

Webfeet to Cherbourg

MARCON TROPHY WINNER 1978

John Freeborn and *Webfoot* No. 216



“Anything to declare?”

“Only a watering can.”

Those were the words that brought to an end our first trip across the channel to Cherbourg. After three years sailing and getting know our Trident *Webfoot*, three years reading other peoples logs of channel trips and cruises - logs that made it all sound so simple: “Sailed off our mooring, being bound for Guernsey - 0730 cleared entrance1330...33 miles out, it was a very swift sail for 50 miles1820 picked up land, where we wanted it with lighthouse nicely fine off our port bow.” Logs that made no mention of the preparations before the trip, no mention if what to expect on the crossing.

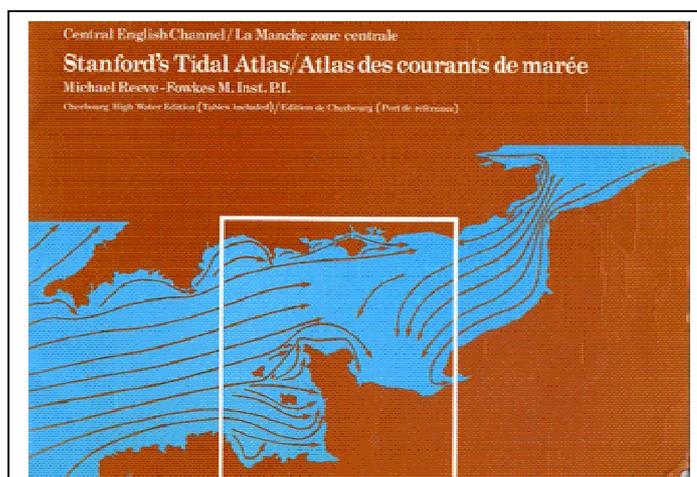


They seem to say, we had to find out the hard way, so must you. That's what we decided to do, find out for ourselves. Our preparations began at the Boat Show - where we gazed with envy at the new digital direction finders that had just arrived on the market. We have a Seafix, which was not too successful in our hands. We experienced difficulty in hearing the signal clear enough to identify the station, before it moved on to the next. We had even tried fitting to it a small amplifier made from a small transistor radio, but with little if any improvement.

We had written to *Practical Boat Owner*, who had suggested that we purchased one of the small quartz regulated alarm clocks now on the market, which would enable the

station to be accurately identified by its time sequence. We were looking to this being the answer as our pocket would not stretch to the new model.

Although the direction finder was beyond our pocket we were able to afford Stanford's Tidal Atlas. This proved to be a most helpful aid - for although I consider myself competent at sailing and seamanship, having sailed dinghies and small cruisers for many years, and have a sound understanding of coastal navigation, it has always been the calculations that pose a problem to me - especially the ones that other people so effortlessly perform in their heads. I guess that being an artist I always recall the wrong type of figures. It was quite easy to work out in advance several different courses depending on the speed we were able to sail, by taking Xerox copies of the Atlas and so avoid trying to do unaccustomed chart work while tired and with possