our road complete with bucket and fork and walked off the path and onto the reed bed. He crossed the reed bed and started to cross the mud. There is no way to tell whether the mud is firm or soft until you tread on it. One foot will rest on firm ground, the other will, with the next tread sink in up to the calf.

This particular lad was very smartly dressed in light coloured jeans and a brilliant white T-shirt and new looking Nike trainers. I watched him for a while from my study window. The trouble with my study at home is that it is too nice. The view from the window looks over the roofs of the bungalows on the opposite side of the road and onto the broad sweep of Holes bay, a large loop of the harbour between Poole town and Hamworthy.

It is too easy to stop work and gaze at the water, deciding whether the tide is going in or out, seeing which of the crab and lobster fishermen are working and generally day dreaming. This is fine unless you are facing a deadline and are experiencing constipation in the creativity department.

The next time I looked up the lad was still there, only this time he appeared to be wearing black wellies. I saw him slip and put out his hands to break his fall.

As he got back up he wiped his hands on his legs, making the immaculate jeans look somewhat less so. I smiled inwardly and got back to my fascinating article about TCP/IP and how to configure it.

A little while later, I looked again and saw him digging enthusiastically, dropping lugworms and rag worms into his bucket. By now there was little of the white T-shirt left, he was black from head to foot. Lord only knows what he smelt like.

At a range of two hundred yards we were spared the odour of the mud, to which I have alluded on previous occasions.

The fascination of IP addresses, network protocols and Domain Name Servers soon lost its appeal for me and I wrapped up the article for the day.

A look at my watch revealed that it was past the time that I should have left home to drive into town to fetch The Current Mrs. Dray from her place of employment and bring her home.

I closed down the PC and left. When I got to the far end of my road I saw the lad again. He was standing in the front garden of a house and a very cross looking mother was reading him the riot act at about the cost of his clothes, his apparent stupidity and what she would do to him if he ever even dared to look in the direction of the mud flats, let alone tried to walk on them. I paused for a while to absorb the wrath of this fine lady, hoping that she would inspire a character in some future writing. While all this was going on a man who I took to be the boy's father was playing a hose on him, attempting to remove the worst of the mud before the lad was allowed into the house, as I drove past I could smell the mud, even with the windows closed.

The last time I had a personal encounter with the bottom of the harbour I unwisely left my boating trousers and jacket in a heap at the bottom of a bag in the boot of my car in the hope that the laundry fairy would find them and restore them to their normal pristine state.

Now it seemed that she had failed in her duties and will have to be shot. I realised that I would also need to get a pickaxe to prise the items apart and hack off the dried residues. The good thing about the dry version of harbour mud is that the smell has gone. The bad thing is that it has been replaced by an adhesive quality equal to the strength of the smell when wet. Consequently I had a struggle on my hands.

I had been making progress with the mud but had to stop as the neighbours were complaining about the hammering. I then left them soaking in the kitchen sink but that too caused problems. Have you ever wondered what happens to the smell of harbour mud when it is dried? It goes away right? Yep! But it comes back just as soon as it gets wet again. Gaggling somewhat I rinsed away the worst of the contamination and wrestled the clothing into the washing machine for a final rinse and spin. Later, out on the line I was able to see for the first time just how artistically I had re-arranged the muck into patterns like clouds. If you look carefully you can make out faces, the back end of a horse, there's a tree with a dog sitting on it...

Chapter 9

In the Bristol Channel no one can hear you scream

In which is discussed the fine art of cooking whilst underway in a storm, the finer points of embalming and sadly neglected skill of accurate projectile vomiting.

Sometimes The Maritime Volunteer Service offers its members the chance to go to sea for a few days. In April 2000 I undertook such a trip. We left Southampton and cruised to St Mary's in the Isles of Scilly to proceed from there to Lundy in the Bristol Channel thence onto Milford Haven in the south west corner of Wales.

Ships and Boats of all types and sizes all have one thing in common; they look a lot bigger out of the water than in it and MVS Appleby is no exception.

She is over seventy feet in length and about twenty feet across the beam, which means that you don't want to be painting her with a two-inch brush. By the time the trip was over she was to feel very small indeed.

We cast off and sailed south down Southampton water on the Thursday evening. It grew dark as we passed the western end of the Isle of Wight and whole panoply of lights was laid out in front of us. We passed our homeport of Poole at about midnight so I rang up my wife to say good night. She wasn't pleased to be woken by this romantic gesture. I took my turn at the wheel and soon saw the loom of the lighthouse at Portland Bill.

The sea at night it is an entirely different world. The land upon which we live out our existence is an irrelevant grey smudge. Out there is a world of flashing lights, passing craft, disembodied voices on the radio and the weather.

In common with those who fly aircraft mariners know that they have escaped the bonds of earth but know that they must, eventually,

return to land. The trick is to do it in such a way that the eventual contact is not too hard and that control is maintained at all times.

Very soon after casting off I realised that my fellow travellers were rapidly forming themselves into a community upon which we would all have to rely for the next three days. Those with engineering skills would appear briefly, don ear protectors and dive down a vertical ladder to the engine room. This massive beast that supplied us with our light, heat, hot water and propulsion needed to be tended like a baby.

In the galley we took turns to produce meals, it didn't matter what was served, anything tastes good at sea if it is hot and you haven't eaten for four hours. I even enjoyed Tesco's Value fish cakes, something that would make my stomach do a back flip, triple Salco and double toe loop on dry land.

We worked four-hour watches. Our first landfall would not be for twenty-six hours so we needed to keep the ship fully operational through the night until we were able to tie up at the beautiful stone harbour at St. Marys. As we chugged through the night I was able to free my mind of all the day-to-day worries. The only thing that I need concern myself with was the compass heading and looking out for other vessels.

Even that task was made easy by the radar set which we could set to sound an alarm if any targets were encountered within a certain range of the ship.

We set the range ring to half a mile and it remained silent for the whole night. The GPS told us where we were at all times. I am always amazed at this wonderful piece of technology that can give you a reading on your position anywhere in the world. I have even seen it used by people who have trouble remembering where they parked the car! The course had already been pre-programmed into the GPS in the form of a series of waypoints. These are key points on the journey where course changes are required. GPS is extremely accurate, I heard a tale about a man who was sailing single handed down the Thames Estuary and had taken the positions of main navigation buoys from the chart and entered them as waypoints.

The proof of the accuracy of the system came when, as the alarm sounded to indicate that a waypoint had been reached, there was a huge crash. He had sailed at full tilt into the buoy, which in the

scheme of things is not a good idea. They are very large and very heavy and generally come off best in any such incident.

I came off watch and turned into my bunk. Another thing I can't do ashore is sleep when there is noise, so inevitably I dropped straight off to sleep even though the main engine, working at best speed was only just the other side of the bulkhead.

On board ship you soon become accustomed to the feel of the ship moving through the water. When that feeling changes you are instantly awake. One such incident occurred during my four hour sleep. We must have suddenly changed course because the roll of the ship changed and the noise of the water slapping the side of the hull came from the other side. After a few minutes it returned to normal and I drifted off again. I never did find out why we altered course.

At eight AM I was back at the wheel. We passed along the south Devon coast as breakfast was served. How I was supposed to steer with a mug of tea in one hand and a bacon sandwich in the other was a mystery. I looked for somewhere to put my plate. Here's a tip for any would be mariner. Whatever you do don't upset the navigator by getting tea and crumbs on the chart.

We sat down to lunch when I came off watch and I spent the next few hours chatting with the rest of the crew. Some were from our local MVS unit, other from units along the south coast from Weymouth to Bexhill.

After a day at sea and after seeing the most westerly point of England disappear behind us we started to see small lumps on the horizon, which was lucky as if we had missed the Scillies that next land is the USA and I don't think we had enough fishcakes on board to get there.

We got to St. Marys as it grew dark. By the time we had secured the ship and dinner had been served it past nine in the evening so there was no recourse open to us but to go on a pub-crawl. On St. Marys this doesn't take long as there are but three pubs to visit. The first is the Mermaid, at the end of the harbour wall and marking the beginning of the main street through St. Marys. Harold Wilson retired to the islands after his long career in politics and the Mermaid

was said to be his favourite haunt. As I sat there supping a pint I could see why.

The building was moving as though it was at sea. I had noticed this strange effect as I stepped off the ship onto the massive stone steps that form part of the harbour wall. The movement of the ship had become normal. It was dry land that needed some getting used to. Moving along to the next pub we sat down with another pint. This pub was far better behaved and hardly wobbled at all.

By the time we got to the last one everything was calm. Closing time soon came around and we returned to the ship. There isn't any nightlife after the pubs shut so soon the place was quiet.

We turned in and slept solidly until WHAT?!?! Four A.M.? Are you mad? We needed to take advantage of the tide if we were to reach Lundy in any sensible amount of time. We were soon at sea again chugging north east by east along the north Cornish coast. The weather was not so nice that day and the Bristol Channel was starting to display some of her more uncomfortable tendencies. The bottom of Wales and the top of the West Country make a kind of funnel, which can bottle weather up and exaggerate its effects. Up on the river Severn this can be seen as the delightful Severn Bore but out at sea it was just rough. The ship started to pitch around in a most uncomfortable manner and people started to find excuses to go and stare over the rail. In the galley they were preparing yet another meal. It is interesting to note that even in this weather somebody saw fit to put soup on the menu and if it was on the menu then it got cooked. Missing something out of the menu could only lead to an accounting imbalance and that would never do. The rolling of the ship got worse and pans began to slide around and fall on the floor. Soon the soup was not just on the menu but also on the floor, up the walls and running like a colourful stream along the scuppers. Lunch, it seemed, would be a little late.

Conditions were such that nobody went outside unless there was good reason. We sat and chatted; the absence of TV does this. The conversation covered the various careers and livelihoods of the crew. One of the guys earns his living as an undertaker in Brighton. He told tales of bodies that wouldn't fit round corners because of rigor mortis. When grieving relatives aren't there to be shocked bodies are made to fit around corners in some alarming ways. We heard descriptions of suicides being cut down from their chosen places of self execution and being allowed to fall down flights of

stairs, bodies from nasty car accidents that could not be identified and dead tramps that were found crawling with lice and flees. It wasn't the gory descriptions of people's final hours, the rolling of the ship or the smell of the food being murdered in the galley, nor was it the smell of the heads wafting up the companionway. It was a combination of all of them, coupled with a particularly graphic description of the process of embalming that finally got me racing out of the watertight door and donating my breakfast to the fishes. All I can say in my defence is that I was the last of the crew to succumb.

Once liberated from a turgid breakfast things began to look brighter. It was by now my turn at the wheel again. When I got to the bridge there was a huddle over the chart table and lots of lines were being drawn. The upshot was that the weather was not suitable for a trip to Lundy, which was a shame. It is a place I have always wanted to visit. We turned north and headed directly for our final destination, Milford Haven.

As we travelled north, roughly along a line from Padstow to Milford Haven, we passed into less troubled waters. Soon the rain eased and we enjoyed a bright but blustery afternoon. From the wheelhouse I enjoyed my first glimpse of gannets fishing and a raft of puffins eating sand eels with a clutch of young, miles from land. The gannets were spectacular, diving like stukas towards the sea, folding their wings and rolling onto their backs as they entered the water. The water was so clear that I could see the birds flying along beneath the surface spearing the fish before breaking the surface and flying off with their catch. The puffins seemed to be too small to be out alone so far from land.

It was a long afternoon, when there was no sign of land it seemed that the ship was hardly moving. Eventually we started to make out some details on the horizon. There is a huge refinery at Milford Haven and its chimney is the tallest thing for miles. We started to make out a tiny stick on the horizon. We checked the chart, which shows all prominent land features. It was bang on the nose, so we congratulated ourselves on our fine use of the GPS and steered for the mark.

Even though we could see the coast it took the rest of the day to reach the haven. We were a day early and our berth in the docks was not ready for us. We settled for a quiet anchorage at the

western end of the haven in Dale Bay. We ate then slept, we divided the night into equal sections and each stood an anchor watch. This again is made easy by using the radar. All we needed to know was that the ship wasn't moving so again we set a range ring that cut through three targets on the screen. Any movement would become apparent at a glance.

I was lucky enough to draw one of the earlier shifts out of the hat. For an hour I was able to wander the decks and wheelhouse in perfect solitude, something that I had not experienced for over 48 hours. Sometimes it is nice to be alone with your thoughts.

The next day we took our time over breakfast, cleaned the ship and weighed anchor for the short run up the haven to Milford docks. A member of the Milford Haven MVS escorted us for the last half mile as we passed through the entrance lock and glided into the basin to tie up.

After three full days afloat in a small community it seemed almost overwhelming to step ashore to so much space and so many people. I can only wonder at the sensations experienced by such people as Ellen McArthur who spend months out of sight of land completely alone. The first impression is that everything is so close, so fast and so noisy.

We handed the ship over to the local crew and set about unloading our kit. It seemed very odd to be driven back to Dorset in a car, after a leisurely journey of 8 knots taking two full days, the M4 seemed very fast indeed.

Chapter 10

When you're four years old nobody listens

In which are described my early influences in the world of boating.

Coming as I do from the not so glorious Thames Valley, where the widest expanse of water is the bit below Caversham Bridge favoured by drunks and suicides, I have often wondered where my passion for boats comes from.

The first home I can remember, an Edwardian semi with a very large garden, is still my parent's home. We moved there when I was three months old as it was felt that the family needed more growing space. My mother spent her childhood years close to the confluence of the Thames and the Kennet in Reading's Newtown. She regaled us with tales of drownings in the river; it seemed that she felt that the river was not a place for enjoyment but for tragedy.

However, after reading *The Wind in The Willows*, nothing could dampen my enthusiasm for the water and for boating. If I could, at such a young age, be presumptuous enough to have a motto, it would be Ratty's famous quote:

"There is nothing - absolutely nothing half so much worth doing as simply messing about in Boats"

Reading has a fair amount to offer a boater; the Thames, its quieter sibling the Kennet and a host of flooded gravel workings used by sailing and jet skiing clubs. I bought a house on the banks of the Kennet and lived there for seventeen years, during which time I was active as a canal restorer, more of which in another series perhaps.

When I was a child the house was heated by a coke boiler, for which the fuel was delivered and stored in a large concrete pen at the side of the house, and thereby hung my bone of contention with the then authorities- my father and mother.

This pen, approximately 20 feet by 10, seemed to me to be the perfect place to keep a boat and, perhaps as a concession to me, was known as the Boathouse. It galled me that once a year, just when I was getting it shipshape, it would be filled with coke for the boiler and nobody likes coal dust on a fine sailing ship, not even an imaginary one.

I can remember being taken by my father on one of his visits to see his accountant in Maidenhead. I wasn't looking forward to the visit until we got there and saw that he owned a boat. In the driveway, loaded onto a trailer, was a small river cruiser. I was allowed to climb inside and look around. Within seconds the tarmac and housing estates were transformed into the Spanish Main and I was Captain Hook, or was it The Spanish Hook and Captain Main? It was a long time ago.

I imagine that I had the best of the visit, I can't imagine that my father had a better morning than I did, plundering gold ships has to be better than poring over the books, even if the business is doing well though later in life the irony of one pirate outside in the boat plundering the Spanish had a lot in common with the accountant inside who was trying to do the same thing to the Inland Revenue.

I read voraciously as a child, Arthur Ransome, Enid Blyton, Robert Louis Stevenson, pirate stories, the Wind in the Willows, I even enjoyed the Rupert annuals, so long as there were stories involving the bear in a boat. Any chance I got to be afloat was seized with both hands. I even stood on floating pontoons by the river to feel the sensation of not being on firm ground. When I couldn't be on or near water I used to draw pictures of boats and ships, a habit that fills the margin of many an important document even to this day.

Like many children, when we had our annual fortnight by the sea we would jiggle around in the back of the car (No rear seat belts or child seats in those days) and scream out with delight when we caught our first glimpse of the sea.

Nowadays I get my first glimpse of the sea when I wake up and gaze out of the bedroom window.

I was older before I got my first boat. We had started to take camping holidays in Europe, my parents hoping that we would develop a more cosmopolitan attitude to life. We found ourselves one August in a camping site in Interlaken in Switzerland, which as

its name suggests, is part way between two of the great alpine lakes, The Thunersee and the Brienersee.

The campsite was on the banks of the channel that joined the two. I had taken my inflatable dinghy with me on that holiday and decided one day to go for a row to the Brienersee. It was a long row but I can clearly remember the crisp air of the Swiss Alps seemed to give me energy and I covered several miles with seemingly little effort. I was cruising back along the river section, an easy journey as a swift current was carrying me back towards the town. As I passed under a railway bridge I saw a familiar figure gesticulating wildly from the shore. It was my brother shouting that I was in big trouble. I was twelve, quite old enough to be in charge of my own vessel in a commercial shipping route.

Several hours later I arrived back at the campsite to find my mother having a fit, desperately trying to track down someone who could translate her anxiety to the local constabulary and start a search for me.

I received a long lecture on water safety from the owner of the campsite, a lecture that was totally wasted on me as my German was not all that special, nor was his English.

He lost his qualification to lecture me about safety when later that day I saw him testing for leaks on a newly changed gas bottle with a lit match.

Later, my brother and I saved up our hard earned pennies and bought an eight foot sailing dinghy, a HiBall, a dinghy class that singularly failed to make any real impression on the world of dinghy sailing, probably because the hull was made from polystyrene, yes the same stuff as those horrible ceiling tiles we had in the seventies and the same stuff as burger boxes. Empty it had a draught of less than half an inch, with two young lads on board it increased to nearly two inches.

We sailed that boat on the Thames in Reading and on one special occasion on the Solent from the Isle of Wight. The beach at Seaview on the north east coast of the island shelves very gradually and we had to paddle out a long way before it was deep enough to use the rudder and centre board. That boat would have been a great boat for exploring the more remote corners of Poole Harbour.

That boat, for all its faults and cranky ways under sail would float in a saucer of milk. I sometimes wonder happened to it.

When I got married for the first time I left home and moved into a rabbit hutch on a new housing estate in Thatcham, near Newbury in Berkshire. This brought me close to the then derelict Kennet and Avon Canal. Most of the canal was still in water and was and still is used for the marathon Devizes to Westminster canoe race. It was inevitable that I would soon acquire another boat, this time it was a 14-foot plywood touring canoe.

I took to the canal and cruised many of the isolated lengths years before it was possible to cruise it in a motorboat. After less than two years I moved back to Reading and bought our second house, this time on the banks of the River Kennet. We continued to canoe the river. It was easier now that we had direct access to the water from our back garden. In time we picked up more boats, in particular we found an advert in a boating magazine for hulls and cabin tops that we could finish off ourselves. As we were not rolling in cash we decided that this would be a good option. After a chat with the builder we paid our money and soon it was delivered. The bare hull and cabin top ready for us to fit out. My carpentry skills were not great but eventually we had something to cruise in. The seats converted into a large bed; there was a small two ring cooker and a Porta-Potty.

I fitted a light into the cabin and "found" a couple of tall chairs that were used for the helmsman's seat. The engine was a two-stroke outboard from which it was possible to charge the battery. The end result was a strange looking thing in which we covered many miles. We went to Lechlade on the Thames twice, explored the Southern Oxford Canal and, when restoration permitted it, drove her into Newbury on the Kennet and Avon Canal.

We became involved in the local branch of the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust and helped to raise money for the restoration which was finally achieved in the early nineties, culminating in a big ceremony in Devizes where the Queen passed through a lock in a canal boat and cut a ribbon stretched across the canal.

Life settled down and the day came when my wife of fourteen years decided to accept a better offer.

I wasn't sorry to see her go and soon I was looking to start a new life. I had a period of unemployment, met my present wife and we

decided that we would like to live by the sea. And so I came to Poole.

Chapter 11

In the Solent there are too many people screaming...

In which I take part in my first yacht race...

One day whilst I was hard at work trying to sort out a problem with a computer and a mobile phone, my manager tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if I fancied a day at sea in his father's yacht, taking part in the Hoya Round the Island Race. I of course replied that I would be honoured and privileged so to do and on the following evening we left Poole on the train to Southampton. There were many similarly bound people in Southampton that evening, we caught the Sea Cat ferry to Cowes amidst piles of sailing kit bags and young tanned bronzed sailing crews.

We met Simon's father in Cowes and set about the toughest task of the weekend, trying to find somewhere to get a meal. That Friday night in Cowes was the busiest I had ever seen and we were glad to find a table in a fairly decent restaurant that wasn't exorbitant. The lady owner had seen the crowds roaming the streets and set about clearing what had presumably been a store room, or so it seemed, our pristine table was set in a room that obviously hadn't been used for a while.

Having dealt with the crisis of the inner man we made our way to the water's edge and waited for a taxi. In Cowes this isn't a black affair driven by a garrulous loudmouth but a rather pleasant motor boat that can reach most parts of the water front in a few minutes and there is plenty of waterfront to be reached.

We arrived at East Cowes Marina and pulled up alongside our home for the next twenty-four hours or so. She was small, a mere twenty one feet in length but like most small craft she was perfectly formed and had everything that we could need. We settled down for the night and were soon asleep, rocked by the easy movement of the river Medina. We rose at first light and set about making ready for sea. This involved frying sausages and bacon and finding

somewhere to clean our teeth. I had slept very well, although my fellow crew members weren't so lucky, apparently there was somebody snoring loudly nearby. It might have been somebody on an adjoining boat; I can honestly say I heard nothing.

We were soon casting off and heading down the Medina towards the start line. I have never seen so many boats in one place before. Sails of all colours stretched across the start line, there were so many entrants (nearly two thousand) that there had to be several staged starts.

We were in the second group and were due to start at 08.10. High tide was at 07.30 so by the time we got underway there should be some ebb to help us on our way westwards, down the Solent towards the Needles.

The start of a yacht race is quite a critical thing. You have to arrange yourself so that you are sailing towards the start line as the start gun is fired. Ideally you need to be crossing the line as you hear the bang. Too early and you have to take a penalty, too late and you have lost ground. We sailed up and down a bit to gauge the wind and the tide, the starter was giving his orders over the radio and timing the firing of the warning guns before the start. We contrived to be four and a half minutes sailing time away from the line as the five minute gun sounded.

There was a melee of boats all bearing down on the upwind end of the start line, seeking the best position and the least obstructed wind. The seconds ticked away, on every boat someone was steering between the hundreds of boats, looking out for collisions, another member of the crew was marking time in a watch and listening to the radio, we heard the crack of the gun over the radio and a second or two later the boom of its report sounded amongst the fleet. We were off and the line was only a few yards away. We set off on a port beam reach but soon came amongst foul air, (no it wasn't last night's prawn vindaloo) we had several larger boats upwind of us and the air had been disrupted as it passed their sails. Consequently we made an unspectacular start.

This turned out to be good for us as the first boats down to Hurst Castle spit encountered some heavy weather and several were dismasted.

Hurst castle spit juts out into the Solent towards the north-western corner of the island, reducing the gap between the mainland and the island to just under a mile and a half. This caused a bit of a bottleneck as the wind was from the southeast and most of the fleet were tacking towards the island to make sea room to clear the spit.

It was a fairly windy day and the water was quite rough in these narrows. We were glad to break out into the clear water beyond and sail towards the Needles. It was quite rough around the Needles and there was quite a scrum to round them. A patrol boat stood by to make sure that nobody tried to take the dangerous shortcut between the chalk pillars. As we rounded the corner in heavy seas the coastguard helicopter was hovering ominously overhead, the Lymington lifeboat was standing by.

Amongst all this a small high powered dory was darting through the fleet, the name of Beken was on the side, this is possibly the world's most famous boat photographer, catching shots of graceful yachts in heavy seas against the backdrop of the massive chalk pillars. Once round the Needles things changed a bit. The tide was still flowing out and we were sailing close-hauled into the southeasterly wind which was stronger there as we were no longer shielded by the island. We were now pitching into some quite sharp rollers and for me the most uncomfortable part of the race had started. I tried to keep busy to avoid the cold. Even though it was a pleasant summer day I noticed that more experienced crews were wearing full foul weather gear and I could see why.

I was soon wet through and starting to lose body heat. I started to feel ill through the violent movement of the boat. It was only my interest in the passing boats that kept me on track. We soon decided to take in a reef which eased the movement of the boat. Now that we weren't labouring through the water so much we started to over take other boats, even though we were carrying less sail, this was quite an important lesson for me, when it comes to sailing more is not always faster.

I made the mistake of relaxing as we passed under the chalk cliffs of the south west coast of the island and, a few miles short of St. Catherine's Point I freely and without thought of personal satisfaction decided to donate my breakfast to the poor starving fishes below. I blame the bananas. I was asked to fetch some from the fore cabin; they were stowed in a net hanging over the loo. The Boat was pitching wildly, I lost my eye reference on the horizon, the smell of bananas mixed with Elsan fluid did the rest.

As with any bout of seasickness, I instantly felt much better and started to take a more active part of the proceedings. I changed into all my dry clothes and eventually the ebb tide slackened. By this time we were round St Catherine's Point, the most southerly point of the island and were heading northeast towards the eastern marker of the race, the navigation buoy that marks Bembridge Ledge. We had to pass outside of this marker before we could turn north to head back into the Solent and turn for home. The sea was smoother here and the wind had slackened a little so we let out the reef and glided onwards towards Nomans Fort, one of the Napoleonic defences and the last marker that we had to pass round before the last leg back into Cowes.

There was a party going on in the fort, loud music boomed across the water to greet us and a few drunks managed a wave. By now the tide was flooding again which meant it was against us as we came down the Solent from the east. Add to this a weakening wind which had moved around to the west and you will see why we were now in for the longest part of the journey. The last twelve miles of the race took nearly as long as the rest of it.

It was a pleasant afternoon for a leisurely sail in the sunshine; sadly we were supposed to be racing although the opposition was, by now, mostly out of sight. The winner had long since finished, having taken about three hours to blast round the island and go home. Nearly nine hours after them we glided past the finishing line to a small cheer, mostly from ourselves.

The last leg had dragged on far too long, the wind had all but expired by the time we got to Cowes so we wasted very little time in getting the motor started, the sails down and buzzed back up the Medina to our berth.

We didn't come last; we were on handicap about 600th, which didn't seem too bad to me. It was a damn good day out and I enjoyed every minute of it.

The GPS, which had been backing up our visual navigation all day, sounded its end of run alarm just at the moment when we were passing between the two moored boats that marked the finish line, thus giving us a good idea of just how accurate this excellent system is.

The water taxi took us back to West Cowes so that we could get the ferry back to the mainland

We got dinner from a fish and chip shop and caught the Sea Cat back to Southampton. We spent an hour waiting for a train at Southampton and arrived home in Poole about 1.00 a.m. A long day and one I shall never forget.

Next time perhaps we'll leave from Poole; it would save hours on the train and the ferries as well as a small fortune on the tickets.

Chapter 12

Coarse Boating the RYA way

In which I go to Portsmouth in the middle of winter and get very wet indeed.

In Portsmouth Harbour in February no one can hear your teeth chatter.

In February of 2002 we were offered the chance to take our RYA level 2 power boating course at Whale Island in Portsmouth. The venue is the home of the Royal Navy Sailing centre and has a range of craft to play with.

They don't sell many courses to the rich and famous in the colder months so they had, it seemed, some spare capacity to offer member of the Maritime Volunteer Service at a very reasonable rate. So reasonable in fact that we leapt at the chance and spent two very exciting and cold weekends learning about the safe handling of both planing and displacement craft.

For those of you who don't know, planing craft are the ones that go faster because they skim along the top of the water and displacement craft are the big heavy ones that push it apart.

The main feature of the two weekends was the weather. The first weekend was calm still and extremely cold. The second weekend was wet and windy.

It worked out perfectly because we covered planing craft on the first and displacement on the second.

Three of us left Poole and drove the sixty miles to Portsmouth to start the course. We were soon kitted out in immersion suits and life jackets and were experiencing high-powered craft for the first time. I had driven some quite quick boats before but nothing like the RIBs with twin outboard engines. The RIB or Rigid Inflatable Boat is a curious craft; it has a solid hull with the upper portion of an inflatable boat and is much beloved of dive skippers, rescue services and those who want to have fun in their boats.

The rigid part of the hull has a V shape and more importantly, a large hole that allow it to fill with water. This acts as ballast and makes it a very stable working platform when not moving. When you pile on the power and start moving the water drains out of the hull and the boat halves in weight. Soon you are skimming along with barely a fifth of the boat in the water. It seems very fast indeed. The curious part is that the speed increases as the water drains out so that even if you don't open the throttle any more the speed increases as it get up on the plane. We had a great time on the Sunday afternoon when we took the boats through Portsmouth Royal Naval dockyard and out into the Solent, where we opened the throttles wide. The water was like glass and the boats moved like rockets.

We raced around a course described by three landmarks, Spitbank Fort, the large Napoleonic fort that guards the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour, the marker buoy for the site of the Mary Rose Wreck and the Spitbank buoy, the channel marker that shows large vessels the way into the harbour. It was bitterly cold and although I enjoyed the power boating I was glad to get back to shore to thaw out.

The following weekend we went back to Whale Island to complete the other part of the course, that week was warmer but wet and very windy. It was one of those days when cold salty water managed to get up even the most tightly closed sleeve. The purpose of this second weekend was to learn about the slower side of boating, tight manoeuvring, picking up buoys, man over board drill and not pinching your fingers on the side of the boat.

My favourite moment of the course was when one of our number (I hasten to add, not myself) received a shouted warning:

"Look out for that post!"

"What post?"

"Doinggggg!"

When I tell you that this post is near to the cross channel ferry berth, is intended for the use of ferry captains to mark the edge of their safe water and is twenty five feet tall, nearly two feet in diameter, is painted in black and yellow bands and has a gallery with a big flashing light on the top you will see why we were amused.

We all passed the course and received our certificates. I will always remember the patience and good humour of Ken Bichard BEM and all the other instructors and I raise a glass to them now. I am now officially certified to operate a power boat with blessing of the Royal Yachting Association. Prior to this I think they just turned a blind eye to me, or perhaps just ignored me. I don't know which is worse.

Chapter 13

In a Force Nine no one can hear anything

In which we yet again get very cold and very wet.

Much of my present boating experience arises from my membership of the Maritime Volunteer Service, an organisation whose prime aim is to maintain and promote maritime skills in Britain. As a volunteer organisation we are sometimes called upon to assist with projects that involve being afloat and, being the kind of people we are, we are always pleased to have an excuse to get the boat out if we can.

Back in the spring of this year we were asked to assist the local university in collecting samples of water from the harbour to see just how good a job the environmentalists have been doing. Again we checked the forecast for the day (when will we ever learn?) and decided that, although it was quite windy, we would go ahead and take part.

The forecast warned of strong winds that would ease later in the day. As we were going to be in sheltered waters we weren't unduly bothered, it might have been a different story had we been asked to leave the harbour and venture out to sea. Strong winds can make things difficult, even for a heavy ex-pilot boat.

Our craft, the Tom Sherrin, was built about thirty years ago in Poole and was the pilot boat for the harbour authority before it was sold to the Channel Islands to work out of Alderney. One of our members bought her a couple of years ago and brought her back to Poole where we use her to wander about the harbour and its environs trying to learn about the ways of the wet stuff.

On this occasion we were asked to collect water samples from particular places at particular times of the day. We did this, even though at times waves were breaking over the bows of the boat and our much-admired collection of seagull splatters had been entirely washed away. Anyone who has tried to wash seagull residues from their car (and most people in these parts are well experienced at it) will know what force this represents. I felt sorry for my companions

on that day, I was at the wheel in the snug dry wheelhouse whilst they were hanging over the side with carefully sterilised sample bottles capturing the essence of nature in a pot, in their hair, up their sleeves, down their necks and in their eyes.

The wind was worth the experience. Predictably the easement never came. Instead it hardened and soon it was snatching the tops of the waves and scattering them in long streaks across the harbour.

The hiss became a whistle, which soon became a scream. It was like a huge unseen hand that was determined to send us one way. Fortunately it was the way we wished to go. There was little traffic on the harbour and the port controller on VHF channel 14 was having an easy day of it up in his control box. From time to time ships would call in asking for a weather reading and you could hear the satisfaction in his voice as he gave the wind speed and direction, each one a little higher than the last.

We did what all sailors should do on a Sunday morning when winds are in excess of 40 knots; we tied up on the quay and bought a bag of chips. We handed in our sample pots to the co-ordinator and went looking for beer. Tom arrived in his boat, handed in his samples from the other side of the harbour and we waited for the 12.30 bridge lift.

Poole is a town divided by a lift bridge. The town and Hamworthy (where I live) are reached by crossing the little channel by a hundred year old lifting bridge. This can cause chaos in the summer when vast droves of yachts leaving or returning to their mooring in Holes bay pass sedately through the bridge, few of them grasping the simple fact that if they went two abreast the queue for the bridge would be halved. On this occasion however, there were in the words of the old song, just the two of us.

At 12.29, fortified with chips and a pint of best, we cast off and headed along the little channel and up towards the bridge. Our radio call to the bridge controller must have come as a shock: "Poole Bridge, Poole Bridge Poole Bridge, this is Tom Sherrin, Tom Sherrin, Tom Sherrin, over."

Yes it's true; in Marine VHF land we say everything three times. In the finest murder mystery movie style "Nobody knows why".

There is a long delay when nothing is heard except for hisses and pops, so we call again:

“Poole Bridge, Poole Bridge Poole Bridge, this is Tom Sherrin, Tom Sherrin, Tom Sherrin, over.”

Eventually we got a reply:

“Vessel calling Poole Bridge – we heard you the first time!”

Great, it's our favourite miserable bastard on duty.

Resisting the temptation to ask why, if he heard us the first time, he failed to follow standard radio procedure by picking up the mike, pressing the PTT (push to talk) key and replying, we politely enquired if we might have the bridge lifted as scheduled.

“There's a lift scheduled at 12.30, there's no need to ask.” He snapped. Even over the tinny medium of radio the irritation was apparent in his voice.

Given that it was now 12.35 and another craft had joined us we felt that there was every need to ask but we held our tongues and our patience was eventually rewarded by the sound of the bells ringing as the barriers came down across the road.

The two spans of the bridge slowly reached for the sky. All this time we were holding station below the bridge, something that is not easy when the wind is determined to slam you into the quay or one of the multi-million pound motor yachts that are built here.

At last we saw the traffic lights change to green and I pushed the throttle lever forwards.

At this point I must mention that the operation of the bridge has been taken over by the local council and our friend "MB" no longer operates the bridge.

The wind still buffeted the boat but moving forwards made steering possible at last. We advanced up into Holes bay and I peered through the deckhouse window, trying to make out the small white buoy with our name on it that marked our mooring. In the conditions that day our small white buoy looked just like everybody else's, small, white and hard to spot amongst the spray and waves.

There is a hazard just behind our mooring, the remains of a wreck that is exposed at low tide. The wind was shrieking fiercely by now

and I was very aware that we needed to pick up the mooring chain cleanly, this involves arriving at the buoy with all the way gone from the boat, that is to say we needed to be stationary.

The trouble was that as soon as the way came off the boat we started to move backwards almost immediately and we had less than forty feet to play with before we were carried onto the wreck, which was by now showing its skeletal ribs at us in a most menacing manner.

Enter problem number two.

Our well-trying and tested boat hook, a solid ash pole with a strong brass hook on the end was not on board. Tom had taken it home as it was looking a little battered and was in the process of giving it a rub down and new coat of varnish, new screws and so forth. The replacement was a rather lightweight affair an extending aluminium pole with a plastic hook.

We arrived over the buoy; the crewman hooked the pick up line and pulled. The only thing that happened was that the hook straightened out under the load and the line fell back into the water. We did not have time for a second try; I opened the throttle and pulled us clear of the danger. We went round again, this time with Young Pete lying on the soaking deck trying to pick up the line by hand. The other Pete, who shall hereafter be known as Tall Pete was controlling my movement at the helm by a system of hand signals of his own devising. Sadly I had no clue about the code, it having only just been invented that moment. He came close to the deckhouse window and mouthed some thing through the glass. I heard nothing and understood less. I slid open the window and pushed my head out. The roar of the storm replaced the hammer of the diesel engine. My head was instantly soaked. Tall Pete came close and bellowed into my face:

“—e drop—ukin’ ---eless piece of —it, go- go roun- -gain!”

“What?” I bellowed intelligently.

“Hoo king’ crap, couldn’t lift a--n Id man’s ---- with it!”

“I’ll go round again, put your hand up when I’m over the buoy!” I screamed.

It isn’t possible to see the buoy from the deckhouse once you are within twenty feet of it.

Fifteen attempts later Young Pete triumphantly pulled the loop of the mooring chain over the Samson post on the fore deck.

We closed up the boat and looked dismayed at the tiny dinghy, now half full of water that was our means of returning to the shore. The temper of the wind hadn’t improved at all, it was still trying to swat us from the surface of the water and blind us by flinging salt into our eyes.

Our salvation hove into view in the form of Tom in his cruiser. A voice came over the radio:

“I’ll hold off until you are ready to come off, things are banging around a bit too much for my liking.”

“Thanks Tom, we’re ready now.”

In true form, as I stepped off the Tom Sherrin onto Tom’s boat a wave spouted between the two hulls and an ice cold spout of water attacked me from below. This was becoming a bit of a theme. That meant that all three of us were drenched. We huddled in Tom’s boat as it battled back to his nice safe marina mooring. It had been quite a morning but we had come through soaked but unscathed which is a result in anyone’s book.

Later we learned that the wind had peaked at gale force nine, another 2 knots and they would have been officially been force ten. All I can really remember is the furious shrieking of the wind every time any kind of obstacle stood in its path.

Even on days like that I thank whatever providence made me move from the Thames Valley to the coast. Sunday mornings in Reading were never like that.

Chapter 14

Coarse Boating and the long arm of the law

Or

Blundering around in the dark

Several times a year Dorset Police Marine Division run an exercise called Operation Senator. This is a gathering of various boating organisations who get together on a weekday night and patrol the Harbour looking for strange goings on, crimes against fish and the like.

We have had two so far, one this week.

Tom, Myself and Ian took to the waters and joined this merry throng to see what went on. We left the town quay at 8.30pm aboard the ex-customs vessel Avocet, as the last light of a chilly April day faded to leave us thundering along in the dark. Poole Harbour is absolutely festooned with buoys, channel buoys, red cans and green cones, cardinal markers, exotic affairs in black and yellow and thousands of mooring buoys, small floats that mark the presence of a swinging mooring for the many yachts that make Poole their home port.

Being Operation Senator we were all assigned call signs beginning with 'Senator'

"Senator 15, Senator 15, Senator one, over."

"Senator 15, Senator 15, Senator one, over."

Tom: "Why doesn't that pillock answer?"

Ian scabbled amongst the paperwork to see who had been given that call sign.

By the light of a feeble torch he hummed as he scanned down the list.

"Tum te tum, Senator 5, that's old Mick from Parkstone yacht club, Senator 11, I thought he was dead, hum hum de dum, 12, don't know him, fifteen! Ah, Tom, we're Senator 15.

Tom: "Oh Bugger!"

Me: "Tum te Tum!"

Tom: " Senator one, Senator One, Senator One-five, over."

Control: "Senator One-five, so glad you could join us.... Please proceed to area India 9 and check the moorings there."

Tom. "India 9, one our way"

The night was dark until 11.30 pm, when a huge deep red moon bled it's way up out of the sea to the east. We stopped and watched in awe. The radio continued to ring out its litany of instructions. Eventually the instruction "Senator 15 Stand down at the quay" came through and we made best speed towards our mooring by the lifting bridge, in between the Lifeboat and the Police launch, and called it a night.

The last time we did this exercise was a different story. We were stooging around west of the quay in the Wareham channel. We heard some frantic radio traffic:

"Senator One, an unlit Poole Canoe has just passed us as speed!"
(A Poole Canoe is a medium sized, flat bottomed open boat used mainly for fishing and in this case for poaching)

"This is Senator Five, we just stopped by them to pass the time of day and they threatened us with a spade and an oar then they disappeared westwards. They left their nets behind, we have them on board"

The police helicopter cut in:

"All Senator craft, for information, this is India 99, we have been videoing their activities on infrared for the last twenty minutes, they are in Lytchett Bay shovelling oysters over the side. We have a unit waiting for them once they come ashore."

It seemed that three lads, short of ready cash, had been raiding the oyster banks south of Brownsea island under cover of darkness, they had picked the wrong night to do this, despite much publicity about the operation they had chosen to go out poaching when there were many pairs of eyes watching out for any thing untoward.

They were prosecuted for illegal fishing, numerous infringements of navigation laws, reckless navigation and threatening behaviour. One got a spell in prison, the others fines and community service orders. When they passed us they moving very fast, somewhere in excess of 30 knots, and disappeared into the night.

To give an idea of the danger of this kind of speed in the total darkness imagine driving a car at about 80 miles per hour, in a shopping centre whilst wearing a blindfold.

"They must be up to no good" muttered Tom. It was the understatement of the week.

On that previous occasion we had suffered a mishap, in the dark and running with a fast rising tide we managed to run over a pickup buoy that was being held under the water by the strong tidal stream. Pickup buoys are small buoys with a length of rope attached to a mooring chain. When the owner approaches he fishes out the buoy and the rope and uses it to haul in the chain to which he moors his boat. It's a lot easier than trying to haul in chain whilst lying on a wet and often slippery deck.

We came to a juddering halt, the port stern quarter of the boat rearing up like a fighter jet landing on the deck of a carrier and hitting the arrestor cable. We stopped. In the dark we could make out a line trailing from the back of the boat. It was firmly wrapped around our port side prop shaft. In the dark we performed miracles of improvisation. We needed to turn the prop shaft to release the line, so we pulled up the deck boards to reveal the shaft. The heavy Perkins engine had stalled and we couldn't shift it out of gear so we undid the universal joint between the gearbox and the shaft, no mean feat when the only light was from a fast failing torch and the only tools ones left behind after installing the radar. Once the shaft was free we turned it a couple of times and, to our delight, we sprang free. A new problem, we were now drifting freely in the dark

through a mine field of unoccupied moorings, the Starboard engine was flashed up and we followed a banana shaped course back to open water. Arriving back at the quay nobody noticed anything out of the ordinary, the other shaft had been re-connected, the gear linkage had been battered into releasing and the engine restarted. They did wonder how we had managed to get quite so filthy though.

This time however, the highlight of the evening was seeing Tom's face as he took a swig of his whiskey laced coffee as we bucketed through the wash left by the truck ferry on its way out of the Harbour to France. A dollop of seawater slopped up against the side of the boat and, between sips, some of the sea got into his mug. Without noticing he took another swig, he had been gloating about the contents of his flask. His face changed to a picture of sour rictus, and he uttered language that I do not feel comfortable in repeating in such refined company.

Chapter 15

When there is water where air should be

In which we learn a bit about the forces of nature, and what happens when they come face to face with nature.

It is a commonly held misconception that the basic principle behind the Art of Coarse Boating is to ensure that you are separated from the water by a waterproof membrane, such as is afforded by the hull of a boat. It's a simple idea. Looked at as a layered model, there is water at the bottom, a boat resting on the top and keen seafarers on top of that in the warm dry comfort of a sturdy craft. It can surely come as no surprise that this is often not the case.

It has been a little stormy lately. Nothing drastic you understand, just enough to make sure that everything is wet. Very wet indeed. Down in Poole town centre, in the little alleyways that lead to the water's edge of the Little Channel, many people who have moorings in Holes Bay keep small tenders chained to the fence so that they can launch them and row out to their boats.

When the owners are out on their craft, be they yachts, cruisers or fishing boats, the tenders are left on the moorings, at the mercy of the elements. These tenders are, for the most part, dinghies that are past their best. They have spent many years chafing at some mooring or another and it is not unusual to see them with pieces missing out of them. There is even one that is "kept" on the bottom, due to the hole that allows water to flood in steadily. Its owner can empty it and keep it afloat for just long enough to get out to his boat and get on board. And, as he says, no one will ever steal it.

This weekend, between the showers we had to try to recover a dinghy from a mooring. The boat it was used to gain access to was now ashore, having the weeds blasted from her bottom and general winter titivation.

Our task was to recover the dinghy, for its class a very good dinghy, from the mooring and bring it back to the shed so that a small leak could be attended to and so that a keel could be attached. At the time it had all the rowing and sea keeping qualities of a pudding bowl.

I drove over to a friend's house with my trailer. There we loaded on another small boat, one that we were going to use to get out to the mooring. We threw the boat onto the trailer and went down to the alleyway. The boat was launched and we rowed out to the mooring. There was a line of moorings, some with pontoons strung between them. With winter coming on there were fewer boats than normal and plenty of tackle simply dangling in the water.

We got out onto the pontoon and looked around. No sign of the tender.

We recognised the line that had been used as a painter snaking off into the water. Pulling on it we soon realised that something heavy was on the other end. If the line had broken or been cut the end will be a lot easier to pull in, besides nowadays it takes a lot to break a piece of rope, even the old stuff that most professional seamen use to tie up their craft. Man made fibres may be ugly, hard on the hands and a swine to tie knots in but they are strong. Half inch diameter cords can have a breaking strain of five tons or more. Generally people only buy the larger sized ropes because they are easier to handle. The rope I use as a painter on my small sailing boat has a 12,000 Kg breaking strain and is far stronger than I will ever need, its size is such that it is only just big enough to handle comfortably without it cutting into my hands.

As an aside, the most dangerous thing you can do when handling ropes under tension is to wear gloves. The fabric of the glove can become trapped in the lay of the rope and I have heard of a case where a woman had one of her fingers torn off because the rope became snagged in her cotton glove and she was not able to let it go.

Proper sailing gloves are fingerless for this very reason.

We hauled on the line. Slowly something started to stir and a blue shape soon became visible in the murky water. The boat had filled over two weekends of heavy rain and winds and gone to the bottom.

Any relaxation on the rope caused the boat to slide back the way it had come, so we had to keep hauling, two of us on a wobbly pontoon dragging this mercifully small boat out onto the board of the pontoon.

Anyone who has done this kind of job before will tell you that the first thing to hit when a boat is dragged off the bottom is the smell. Mud from the bottom has an odour all of its own. I don't know whether it is due to the vast amount of fish poo to be found down there or perhaps somebody had been dumping toxic waste but as soon as bottom mud becomes exposed to the air for the first time it can quite literally take your breath away.

It was like the devil's backside after a night out on the Guinness followed by a dodgey prawn vindaloo. It is also very slimy. It will not rinse off easily but we were able to shift the worst of it as we emptied the boat. After narrowly avoiding capsizing the pontoon several times and by a cunning process of allowing the mud to transfer itself onto our clothes, we eventually got the boat to the surface and tried to raise one end.

Things being as they are, i.e. always as complicated as possible, the boat came up upside down and here hangs a strange phenomenon. In such a position a small boat will not unstick from the water. Even a small craft like this one would contain about a quarter of a ton of water, which makes the process of getting it out very hard indeed. The trick is to try to get the bows to break the surface and break the seal. The suction can be tremendous. By means of poking with an oar and pulling as hard as we could, we were eventually treated to a loud sploshy slurp as the suction broke and we fell backwards as the boat shot upwards. We wrestled it onto its back and soon it was floating serenely, half full of water.

We illegally boarded a nearby fishing boat and borrowed a bucket from its deck to bail out. The boat was soon empty.

Eventually we set off across the channel to the steps with our errant charge in tow. You would think that this was the end of it but now the wind got to work. The empty boat was blown past us and tried to drag us into the open waters of the bay. We were rowing determinedly towards the steps, the boat had other ideas. As is usual in these circumstances we had to row towards one objective

in order to reach another. The true skill lies in knowing just how far you have to aim off in order to end up in the right place. We managed this and, feeling quite proud that other than a wet shoe I was still dry, I went to step out onto the step and take the lines ashore. The tide had been dropping all this time and I planted my dry foot straight onto a patch of freshly exposed weed.

Hands up everyone who knows what happened next.

Wrong. I got that foot planted safely and started to bring the other one across. In the blink of an eye I was standing securely on the weed covered step ready to climb the flight and secure the boats. A person of low intelligence then appeared. You can soon identify this sort of person; they wear sunglasses all the time, strangely placed on the top of their heads. They are also easily recognised by the type of transport they adopt. On the road it is a red Ford Escort with expensive alloy wheels and a stereo that can give false readings on the Richter scale. The aquatic equivalent is the sort of boat that Jim Bowen used to give away as star prize on Bulls Eye. Over powered, impractical, noisy and totally unsuited for use in confined spaces.

People with names like Darryl, Kevin or Wayne adopt this kind of boat usually in a vain attempt to get girls like Tracy or Sharon interested in them.

Today however was my turn. The Kevin concerned was not even aware of my existence, even though his revolting after-shave was close enough to over power the smell of the mud. He roared past blissfully unaware of the six-knot speed limit and even more unaware that the other person involved in my day's struggle was one of the harbour controllers, and passed off into the distance. Sadly he was followed by a huge rolling wake wave, which rolled under the two boats and was forced into a spout by the very steps on which I was standing.

It is a most unpleasant sensation to be soaked from the undercarriage upwards and the remarks that I addressed to the Kevin were somewhat immoderate. Being a full blooded Kevin he turned his craft and headed back my way.

"Are you fookin' talking to me?" he enquired gently.

"No I'm not talking to you, you tosser, I'm shouting at you!" was my terse reply.

"Well I ain't done nuffin', so I reckon you're out of order."

Feeling like a suspect tea machine I demonstrated my lack of out of orderness by telling K exactly what I thought of him and his silly boat, his silly glasses, his silly haircut, dreadful taste in cosmetics and his appalling grasp of the English language, at which he became somewhat animated. He opened his throttle and headed my way. Had he asked I would have told him not to come that way, just a few feet off the jetty to the north there lurks a troll-like lump of concrete that lives under the water and at low tide leaps out and bites at the bottom of such craft as Kevin's. There was a loud crunching sound and the note of the engine soon became much louder and higher pitched.

"Hmmm" I thought, "he's banged his prop on that piece of concrete, that's going to be expensive"

My musings were confirmed by a pained shout:

"That's bust my fackin' engine, there's a bastard great lump of concrete here!"

"Do you have an anchor on board?" we enquired solicitously.

"Yeah! I fackin' 'ave!"

There was a splash as it went over the side; we prayed that he had forgotten to tie it onto anything.

"As soon as we get these two clear you can come in here." called my colleague.

We stacked the two boats onto my trailer, one on top of the other, hitched it up and drove away. As far as I can tell Kevin is still sat there, in the dark, in the rain, twenty yards from the shore with his outboard motor in pieces on the back seat. He needs a small metal pin, approximately two inches in length and an eighth of an inch in diameter. It is called a shear pin because in is designed to shear off if the rather expensive propeller (a great force) comes into contact

with any immovable object, thus saving the propeller and, more importantly, the Gearbox from serious harm. A well prepared seaman will have a few of these pins about his person if he is going boating in an area like Poole Harbour where the water is notorious for being shallow. Our Kevin, being the knob head that he is, does not have a spare. It is more than likely that he will not learn his lesson and start to carry a spare, cost 50p, time to fit about 45 seconds. What is more likely is that he will become aggressive and start to kick things, blame everyone but himself for his predicament and then try to sell his boat which for him will hold no further pride of ownership.

He will spend the money on a bigger amp for his Escort and a liver crippling package holiday to Ibiza.

That is if he ever gets ashore from his boat.

Chapter 16

Coarse Boating The Grey Funnel Way

In which the Navy introduces me to their boats and I repay their kindness by losing one of their best men.

As usual this was one of the wettest days I have ever spent at sea. As it relates a tale of Navy people some of the language is colourful but reasonably authentic.

During my two weeks of basic training with the Royal Naval Reserve there were many modules that had to be covered if we were to be considered to be useful standby members of Her Majesty's senior and superior service. Obviously marching has to take pride of place over all the other skills we learned and within days, after much shouting and abuse from the Gunnery Instructor, I was proficient in putting one foot in front of the other in the correct order. A day or two after that we could turn corners and stop, skills which up to this point I had taken totally for granted.

We learned how to pull apart and fire some of the range of guns that Her Majesty sees fit to equip her best people with, though this caused our instructors to have a few worried moments.

I overheard one old hand say:

"There's no more dangerous thing in this world than a Matelot with a gun."

He said this as he took a deep draw on that most lethal of objects, the Navy Duty Free issue Blue Liner, the cigarette that makes people who live next to rubbish tips bless their good fortune.

We learned how to put out fires and tie knots, mend holes in the sides of our ships, how to read maps and walk on Dartmoor until finally they could delay the fateful day no longer. They had to let us out in boats. Accordingly we were bussed to Jupiter Point, an establishment in the estuary behind Plymouth sound where we were to be initiated into the art of driving motorboats.

The instruction was simple, which was just as well because the Killick (Leading Hand, so called because his badge of rank is an Anchor, otherwise known as a Killick) in charge was simple as well. "Yer push this forward ter go forwards, backards ter go backards, this bit ter the left ter go right and right ter go left" he mumbled. "Smoking ain't allowed in the boats, no runnin' on the pontoons and yer lifejackets must be worn at all times."

Isn't it amazing? After all these years I can remember every word of his instruction. He must have been a truly brilliant teacher!

Kitted out in the full Navy spec foul weather gear we were as warm as toast and despite the less than perfect weather we enjoyed puttering up and down the estuary in the big grey diesel-engine whalers that are the workhorse of the Navy's small boat fleet.

It is necessary to understand that the Navy is a different world to the one that normal people inhabit. We weren't on the sea; we were temporary residents of the 'Oggin. The Navy often refers to itself as the Andrew and has a wealth of other colourful phrases to describe life on the ocean wave.

One of the exercises that we were to master was "Coming Alongside" where we had to imagine that a twenty foot by five foot pontoon anchored in the fairway was in fact one of the fleet of complicated and expensive warships that protect our shores. We had to drive up alongside it and stop so that our VIP could step off the boat and take his place on the ship. Like any basic manoeuvre this led to some hilarious results. One of our team executed a perfect routine of juggling tiller and throttle, bringing us to a halt perfectly parallel to the pontoon and dead in line with the marks. Sadly he was twelve feet away. The instructor was heard to comment dryly:

"Your Admiral must have fackin' long legs then, I know them bastards finks they can walk on water."

We tried again. This time we found the pontoon. Hard.

Our friendly killick wasn't slow to comment. He confined his remarks to a simple:

“Fuck Me!”

My effort was the best by far. As always when I get my hands on a boat the weather got worse. It was raining hard and blowing a storm and we had lost sight of the base. I had also lost sight of the pontoon. My glasses were steamed up on the inside and streaming with salt water on the outside. The waves were getting quite large and between them it was not possible to see much more than the sky. I headed for the spot where I last remembered seeing the pontoon and found it with a bump. Quite a soft bump but a bump none the less.

I put the engine into reverse to check our progress and this was where I first suspected that something might be wrong. The engine raced so I closed it down quickly. Why? When a propeller has nothing to “bite” on there is little load on the engine and it runs much faster.

The reason for the race? Usually it means that the link between gearbox and propeller has ceased to be. In this case it was much funnier than that. I had indeed found the pontoon; the last big wave had lifted the whaler and twelve sailors and plonked us down high and dry directly on top of the pontoon.

Oh! How we laughed. Then we stopped laughing and started to wonder how the hell we were going to get off again and return to base.

As we were pondering our dilemma another wave came along and brushed us off the pontoon, like a giant fishmonger rinsing the manky bits off his chopping block.

We endured some fairly ripe comments from the Killick, the content and nature of which I will leave to your imagination. Suffice it to say that all our parentages were called into question.

This exercise was now considered to be complete and we moved onto the most important of all safety routines, Man overboard. To assist us in this endeavour we had an additional member of the crew stowed in the bows. His name was Rodney and he was a tall handsome bronzed sailor type with a very fixed expression. There was a good reason for this, Rodney, named for one of our great Admirals, was made of plastic. He was life sized and life weight. He wore full Navy boating gear including a life jacket and was assisted

to fall overboard ten times in all.

There comes the crunch. He was successfully recovered only nine of those times.

The following tale is a perfect illustration of why it is not a good idea to fall over board. As the weather worsened it got harder and harder to see Rodney's head amidst the waves.

Even with a life jacket on only the head is out of the water and that is less than a foot tall. When the waves are three feet tall, (a fairly gentle sea) you can see that it is very easy to lose sight of a body in the water and that is exactly what happened.

We didn't bother shouting; we suspected that Rodney's hearing wasn't up to much anyway the wind made it very difficult to hear each other, let alone a dummy. We returned to the shore and held a moment's silence for him instead. When we got back the officer in charge was incandescent with rage.

"Didn't you see the recall flag?"

We couldn't even see the building let alone the flagpole. Our Killick told him so.

It didn't go down very well with the man in charge who had taken the wise step of remaining in his office enjoying the luxuries of a television set and an obliging Wren.

"Do you know how much those things cost?" he roared, referring to the dummy.

Funnily enough we didn't, having never bought one ourselves. I couldn't see why we would want one. Being an officer and a gentleman his language was not of the sort that needed editing before inclusion in this work.

He ranted in a most civilised way for half an hour and we listened, totally intrigued. At last he finished and turned to leave the changing room. He slipped on a puddle of water and fell down the outside metal staircase, cursing the air blue as he bumped down to ground level. Every other person on the base was crying with laughter as he picked himself up and stomped away to the Wardroom.

We had all taken an oath to respect and obey "Those officers placed in authority over us" so I suppose that in theory we could have been

marched off en mass to the brig. The only problem was that the only person present who had sufficient authority to charge us was also helpless with laughter.

The footnote to this tale came a couple of days later.

The scene is Devonport Dockyard, Plymouth, the time: the dead of night.

A ship is alongside and guarding the brow (or gangplank to you and me) is a young matelot, fresh out of basic training and on watch for the first time.

Anyone who has ever stood guard over anything will know the emotion he was most feeling; sheer unadulterated and absolute boredom.

Then he glanced down.

Doing in a split second what it takes senna pods all night to do, our young hero, instantly forgetting all his training and briefing, starts to shout and scream incoherently.

Down below the brow, bobbing face down amongst the burger boxes in the oily water between the ship and the hard wall was our friend Rodney. They turned out the guard, launched a boat and recovered the body. Only when it came ashore did they realise that it was not a real body and they all started to calm down.

The next morning Rodney was returned to the arms of his beloved family in a Navy Land Rover, with a wreath around his neck.

Chapter 17

Coarse Boating and its place in History

In which we discuss the history of the world, in as much as it affected the development of coarse boating.

To understand the art of coarse boating we have to go back in time and place to Ancient Greece.

It all came about one day when a chap called Archie Medes was splashing around in his bath and noticed that the water level rose when he submerged his wooden duck. (You have to understand that rubber was not available to the Ancient Greeks so their bath toys were carved from the finest exotic hardwoods.)

After some splashing and one or two spills there was an angry shout from downstairs:

"Oi! Archie! Wot you doin' up there? There's bleedin' water coming through de ceiling and everyfings' getting' ruined, pack it in yer bleeder!"

The soft and gentle voice wafting up the stairs was that of his dear wife, Mrs. Medes. Archie ignored the distraction, after all there must be some allowances made when you are one of the great geniuses of the ancient world.

He began to formulate a theory about displacement; the excitement of the moment caused him to shout out that famous cry "Eureka!"

Despite what you may have been taught at school, this does not mean, "I have it!" Its real meaning is far less obscure. The true meaning is "Don't bother me now dear, I'm busy". Throughout the day Archimedes toiled in his bath experimenting with feathers, balls of lead, pieces of wood and the toilet duck to see which items would float and which would sink.

He discovered what we now take for granted, namely that any object that

can

displace a greater weight of water than its own weight will float and an object that displaces less than its own weight will sink. Hence the lead balls went straight down and the feathers floated. This led to his now famous definition of a boat: "A boat is a hole in the water, lined with wood, into which you continuously throw vast quantities of money".

Throughout the day Mrs. Medes kept calling up the stairs:

"Get out of dat bleedin' barf, Archie, Me Muvver's comin' to tea and I want to get it all clean up there."

The wives of present day mariners display a similar lack of understanding when faced with their spouses' hobbies.

"Don't you walk in here, I've just washed this floor and I don't want you getting varnish and sawdust on it."

Similarly:

"Get those overalls off before you sit on the sofa!" and "When are you going to clear up all those bits of wood out there?"

The trouble with scientists is that they define and even name a phenomenon

ages after every body else has been using the science for centuries.

Coarse boating did not have to wait for Archie and his bath time shenanigans, as soon as a cave man sat astride a log to reach the deeper fishing pools the art of coarse boating was born. He soon learned that he had to sit still or the log would roll. The Neolithic coarse boater learned about the fragrance of mud and its adhesive qualities. He looked at his log and glowed with the same pride as someone who builds their own boat today:

"I felled that tree and rolled it to the water." He would reflect.

Some time later he learned that he didn't need all that wood and gradually hollowed out a trunk to reduce the weight. He didn't need to understand displacement; all he knew was that it was the outside of the trunk that was important, not the mass of it.

The most primitive boats show a great understanding about the laws of physics. The early dug out shows us that Ug and his pals understood displacement and the need to keep the centre of gravity as low as possible. They also learned that it was easier to hollow the tree trunk out by lighting a fire on it than it was to batter the wood away with a piece of sharpened flint.

The curious part of this development is that the dugout canoe was invented and used the world over by many cultures and tribes almost simultaneously. There are tribes in the Amazon basin who still build and use dugouts.

Where great trees are less bountiful the problem has been overcome by the simple expedient of waterproofing a large basket.

Such ancient craft as the Coracle and the Curragh follow this line of construction. There is a chap in the hills of Snowdonia who continues to build coracles to this day, they are great fun, once you are in they aren't too wobbly and you can go any direction you like, so long as it is downstream. Shrewsbury Town Football Club used a coracle until quite recently to retrieve any ball that went over the boundary fence and into the River Severn.

Around the world adaptations of the various primitive types of craft have developed in a variety of ways. In the South Pacific a curious variant of the dug out canoe appeared with an outrigger, to give it stability. Later this evolved into the catamaran, basically two dugout lashed together to provide a stable working platform.

Other primitive craft were made where no wood grew. Bundles of reeds were lashed together and made into some quite remarkable craft. They tied reeds into bundles and tied those bundles together to make elegant reed boats that could be paddled across oceans. Was it an accident that caused the reed boat? Was somebody looking for an easy way to shift a load of reeds that he had cut to thatch his roof? Did he find that he could make a raft big enough to take him to the sea? However it happened it was a remarkable demonstration of the adaptability of the coarse boater.

When the Vikings started to build boats they tore up the rule book and produced some of the loveliest looking craft the world has ever seen. Even today they would be considered brilliant designs. The long flowing lines, the rise of the shear and the meticulous fixing of one plank to another to form the clinker hull is truly marvellous. Even today, with power tools and far more modern and convenient fastenings, the building of a clinker hull is some thing to be marvelled at. It might be said that the Vikings were instrumental in bringing about the beginnings of non-coarse boating but I shall claim then for my cause anyway.

Some of the oldest and most common boating terms came from the Vikings. They never got around to inventing the rudder, they steered using

a steer board, a long oar hung from the right hand side of the boat, thus inventing the term Starboard side. The other side would be the side of the ship to go along side a quay so that the steer board wouldn't be damaged; hence the other side became known as the Port side.

Many phrases in modern usage came from the sea.

We talk about seeing things through to the "Bitter end" but what is the bitter end? I can now reveal to you that it is the end of an anchor cable or chain, the bit that never gets out of the chain locker in a ship; consequently it spends its entire existence in the dark, amongst the bilge water and rat droppings and never gets a wash. "Bitter" is a fairly charitable description of it.

When ever we refer to having four square meals a day we are harking back to the days of Nelson's Navy. People would be dragged off the streets to serve in the endless wars with France. For some it was an improvement in lifestyle where they managed to be fed regularly, four times. These meals were served on square wooden platters, designed not to roll when dropped and to fit into wooden frames that clipped to the mess tables, these frames were called Fiddles, which is where the phrase "On the Fiddle" comes from.

There is even a completely innocent explanation for the phrase "Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey" suffice it to say that a monkey was an iron frame that could be placed on the deck in order to stack cannon balls so that they wouldn't roll away. If the monkey was made of polished brass and was being used for an admirals' inspection cold weather and the differing coefficients of expansion could take care of this expression without any hint of simian discomfort.

Chapter 18

Coarse Boating the Baden Powell Way

In which we learn that "Just two hours a week" can lead to some unseemly orange faced behaviour.

When I was a kid I always wanted to join the Sea Scouts. Sadly this pleasure was denied to me until I was in my thirties and was coerced into becoming an assistant leader for the Sea Scout troop run by my Cousin Phil.

Anyone who has had any involvement with the Scout Association will be familiar with the story:

"It's just for two hours a week Jeff, honest!"

And to start with it is. The trouble is it can expand to fill every minute of the week if you allow it. It's a bit like the junk in the garage or shed, no matter how much space you have it will all be filled, given time. I was out of work at the time and needed some distraction so I enjoyed the company and the opportunity to get my feet wet.

The experience opened my eyes to many things, not least of all the ability of kids to fail to appreciate the implications of their actions. It also showed up their totally irrational fears of things that are not dangerous and their total lack of appreciation of things that are. As with any group of people, this group of lads had some real characters amongst it, not least of all was a lad that I shall refer to as Bernard, mainly because he is now a young man quite capable of beating me up and is as I write trying to make his way in life and doesn't need anyone like me to publicise his misdemeanours.

Bernard was a leading light amongst the lads, always keen and willing to help but liked to do things his own way. He was always confident in a boat and it was tempting to rely on him and not to worry about supervising him too closely. Being scouts, they all worked towards proficiency badges one of which was the power boating badge, in which a scout had to spend some time getting to know the basics about motorboats, show that he can drive with safely and understand the rules of the road.

At the time I had a small cruiser, which was kept moored at the end of my garden in Reading. The lads came round one weekend and we spent the time going over the boat, learning about the way that gas is stored safely, how to diagnose simple engine problems, clean spark plugs and mix fuel. As this boat was steered with a wheel most of the lads got the hang of it quite quickly. Most of them had driven cars before and there were no

surprises other than the problem of getting a fouled spark plug out and cleaned. We returned to the boat house by river, a journey of about four miles that we made in a ten foot dinghy powered by an outboard motor

This journey involved a short trip down the river Kennet, via County lock, through Reading town centre to Kennet mouth where we turned left and went upstream, through Caversham lock, under Reading Bridge and back to the boathouse on the Warren.

A few feet downstream of Reading Bridge there is an instrument pod belonging to the Environment Agency. It is about twelve feet high, nearly eighteen inches in diameter and painted in black and yellow stripes. It records the water levels, rate of flow and so forth and beams the information back to head quarters where the information is used to monitor stocks and warn of floods.

We were approaching the bridge and Bernard was at the helm.

At first I thought he hadn't seen the pod.

"Bernard, just bear to port a bit" I called.

He veered to starboard.

"Bernard, turn left!"

We move more to the right and get dangerously close to the tower. It is made of solid steel. The boat, containing my good self and three scouts, was not.

"BERNARD!! TURN TO PORT!"

We side swiped the steel column causing it to boom like a huge gong. It shook and wobbled. I can't be sure how much damage we did to the instruments but if they cared to analyse the paint we left there they might trace it back to us.

It was a valuable learning point though: never have your hand over a gunwale, I also learned what passes for swearing for a small boy who, despite being in severe pain, feels that he must control his language in front of an adult. I relaxed him by suggesting that it must really bloody hurt and suggested that he dangle it in the water to numb it a bit.

We arrived back at the boat house without further incident. We put the boat away and stowed the outboard. On the following Monday we presented the boys with their power boating badges and I kept quiet about the journey back. I always maintain that you learn far more from making mistakes than you do from always getting it right.

This was not the only time that Bernard supplied the entertainment.

One weekend we decided that the boathouse and the attached storeroom needed a good spring clean. There was a heap of rubbish, broken oars and paddles, cardboard, ropes and other stuff. Being the good scouts that they were Bernard and his mates carted it all down to the far end of the lawn and made a fire. We added the mortal remains of an elderly and sadly rotten Mirror Dinghy. It had been leaning against the back of the boat house for years but lately we had noticed that it was possible to see through it in a variety of places. A brief survey revealed that there wasn't much we could do for it.

It blazed for most of the afternoon; they made regular trips with more junk to feed the flames. At one point I noticed Bernard staggering off with a pile of stuff, amongst which was a rather superannuated and rusty can of baked beans.

"Bernard," I said "don't put that tin on the fire will you?"

"Why?" he said, his face a picture of pure innocence.

"It might explode, just put in the bin bag for taking home."

"It'll be alright, it's only beans, we can get the can later and throw that away."

"Bernard, don't put it on the fire, it not a good idea." I said firmly, well as firmly as you could with a bloke like Bernard.

He disappeared and I went back to work.

A few minutes later there was a lull in the noise of sweeping and scrubbing in the boathouse, allowing us to catch the distant sound of a dull thud.

There was some commotion outside and we went out to see Bernard wandering around wondering what to do.

He was unhurt, except for his pride but he had obviously been intent on watching the fire and its effect on the can of beans because, from the shoulders upwards he was now bright orange. He had beans in his hair, in his ears and dripping from his shoulders. His response was to strip off and dunk his clothes in the river. We washed him down with the hose and hung his clothes to dry. Being a good scout he had a change of clothes in his bag. When his mother came to take him home she showed not a flicker of surprise at his antics.

Each time we had a new batch of Sea Scouts we had to make sure that they were competent to go boating. To this end we would take each new intake and have a camp at the boathouse for a weekend so that we could teach them the procedures for using the boats, safety routines and assess their confidence in the water.

We rowed, canoed, sailed and explained the use of buoyancy aids. Once they were all familiar with them we would take them out in to the middle of the river and invite them to leave the boat, so that they could experience

the buoyancy aid and how it works at first hand. It is a shock, the first time you feel it pulling up under your arms and we felt it was best that they experience the sensation for the first time whilst we were at hand to ensure that all was safe. Accordingly I rowed the big old gig out into the river, shipped the oars and prepared to have a struggle to get the lads to go over the side. I needn't have worried; as soon as I started to speak they all went over the side, soaking me with a combined splash that ringed the boat. They all floundered their way the sixty yards back to the shore and that was that. By the time I got back there was a row of dripping buoyancy aids drying in the sun and no sign of the boys.

Unbeknownst to me, Phil had sounded the dinner bell and their animal instincts took over. It was only by luck that there was anything left for me at all.

Chapter 19

Trying to make the art less coarse

In which we experience a paint job and an infallible method for getting rid of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Things have been blue for far too long. I wondered about painting the boat red, or green, or white, anything but blue.

This kind of thing becomes necessary every couple of years. The beaches around Poole Harbour have a unique geological phenomenon. Whereas most of the bottom of the harbour is mud the beaches are sandy and have a special kind of stone that behaves rather like those wobbly men toys that always stand up when you knock them down. The stones are sharp on one side and smooth on the other but always land sharp side up. This makes the beaches unpleasant for the amateur barefoot paddler and does absolutely no favours to any boat that is launched across them. Those of us in the know equip ourselves with sand shoes so that we can paddle in comfort after a long day in the office. Sadly there is no equivalent to protect the bottom of the boat.

Out in the back garden I washed and dried the boat off and rubbed it down to prepare it for the new paint. After this I wandered down to the chandlers shop on the quay to see what paint they had in stock.

This kind of thing is not for the faint hearted. There are many colours available, but we no longer have any thing as mundane as paint available, we have Paint Systems. These all have one thing in common: they are incredibly expensive.

I looked at the Paint Systems. It appeared that I was going to be in for a sizeable sum to repaint the boat. I tried the local DIY superstore. They carried a limited range of International's yacht paints and when I say limited I mean blue orer, blue.

I took the philosophical view that whatever I put on the bottom would end up being scraped off on the beach so it might as well be blue and the money I would save could be put to a more useful purpose, like chips, beer and curry.

I dragged the boat off the trailer and rolled it over.

Carefully, so that I didn't hurt my back, I lifted one end and popped a trestle under. I went round to the other end and again with great care lifted the other end and popped the trestle under. Having taken such great care to lift carefully and not bend my back it was inevitable that I would feel a sharp twang and a pain would shoot up my back.

That was the end of the renovations for that weekend. The next week I had a couple of days off so I continued with the job. The boat was secure on the trestles and I did not need to do any more strenuous lifting or bending. Instead I took out my trusty power sander, loaded a fresh sheet of paper and set about smoothing out the lumpy bits.

Our street is a quiet haven of tranquillity and I felt dreadful about shattering the calm. The neighbour's dog started to howl and I could feel the hostile gaze of its owner's eyes on my neck. I vowed to battle on, it was a Monday morning and I felt it reasonable to work outside. I worked through the day in thirty minute stints until the bottom of the boat was as smooth as the day I built it. The epoxy coating left a white hue on the plywood and the air was full of irritating white powder. I had to get rid of it so I took a bucket of hot soapy water and scrubbed it all off, finishing up with a thorough rinse from the garden hose.

Then the itching started. I took myself inside, stripped off my working clothes and threw them into the washing machine.

I could see the fibres glistening on the fabric. I went up to run a bath. The doorbell rang; I grabbed my dressing gown and ran down. Standing on the doorstep, hopping from one foot to the other was bad enough. Trying to get rid of Jehovah's witnesses is always a challenge. I wonder what they must have thought of the short fat bald bloke who, in the middle of the day was covered in red blotches, wearing his wife's hastily grabbed dressing gown hopping around scratching and cursing while they offered their words of eternal salvation?

I must confess to being somewhat blunt with them, as they turned to leave I slammed the door, ran upstairs and finally sank into a soothing bath to try to remove the epoxy fibres from my skin. Later, de-itched and dressed again I was ready for stage two.

There is something about paint and the weather, every time I removed the lid from the paint tin the sky clouded over and rain started to fall. Putting the lid back caused the sun to come out. It wasn't coincidence; I repeated the test several times, each with the same result. I cleared some space and dragged the boat with its trestles back into the garage. It's amazing how a boat that feels tiny out on the water grows to an immense size on land and even bigger in a confined space. I had to be very careful not to

walk into the freshly painted hull as, for some reason, I had forgotten to take off my best trousers and put on my old jogging pants. I knew I would be in trouble when TCMD came home so I limboed out of the garage and did my best to hide the evidence. It wasn't too bad; there was just one line of blue paint running horizontally across the front of both legs. No more than about nine inches by about one and a half. I didn't panic, I didn't race off and buy new ones, I didn't stage a mysterious fire. Instead I did a wonderful job with some white spirit and rag and left the sacred garment revolving in the Hotpoint.

The time of day soon came when I had to leave to fetch Herself from work. We arrived home and, in time honoured fashion, I completely forgot about the wet paint. Why does this kind of paint take so long to dry? It needs a good twenty-four hours of warm sun before you can be sure it won't stick to your fingers. It was teatime and my dearly beloved decided to fetch something from the freezer. When I tell you that the freezer is located at the back of the garage I'm sure you can tell what happened next.

Why she couldn't tell by the smell of paint, the shining surface of the boat, the fact that it was up on trestles and the trailer was outside didn't give her a clue that the paint might be wet is a mystery to me. The repercussions ran on all evening. She did however notice my aptitude with the white spirit and cloth. I have one of those faces that can give a picture of complete innocence, for all of a second. I don't know how it happened but I had soon spilt the beans on the trouser incident. There were no recriminations, no shouting, no admonishments, just a stony silence. Do they learn this from their mothers?

The upshot was that I spent a lot of time cleaning, although once I had finished the job it was admitted that the old girl was looking very smart in her new livery. The boat looked pretty good as well

As luck would have it the weather, which had seemed to put an end to the season's boating activity, improved and I found myself once more bobbing around on the harbour. It was unseasonably warm, there was no wind, I couldn't be bothered to row and the electric outboard motor seemed to be having an off day. I decided that it had all been too much so I tied the emergency handbrake to the end of the painter with a very seaman like bowline, unfolded its hooks and tossed it over. I spent a pleasant afternoon inspecting the inside of my eyelids and catching up with my daydreaming. It had been a funny old summer and I was ready to face the winter with a few pleasant memories of the good days. Those few rare precious good days when the weather and I both managed to get the day off work and go

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sailing. Every year I promise myself more time afloat, maybe next year I will achieve it.

Chapter 20

Coarse Boating – the art of coarse weather forecasting.

In which we find that the Met office don't always get it right, that you should not trust anything you haven't checked for yourself and binoculars can't swim.

Sometimes it isn't a good idea to rely on the weather forecast when setting out on a sailing trip. There are so many sources of weather information available, the television, newspapers, the Internet, radio and the little hut on the quay where the Coast guard posts up the Metfax each day, it can come as a surprise when they get it wrong.

Closer investigation would have revealed that they all get their information from the same source, the piece of seaweed hanging from Mrs Crusty's bathroom window in Church street.

It was on such a day that I found that I had a day free to go sailing, the weather looked a bit iffy so I checked with all the sources listed above and decided that it was OK to go.

The wind was north-easterly, force four to five, the tide was still rising but in about three hours it was due to turn and the wind was supposed to veer round to south-westerly and moderate to force three or four. What this meant was I had a good wind and tide to sail up to the western end of the harbour, potter around a bit and get a good wind to come home again.

I dragged the boat down to the slipway and set about preparing for sea. The wind was at the limit of the boat's operating capability so I made sure that every thing was secure and double-checked all my knots. I was soon sailing briskly westwards towards Gold Point (Look on the map) and the open water leading to Wareham. In the open area behind Brownsea the waves were quite large, they wouldn't be considered much out at sea but they were large for the harbour and large for my tiny boat. I was still dry, I was still sailing well and there was not too much to worry about.

I was tearing along, thoroughly enjoying the trip when the tip of Gold Point came into view. I needed to turn more to the north so I pulled in on the main sheet and pushed the tiller to the left. As I did this and the boat came

round to take the wind on the Starboard side I was struck by a large wave, which took my breath away, half filled the boat, and completely spoiled my sandwiches. Worse than that I found myself still gripping the tiller firmly, even though I was now on the bottom of the boat, nowhere near the rudder. That was the only part of the boat's construction that I had left to someone else and I wondered at the sanity of how anyone could think that tiny dab of wood glue and two three-quarter inch brass screws was enough to keep it on.

The boat was cart wheeling violently in a swirl of boiling water. Not only had I encountered a freak gust of wind but I had also done it in a spot in the harbour where two tide streams were meeting and causing a fair amount of turbulence. The rudder was no longer under control, it was swinging wildly from side to side and I was still gripping hard on the short section of one inch dowel that used to comprise the tiller.

The boat was being tossed like a cork, the sail was wrapping itself around the mast and I was extremely wet. Nothing new there, I thought.

It was now a matter of applying the emergency handbrake and sorting out the gear.

After three attempts I managed to get the anchor to bite on something and started to shift my gear so that I could get the water out.

I took down the sail as the wind was increasing and I was getting sick of being flogged around the head by the leach of the sail. All my gear was wet but I had a dry sweater in a waterproof bag which I had wedged under the thwart. The battery was standing in a pool of sea water so before I could do anything else I had to bail it all out. You can buy very natty little bailers from boat shops but, being the tight wad I am, mine was made from a six-pint milk container from Sainsburys. With the water out the boat was riding a little easier in the water. It was approaching time for the tide to start to ease and the wind to moderate. I sponged out the last few drops and wondered what to do next.

Instead of easing and moving into the south west, the wind strengthened still further and moved round northwards. The water got lumpier and suddenly home looked a very long way off indeed. North was where I wanted to be, by now I had decided that I needed to be trying to get home and nature was conspiring against this plan. I un-shipped the now useless rudder and stowed it in the bows, covered all the gear with the sail and prepared to head for the north shore.

My electric outboard motor has proved its worth before and today was no exception. It weighs next to nothing, is totally silent in operation and moves the boat faster than I can with oars.

I started off towards the north shore and the docks. I was only able to move slowly, if I applied full power the boat slammed into the waves and we got nowhere fast. Soon I was hugging the shoreline and approaching the cross channel ferry berths.

The Barfleur, a Brittany Ferries ship that plies between Poole and Cherbourg, occupied one of the berths. As I came along side the stern of the ship I was level with a line of hopeful looking people in cars, some towing caravans. They were slowly driving into the great maw of the ship. The tide was still rising quite fast and it took nearly twenty minutes to get past the ship. From down there it looks very big indeed. The battery was failing by now and I started to assist it with the oars.

I gradually crept along the side of the ship, speeding up involuntarily when I passed two openings marked "Foul Water Outlets" and "Bow Thruster" and, after what seemed like two lifetimes, crept around the corner from the ferry berths to the New Quay. Here my fortunes changed for two reasons: firstly I was now rowing with the tide instead of against it. Secondly I encountered a man demonstrating a range of small boats that he was hoping to sell as a package with outboard motors. He buzzed alongside and asked if I needed any help. Having rowed for quite some distance and being somewhat wind, sun and spray burned I was very happy to pass him the end of my painter and accept a tow for the last quarter of a mile to the fisherman's dock. It was there that I finally managed to unload all the gear from the boat and assess the damage. The sudden swing of the boat in a heavy running sea was far too much for the rudder assembly and it had parted company with the tiller. The boat is too short and wide, a bit like me, to steer using just the sail, as you can with more advanced sailing dinghies. My camera was a little damp but otherwise unhurt. My nice new Pentax bird watching binoculars were past any kind of help. They had been swimming around in four inches of water for long enough to become completely fogged and no amount of rinsing with clean water and placing on the radiator to dry could save them.

It was with heavy heart that, the next day, I committed their mortal remains to the wheely bin, in the sure and certain knowledge that they might be resurrected by the totters at the local tip and live gloriously at the right hand of some old geezer in Parkstone who watches the woman opposite getting ready for bed. She's quite safe; I tried and couldn't see a thing.

My back was sore, I had been rowing for what seemed like hours and the T shirt had been wet and dried again several times, each time leaving a thicker layer of salt on the fabric which chafed on my skin. My face, accustomed to a gentle life under office strip lights, was aglow with wind, rain and salt burn.

The repairs have been done; the tiller that I now have is a far more substantial piece of equipment. It was shaped from a piece of Meranti, a tropical hardwood, using a wooden spoke shave that used to belong to my great grandfather. It resembles the cut off end of a pickaxe handle and has a Turkshead knot on it, just to make it look really nautical.

The fixing to the rudder's head stock is so strong that it will take my very substantial weight. There is there a strong mortice and tenon join, three long brass screws and some proper marine grade wood glue keeping it together. If the same incident happened today I would definitely be able to get home under sail.

Chapter 21

Out on the open sea.

In which a recurring theme rears its ugly head, TCMD joins us on board and wishes she hadn't.

If sometimes you think that Hollywood got it wrong when they portrayed somebody standing at a ship's wheel whilst out of shot stage hands are pelting him with buckets of cold water then think again. When you are out at sea in heavy weather it feels just like that. The boat will be riding one wave after another and each time the bows of the ship hit another wave a small percentage of that wave is hurled at the helmsman or anyone who happens to be on deck at the time.

I noticed this phenomenon one night, when I was out on Poole Harbour after dark. Every year the local council organises spectacular firework displays every Thursday evening during the summer months and it is fun to be out on the water to watch them. The fireworks are launched from a barge which is moored a safe distance from the shore. The Quay gets extremely crowded, one Thursday night in July 2001 an attendance of 22,000 was recorded so, as you can imagine, it is good to get the chance to observe from the deck of a boat away from the snotty kids, pick pockets, salesmen, over enthusiastic local radio DJs and people from the North.

One fine summer evening a group of us took a motor launch out; there was David from the MVS and his girl friend, TCMD and myself. We packed a picnic and took a few bottles of liquid refreshment. It was a fine summer evening, warm, just a bit close but set fair to be a smooth trip. That night we had the services of a Faery Huntress, a smallish boat with a rather powerful six cylinder supercharged diesel engine that was, on a good day, capable of some quite dramatic speeds. The keen eyed amongst you will remember the boat from a James Bond film of the 1960s, Dr. No, where 007 thwarts his pursuers by taking off in a boat and rolling drums of fuel off the boat into their path then exploding them with a flare gun. Those boats were Faerys.

We set off and plodded round from Hamworthy to the main shipping channel then headed in towards the quay. We dropped anchor and tucked into our picnic. It was now dark and the display was due to take place in about an hour. We had watched the barge as it was towed out to its safe anchorage and we soon saw a practical demonstration of the correct lights to display on a towed vessel carrying explosive ordinance - lots of them.

The one I felt they shouldn't be displaying was the red one on the end of the cigarette being smoked by the bloke who was steering. As if reading my thoughts he tossed it over the side where it was extinguished by the sea.

Whilst all this was going on the tide had turned and the wind had increased. The glass like water was transformed into the set of The Cruel Sea, I was Noel Coward. The Huntress started to buck like a mustang, at one point I had to grab my beer to stop it going over the side. Down in the cabin the girls were expressing their unease.

David, being the perfect gent that he is, agreed that we would weigh anchor and try to move to a quieter spot. There is an area in between the quays is usually a good bet so we headed that way, only to be turned away by the safety officer who decided that it would be too close to the barge. Considering that we were moving away from the barge to get there it seemed a bit rich but the safety guy's word is law and we moved away. We headed south towards Brownsea Island. When we hit the main ship channel we were in full exposure to the weather and tide. The tide races through the channel close to Brownsea's shore and the wind was plumping up the waves as though preparing pillows in a hospital.

The boat started to pitch violently and the rain started. I heard the sound of glass breaking and feminine swearing coming from the cabin. TMCD poked her head out of the cabin door:

"I think we should go back, it's too rough." She said.

What I heard was:

"Hi hin hoo huuf et ack u astard"

I looked forward and saw that we were heading for a large wave. I ducked down behind the windscreen to avoid the great gollops of

water that were due to hurtle over the bows of the boat, it didn't come.

I straightened up and a Hollywood style bucket full of water smashed into my face.

We battled on through the waves and I got caught out a few times, I would duck as we went into the big waves and would get soaked as I stood up again.

Then I noticed what was going on: it wasn't the big wave that was the problem; it was coming down the back of the big wave and burying the bows into the little wave that followed it. As soon as I realised this I enjoyed watching David duck for the big wave and get soaked as I ducked for the next one. After about half an hour I decided to let him in on the secret, by which time we were approaching our mooring and the need to know was not so great. His response was classic.

"Oh, I see. Glub!" A wave snatched the rest of the response from his lips.

We got the boat tied up and shut down. The fireworks were performing their magic away to the east of us but the wind and rain had robbed them of their magic.

Besides, there was always next week.

Chapter 22

Coarse Boating and the well earned reputation

In which I describe some earlier boating experiences and show that some reputations are well earned.

Before I enjoyed my coarse boating on under and around Poole Harbour I lived in Reading and did some of my boating on the River Kennet. I belonged to the local canal society and did a fair bit of time helping out with a narrow boat owned by one of the trust members, who ran trips.

The boat was an ex-working boat called Lancing, a 72ft boat of the Large Northwich class which carried cargoes on our canal system when such things were still an everyday occurrence. She now plies the Kennet and Avon canal between Reading and Newbury showing parties of people a side of the town they have not seen before.

The rear cabin and the engine room are as they would have been during her working life, the long forward cargo hold now has a roof and long benches along each side and there is a small kiosk at the aft end of this where Norman makes a few more pennies selling teas and buns.

One night I got a call to ask if could help with a party of journalists. They were taking the trip from Reading town centre to the Cunning Man pub at Burghfield, where they would partake of a few ales before the return trip. This trip would involve passing through two locks, Fobney lock at the southern end of Reading and Southcote lock. These locks were built to accommodate the working boat, the Kennet and Avon was built to broad canal specifications which meant that they are able to take two boats of the size of Lancing side by side. The trick was to get the boat well forward in the chamber so that the rudder does not get fouled on the cill below the top gates.

That night the crew consisted of me, John and the former Mrs Dray, who is sadly no longer with us, she caught religion and prefers the company of a chef from Newcastle who probably thinks he is God.

The party of newspapermen were already fairly well oiled when they arrived at the boat; they had put that day's edition to bed in the late morning and had gone to the pub for the afternoon. Now at 7.30 they were embarking on a new drinking spree. It seemed that the reputation that journalists have for being fond of a drop or two was not going to be harmed in any way.

The outward journey passed without incident, all that really happened was that they confirmed themselves as heavy drinkers. Normally, if there was a party of pensioners on board, we would make a few cups of tea and maybe one or two small bottles of beer for the men then we would chat about the canal, the weather and how in sixty years they had never seen the old magistrate's court from this angle.

By the time we had cleared Reading town centre we were dry. The journos had polished off everything on board and were eyeing the cans of antifreeze in the engine room with a nostalgic air. I made an executive decision, well two actually. The first one was to phone Norman and invite him to bring more supplies of booze to Fobney lock; the other was to open the throttle a bit so that they would have more drinking time in the pub.

Norman wasn't in so it was down to plan B. We did Southcote lock in record time and were soon drawing alongside the mooring at the Cunning Man. The passengers roared off the boat and into the public bar, without a second glance at the waterway. Trying not to feel hurt at this we set about preparing the boat for the return journey.

The first thing was to empty the loo. This was a large tank attached to a loo seat that could be uncoupled and taken ashore to a disposal point. There was one of these on the other side of the canal at the local British Waterway depot. We backed the boat across the cut and, once secure, set about undoing the coupling. It didn't help that the tank was full to the brim (we had emptied it the day before) and the water proof seal that prevented spills was already below the Plimsoll line. The resultant spillage was dealt with using a bucket of soapy water and the bilge pumps.

We carried the tank ashore, to gain a mental image of this operation cast your mind back several decades to the funeral of Winston Churchill and those young naval ratings who manoeuvred the heavy coffin off the launch which was used to carry it up the river.

We got is ashore without spilling too much of it and watched the still warm second hand beer gurgle down the drain.

It was getting dark by now so we turned the boat around at a winding hole a few yards past the pub and were soon prepared to receive the passengers back on board for the return trip. After a break for a wash and brush up, a cup of tea and a sandwich we watched as the newspapermen started to reel back towards the boat.

The jetty at the pub is a narrow one with no handrails and we wondering how many of them would fail this particular hurdle. To our surprise and muted dismay they all managed to walk the plank successfully and were soon at the boat clamouring for more beer.

Norman had arrived in the nick of time with an estate car crammed with cases of lager, so we were able to satisfy the thirst for a while longer, although it was becoming apparent that some of their number were beginning to succumb to the arms of Bacchus and might not see the rest of the trip through.

The casualties started to pile up and things looked as though they might get out of hand when they started to pile the unconscious bodies on top of the boat to make more room for those still drinking.

Nobody likes steering a narrow boat in the pitch dark, it is a long way to the front of the boat from the steering position and no amount of flood lights will help light the way in the countryside. I decided that we needed to end the trip ASAP and it was with some relief that I saw the welcome sight of the top gates of Southcote lock come into view. We glided in the lock and I threw a line over the end of the lock gate as I passed it, this has the dual effect of pulling the gate shut and of slowing the boat.

The gates closed and I leapt up to check the lines and open the sluices at the bottom gates to let the water out.

Soon we could hear the water roaring through the sluices and the back end of the boat started to settle down in the chamber. As I

waited for the boat to level out I sank into a day dream. I was woken from it by the shouts of the crew. There was a particularly piercing shriek from the former Mrs. Dray, who was very good at advising others what to do but never seemed to find it in herself to do anything herself.

They were scrambling out of the cabin and climbing up the lock side ladders.

I looked forward; the bows of the boat were still at the upper level, firmly wedged in the gap between the top of the gate and the balance beam. My end of the boat was nearly at the bottom and the whole thing was hanging at an alarming angle.

I ran up the sloping roof, windlass in hand, climbed onto the lock gate and lowered the sluices as quickly as I could. I sprinted to the other end of the lock and started to open the top sluices to fill the chamber, John was on the other side opening the other set of sluices to make the operation as quick as possible. Advice from the third member of the crew fell on us from the boat, about as welcome and useful as a case of condoms on a trip to Lourdes. Water thundered into the chamber and soon the crisis was over. When the levels were still about two feet apart the bows slipped out of the gap and the front of this huge boat fell into the chamber. There was a lurch and a splash and all the journo's roared their drunken approval. There was a faint sound of breaking glass but nothing worse than I had been hearing all evening anyway. We emptied the lock and went on home. We passed through Fobney lock without incident and were soon discharging the cargo onto a wharf in the town centre. They were a cheerful lot; several came and thanked the crew for a great trip. One of them slapped me on the back, blurted out something incomprehensible and staggered to the water's edge, throwing up spectacularly into the water. As he waddled away towards the newspaper office he bawled out: "I bloody love you blokes"

I removed seventeen bin bags full of empty beer cans from the boat that night. Many more found their own way back to town via the surface of the river.

The next day's edition of the local paper was noticeably thinner than usual and seemed to consist of stories of the "Fifty years of flower arranging in Berkshire" type of stock journalism.

Chapter 23
The Art of coarse Radio communications
Or
Send three and four pence, we're going to a dance.

In which I learn how to use a radio, pass the exam then promptly forget it all again.

So goes, it is said, a true misunderstanding from some troops who failed to communicate effectively back in the mist of time when you could indeed have a night out for three shillings and four pence (about 16p). It is a line that is trotted out on any kind of communications course and most especially the course that leads to the award of the Royal Yachting Association's Maritime Radio Operator Certificate of Competence.

I have a piece of purple paper, bearing my mug shot, issued by the RYA on behalf of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to say that I have been examined and been found to be of a suitable level of competence to operate the kind of short range VHF Radio that can be found on many small craft and fishing vessels along the shores of our Sceptered Isle.

During the training course for this certificate I was required to learn the various procedures that are deemed necessary for the safe and considerate operation of marine radio.

We practised all day, we learned about PAN PAN calls, Mayday calls, giving one's position clearly and unambiguously, using the phonetic alphabet so that you don't confuse Bs and Ds and made pretend calls to each other across the room and into the next room. We learned how to talk to the Coastguard in such a way that we didn't annoy him, or her.

At the end of it all the local RYA examiner arrived and tested our knowledge with a short written paper and a brief practical test where you demonstrate your flawless knowledge of the difference between "Over" and "Out", it being a cardinal sin to utter both words together at the end of a message.

For those not in the know, you say "Over" when you have finished speaking and are handing over to the other party to speak and you say "Out" when you deem the conversation to be at a close and you are not intending to do anything other than pour another glass of Beaujolais. It is not correct to use them both together.

Anyway, back to the course.

During the course we learned about the effect of Chinese whispers, the message that purportedly originated on the Western Front during World War 1 was:

"Send reinforcements, we're going to advance."

The message was apparently relayed through various levels of command until it reached the gin swilling echelons of the British Army, who heard

"Send three and four pence, we're going to a dance."

They probably greeted this message with cries of "Damned Impertinence!" before going off to the officer's mess for another chota peg.

I only say this because I had the best intentions when I took my VHF course; I wanted to get a good mark and was successful in doing so. It didn't help me, however, when I was first called upon to use the radio in anger.

I was enjoying the sun and the sea, standing just outside the wheelhouse of Tom Sherrin as we cruised along the Wareham channel towards the western end of Poole Harbour.

The radio barked at us:

"Tom Sherrin, Tom Sherrin, Tom Sherrin, this is Poole Harbour Control, Poole Harbour Control, Poole Harbour Control, are you receiving? Over."

I understood why they repeat everything three times; it helps you to pick your name out from all the background chatter.

"Jeff, answer that will you?"

I took up the microphone and burred something, it might have been "Garlic sausage poodle polish" for all I know, all I do know is that I remembered to say "Over" at the end.

"Tom Sherrin, this is Poole Harbour control, state your position please, over."

"Hello Richard, we're just south of Rockley point heading west at eight knots,"

I was very proud of myself for being so concise that I forgot two things: Firstly I forgot to say "Over", secondly, and far more seriously, I forgot to release the transmit button.

I said to Tom:

"I wonder what the moaning old bugger wants now?"

Tom gestured at my hand, the mike button was still pressed in and my knuckles were white with the pressure I was applying. I let the button go and the background noise of the radio returned.

"Tom Sherrin, this is Poole Harbour Control, moaning old bugger speaking, can you look out for a small sports boat, he's near the end of the Rockley Channel and has run out of fuel, over."

I was thoroughly demoralised by now, having hoped to remember all we had been taught I was demonstrating a level of operating skill that you wouldn't expect from a very silly person.

"Poole Harbour Control, this is Tom Sherrin, I think I can see him now, we're just drawing level with him. Over."

"Harbour Control Out" came the terse reply.

We approached the boat, he hadn't run out of fuel, he had committed the cardinal error of forgetting he wasn't in his car and had forgotten that most boat fuel tanks have a vent that has to be opened before leaving port. As soon as the fuel starts to flow out of the tank a vacuum is created and soon the fuel stops flowing. You run out of petrol as soon as you get clear of the marina and open the throttle to cruising speed. We leaned over and spun the tiny screw on the top of his tank and were rewarded with a hiss of air as the tank took a sharp intake of breath.

He started the engine again and burred off into the sunshine.

I called in again to report our progress and was rewarded by a double click on the mike.

I called in again and got the same response. I called in for a radio check and again got the same response. Tom carefully avoided my eye as I got annoyed:

"Is he sulking because I called him a moaning old bugger?"

"I dunno, you'd better ask him."

When we next met Richard, the port controller, I made my peace with him. As I left suitably chastened Tom took me to one side and explained to me that a double click on the mike was a radio operator's short hand for acknowledging a call. That was the part that they don't tell you about in the lessons.

I have held the certificate for over two years now and my radio procedures are now as sloppy as everyone else is on the Harbour. I even heard Richard say "Over and out" to the cross channel ferry the other day.

Chapter 24
Coarse Boating - The definition of a coarse boat.
Or
Phooaar! Look at the Chines on that!

In which we discuss the meaning of coarse boating and try to define the difference between a coarse boat and all the other kinds.

When you fully understand the principles of coarse boating you will understand the fascination it has for me, someone who has always hankered for the sea but who has always carried on an existence on dry land.

Think of boating and the images that usually come to mind are yachting, the likes of Sir Robin Knox Johnson and Ellen McArthur, even Princess Anne and the Pimm's swigging crowds of Cowes week, I thoroughly enjoy a jug of Pimm's on a hot summer 's day but I do hate crowds, they make me feel extremely uncomfortable. Coarse boating is what the rest of us practice, those of us who boat on a tight budget or even with no budget at all.

Working boat users such as the oyster men and crab fishermen of Poole are coarse boaters, they have to have a far deeper and enduring love of the water as they spend their entire working lives scratching a living from the sea in all weather and all seasons. Whereas a leisure boater with a well lined wallet will go ashore to the chandlers for a thingumyig to fix a problem on the boat the coarse boater will make do with something scavenged from a wreck or adapted from something he or she finds in the garden shed.

It is truly amazing just how much stuff is considered essential on a pleasure boat that you won't find on a working boat. The safety kit is all there and there is usually a VHF radio but people who seldom venture off their moorings go equipped with all kinds of gear, including Radar, GPS, depth sounders, flares and radar reflectors.

The fishing boat will have VHF, a fish finder and a mobile phone.

The Poole canoe is the physical embodiment of all of the principles of coarse boating. It is an open boat that, at first glance, seems so simple that it appears to have been designed by a child.

It is in essence a flat box, quite long and narrow, which has been brought to a point at the front. Given a box of tools and a few sheets of plywood most people would come up with the Poole canoe if told to design a boat that uses the minimum of material for the greatest amount of boat.

When you see the environment that the boat is used in it all appears to be a lot cleverer, it is flat bottomed with a slight rise to the front and can float in as little as two inches of water. It can be skimmed over mud and makes a stable working platform for the many applications to which it is put.

The sides are flared outwards towards the front of the boat, this means that any waves they strike are parted and thrown sideways instead of being lead over the bow and into the boat.

Instead of hanging the outboard motor on the back of the boat the Poole Canoe often has a well for the engine, a bottomless box a few feet forward of the stern so that the engine is not on the back of the boat. This makes it a lot easier to use the stern counter of the boat for Crab pots, small nets, Oyster cages and so on.

It also makes the canoe more stable as the steerer does not have to sit right at the back of the boat, causing the bows to lift out of the water and block the forward view.

Poole exports vast quantities of oysters to the continent each year, many of which are fished for from Poole canoes.

If you were heading towards my house from the drive through McDonalds you would see a Poole canoe parked as an ornament on a roundabout. This always seems a sad way for a boat to finish its life. To me it like having your mother stuffed and mounted in the bathroom, used as a holder for the loo brush.

The right place for a Poole Canoe is afloat and working in Poole Harbour. When it is passed its best and too rotten to work any more it should suffer one of two fates:

Either it should be left to rot in a secluded back water where it will provide habitat and food for wildlife and photo opportunities for art students from the local college or it should be dragged ashore and burned, the time honoured Viking funeral. For any boat to finish its days as an overgrown window box is the saddest thing I can

imagine, it is a crime perpetrated by those of little or no imagination.

My wife often threatens to do this to my dinghy, she says that one day I will come home to find it front and centre in the front garden. I think she is joking. If ever that happens I have promised that I will, that very night, have a new and novel loo brush holder in the downstairs toilet.

Coarse boating isn't about having the right gear or winning races, although the occasional trial of one's skill doesn't come amiss. The real thrill for me is the ability to glide into a secluded corner of the harbour and see something that no-one else has seen, seeing boats in their natural elements and seeing that the lines are just right. It's about lying back and listening to the water slop-clopping against the hull whilst the sun warms the outside of my eyelids. It's about still feeling the gentle movement of the boat when, hours later, you are lying in bed drifting off to sleep after a day out on the water.

My wife summed it up one day in the local newsagent; I was looking at a magazine, classic boat or a similar publication. The centre spread was a classic gaff rigged sailing boat that had recently been restored and was looking lovely. I stood there holding the magazine open gazing at the beautiful photograph. Behind me and out of my sight was a man doing the same thing with a copy of Razzle, Big Jugs Monthly or some such, she remarked afterwards that we both had the same expressions on our faces.

It was a case of "Phwoooar! Look at the chines on that!"

Chapter 26 Hidden Depths

In which we find ourselves greatly concerned about the proximity of the bottom to the top

On the harbour, I may have already mentioned, there is a constant problem with shallow water. You can't always see it but there is often less than four feet of water to cruise through. Outside of the marked shipping channels it is never safe to assume that there is enough water for a motor boat of any size

I saw a channel that runs between Brownsea and Furzey Island. It is marked on the chart as Whiteground Lake. I have been through there unworried several times until the day that somebody got the depth sounder working on the Tom Sherrin.

We were supposed to be patrolling the western end of the harbour for the harbour Master; it is something we do in the summer in return for the facilities that he allows our group to use.

We had visited the area to find nobody there, not surprisingly, as the weather wasn't all that great and the water was a bit choppy for comfortable water skiing, we therefore decided that a sight seeing trip was in order. We set off around the southern side of the harbour. There is a huge expanse of open water, which is designated as a quiet area and it is always a great pleasure to cruise through it.

It can be deceptive, in anything bigger than a dinghy you need to take great care not to run aground, at best it is inconvenient, at worst expensive. When you run aground the first thing to hit the bottom is the propeller. This isn't too much of a problem if the bottom is soft mud but usually there are stones, chunks of concrete, lobster pots, wrecks and other bit of debris on the bottom, which make the chance of prop damage very high.

Props are delicate things; they are finely balanced pieces of engineering. The other thing you need to know about propellers is that they cost a kings ransom to repair or replace.

A nick in one blade can cause one side to weigh more than the other and, if the damage is bad enough, it will lead to vibration. That vibration can be uncomfortable for the crew and can lead to engine wear and damage. On a high performance engine it can lead to catastrophic failure.

It was only a few minutes off high tide so I thought that I would have plenty of water. We chugged along gently, enjoying the solitude. The channel isn't terribly well marked but we could see where we were going.

Given that the bottom is so near the top around here we were being extra vigilant about depths. We plotted our position against the chart constantly.

We also kept at least one eye on the depth sounder, running aground was not to be an option that day.

All was well for a while and we got well into the little channel between the islands.

The depth sounder and the chart started to disagree; according to the Admiralty we should have had nearly two metres of water below the keel at what is known as chart datum.

Chart datum is supposed to be a minimum that you are likely to encounter but we do have to allow for the way that mud moves about and it can often be wrong, especially if there has been a lot of winter rain that can bring silt down from the many rivers that feed into the harbour. By and large though, the Admiralty makes exceedingly good charts and they are usually reliable.

Our display was showing 1.2 metres.

Given that high tide was only a few minutes ago we should have had more than the chart was showing, not less.

By this time we were well into the channel so I decided to keep going. I slowed down the engine, this has two effects, it will raise the stern of the boat and reduce the risk of damage if we did hit something.

By contrast, watch a boat when power is applied; the first thing that happens is the stern will squat down into the water. By reducing power to a tick over this will not happen.

We slid slowly through the smooth water and watched the depth sounder nervously. I got the boat hook out and tried checking the depth the old fashioned way. I could not find the bottom with it. We plodded on.

Eventually we started to come to the end of the narrow channel, the depth sounder was showing 0.1 metres at the lowest and we were concerned to be there with a falling tide.

When the depth sounder indicated 0.0 metres I cut the engine altogether, I wasn't going to risk any prop damage; bills for the repair of phosphor bronze propellers usually have far too many noughts on them for my liking.

I took the long pole from the cabin top and started to quant the boat towards deeper water.

I estimated that we had to cover about a hundred yards to go before the bottom started to shelve away again.

Poling a heavy twenty-eight foot boat against the wind is not easy and it was quite some time before we had got clear of the shallowest part of Whiteground Lake.

I got back behind the wheel and knocked the engine into gear. We set off slowly, the gauge showing 0.2 metres then 0.3, 0.4, 0.8 and finally a healthy 2.0.

We chugged around the south side of Brownsea Island along the channel known as Blood Alley, and were soon looking out of the harbour mouth.

Resolving never to take such a risk again we went back to where we were supposed to be and continued the patrol.

Later that day Tom came by.

"How Do!" he called cheerfully. "Did you try the depth sounder?" We replied that we had. We explained that we had used it extensively on our trip around the harbour.

“That’s good, “replied Tom, “did you see that I had calibrated it to add a 1 metre margin of error?”

Chapter 27

Adding a link to the food chain

In which we find out about the torment that is seasickness, wonder at the excesses of the New World and find that justice will prevail.

The Navy, like a lot of other organisations, uses a lot of acronyms in the course of their everyday activities. One such is RAS, for which I have discovered several meanings over the years.

The first is Replenishment At Sea, where a vessel under weigh is re-supplied from another ship running alongside. This involves firing a line across between the ships and using that to haul across a heavy cable, from which are slung the supplies requires. A fuel hose is also passed across. It involves both helmsmen concentrating so that the gap between the ships stays constant. This is particularly important if a senior officer is being transferred by breaches buoy, if the gap is closed the admiral will be dunked unceremoniously in the drink and, if the ships touch, he may even get squashed.

Later in my role as an IT professional I discovered that RAS was an acronym for Remote Access Services, such as are used when we make a connection to the internet.

The one that interests me today is Regurgitation At Sea, *Mal de Mer* or the time honoured practice of staring desperately at the water and becoming reacquainted with your last meal. If you suffer from this malady try to think positively, remember that there are thousands of sea creatures that will make good use of it. It is your contribution to the food chain.

Before I go any further I must say that sea sickness is no laughing matter, it can make you feel extremely ill indeed.

It is said that the sure way of diagnosing the condition is to hand the sufferer a loaded gun. If they take it gratefully and blow their own brains out then it truly is a case confirmed. The only real cure for

seasickness is to sit down under a tree, although I might be hesitant about suggesting this course of action to a sufferer. I have seen and heard of a multitude of cures which range from wristbands and pills to lumps of bacon fat and magnets.

One thing they all have in common is that they only work if you believe that they will. This leads me to believe that a large part of the illness is psychological. This can be proved by observing the speed of recovery once ashore again on terra firma.

The people who suffer worst are those who start to worry about it even before they leave home. They often fail to eat anything which is a bad thing to do. If you feel sick it is always best to have something to bring up. A full stomach will also be less susceptible to the kind of motion that induces sickness.

I will take us back to a trip we enjoyed nearly ten years ago off the east coast of the USA. We had decided to try the whale watching cruise and so far we had failed to see any whales. We were amusing ourselves by observing our fellow passengers, two of whom were California Girl and Mr. Geewhiz!

Mr G, having discovered that we were foreigners, had spent some trying to impress us with his superior knowledge of everything. His questions ranged from the usual banal queries such as “England, is that in Scotland?” to “Did you drive here?”, “Do they have airports in Yerp?” My favourite was “do you have anything like this in Great Britain?” – referring to the seascape unfolding around us.

I assured him dryly that we did, indeed our island was surrounded by the stuff. He looked at me wondering if I was being unfriendly but decided that it would be impossible with a great guy like himself. “Oh you British guys and your famous reserve!” he crowed.

All this time his lady partner was leaning on the rail getting paler and paler.

California Girl had been hanging on his every word but now had a faraway look in her eye. When she boarded the boat she was the image of fresh young American womanhood, I fully expected her to pull out a set of coloured pom-poms and start to wave them around shouting “Go Captain!” before falling to the deck doing the splits.

Instead she gazed out to sea over the rail and became as still as a statue, as silent as the grave. She was the colour of freshly laundered pillow cases.

I noticed that TCMD was directly downwind of her and advised her to move. Anytime now her dunkin' donuts and waffles would come streaming aft to form a pre-digested flag flapping from her mouth.

Everything changed in a second. A shout went up from the starboard rail and everybody rushed to look. A magnificent beast had broken through the waves near us and sounded, less than a quarter of a mile away.

The flukes of its tail were waving in the air and Mr. Gheewhiz was applauding and whoo-hooing as loudly as he could. CG immediately forgot her condition and rushed to the opposite rail to join in with a chorus of "Yeah!" and "Did you see that?" and more clapping and whoo-hooing. All we needed was an electronic score board and a shaky Hammond organ to provide a fanfare and we were back in the land of bubble gum and proms.

The whales were a magnificent sight and the experience would have been wonderful, were it not for Mr. G and his loud and facile running commentary.

I felt sorry for the California Girl.

On the way back the roles were reversed. CG was enthused by her surroundings. Mr. G had seemingly burned himself out and sat quietly, resting his forehead on the rail. We came within sight of land and started to feel the effect of the swell rising to meet the shore. Without warning his dinner erupted from his mouth and ran down the front of his Chicago Bulls jacket, was this social comment or had justice finally prevailed?

Chapter 28

When Sailors get coarse, the coarse get sailing

In which we discover that when you don't have speed or manoeuvrability on your side you may have to resort to underhand tactics to evade an idiot.

Firstly, a geography or navigational lesson; if you were to enter Poole harbour from the sea you would no doubt consult the appropriate Admiralty chart to be sure of the navigational marks to look out for. You would see an anomaly on the chart, a feature that looks like a sandbank but which revels in the title "Stone Island".

Of all the so called islands in Poole Harbour, Stone Island is possibly the most enigmatic; at high water you would scour the surface of the water for this feature to no avail. At low water you would see a line of small boulders approximately 75 yards long, forming a small escarpment in an otherwise featureless sea of mud.

This, I suspect, is not a natural feature but something that was placed there by or on behalf of the local repairer and purveyor of propellers, as its main function seems to be to lurk under a few inches of water to catch out the unwary and damage their propellers. I sometimes wonder if there shouldn't be a small post there, bearing the name of the company and a phone number through which their emergency towing and repair service could be contacted.

Stone Island can be useful to the sailor, though. Provided that you know it is there and provided the tide is right it can be a great boon to evading pursuit if you inadvertently offend somebody in a motor boat.

One day I was pottering around in my dinghy to the south of Brownsea Island, in the area of the harbour reserved for quiet boating. It doesn't get much quieter than my sailing, which consists of

finding a nice spot, demonstrating one's skill at tying a bowline to attach an anchor and settling down for a spot of lunch and forty winks.

On this particular day my siesta was disturbed by the roar of a mercury outboard and the scattering of spray over my poor sleeping head. Some Kevins had found their way into the quiet area and had decided that rules such as the 6 knots speed limit apply to everyone but themselves. I dried myself off and raised my sail, thinking to head for the shallow water where they could not go. I sailed east towards the harbour mouth, mainly because that was where the wind took me when I saw them coming my way again. Again they passed at high speed and again they soaked me.

I roared something abusive at them, something rhyming with "Anchor". I followed this up with a wonderful play on words including rhymes for "Back to front", "out-lasting" and "Greatest Hits"

They turned and approached more slowly, demanding to know what I had just said.

I replied that, had they been driving a little more sensibly they might have heard, actually I asked if they were deaf as well as stupid, where upon they turned to come alongside to remonstrate.

I could see the surveillance camera on South Haven point turn to watch us and, as the gap closed, I put up my helm and headed north. As soon as I was under way I eased the centreboard up halfway to clear Stone Island, feeling the bottom of the rudder rub lightly over one of the stones. As soon as I had passed the line of stones that were approximately ten inches below the surface, I dropped the centreboard again and sailed for North Haven.

The Kevins accelerated and for once it all went to plan, there was a loud crunching sound and the rear of their boat bucked up out of the water, the roar of the engine became a scream as the engine, relieved of the load of the propeller and the final drive gears, started to race.

The boat settled down onto the water again and, after a few attempts to move off again, they started to call for help.

It is truly amazing how helpful one's fellow boaters can be in a moment of crisis, even more so when the cause of the distress happens to be a pair of planks in a ski-boat. One kindly fellow offered to take them under tow, then dragged them over the stone bank again, before dropping the tow line by sheer accident, leaving them

aground on some sharpish boulders with the tide ebbing fast.

Later that day Stone Island once more sank into the depths, it would be another twelve hours before it could attempt to claim its next victim.

All in all a very satisfactory day on the water.

The Art of Coarse Swearing

This work contains a few swear words, indeed it's about swearing so if you don't like swearing don't read it. For those who are left, it's all true so I make no apology for the content. This is by way of being an epilogue to the main work presented here.

Some times I wonder at the creative genius of matelots who, although their language and vocabulary are somewhat limited, manage a level of creativity that will leave the most avid writer speechless.

The matelot's vocabulary, which I have alluded to before, can sometimes be quite colourful. Indeed any account of life in a blue suit that does not include a measure of foul language would not, in my opinion, be credible.

My mother was always fairly forthright about such things, she pronounced that anyone who swore a lot was someone who had not had the benefits we had and simply knew no better.

I wonder what she would have made of it when my father and I were trying to remove the clutch from my first car, an Austin 1100, and the clutch-puller was having no effect at all on the removal of the plate from the splines.

Suffice it to say that the air was blue, right up to the point where a smart tap with a ball-pein hammer was applied to the end of the tool, which caused the whole assembly to fly off in a shower of parts, resulting in a 1 inch AF spanner landing on the roof of the building behind, narrowly missing my father's head on its way past.

To this day I believe that the foul language coupled with mindless violence was what finally caused the seized components to part company.

Anyway, back to the matelot.

One of the first people I met in the service was a cheerful Brummy lad who used the F word as a kind of verbal punctuation. He could be passing on a perfectly mundane piece of information and still manage to use the F word or one of it's many, varied and creative variants every third word.

To hear the same word used as noun, verb and adjective in the same sentence is truly awesome and in a moment of frustration I once heard a Killick (leading hand) utter a sentence in which all but two of the words was the F word or one of it's derivatives.

The two words that weren't the F word were "This" and "Me", the most amazing part of the whole sentence was that it made complete sense, was totally unambiguous and conveyed the exact sentiments intended.

He was trying to start the engine on a whaler. He had the engine hatch open and his head was down the hole. Muffled swearing was being used to soften up the starter motor and in deference to the Wren officer who was observing.

As is often the case this was the person who, on observing the presence of a woman would say something crass like

"Mind your language lads, Ladies present!"

I've often noticed that the people who say this are the ones who swear the most when they think that they are in all-male company. They assume that one's gender is an indication of how accepting you will be of foul language. Some men find swearing offensive, just as some women are as foul mouthed as the proverbial docker.

The reluctant boat engine refused to respond to his ministrations, the usual reason for a diesel engine not working is either an air bubble in the fuel line or a flat battery. There was no problem with the battery, he had managed to get a good few shocks off it, he bled the fuel line to remove bubbles so that shouldn't have been an issue either. The fuel had been freshly drawn from the pump on the dock so there should not have been a problem with contamination.

As is often the case there was nothing apparently wrong with the engine, it simply wouldn't start.

After some sickening thuds, bangs and knuckle grazing our hero decided that he had lost enough skin and blood. He extracted himself from the engine housing, straightened himself up and delivered the sentence that I will never forget:

"Fuck me, this fucking fucker's fucking fucked!"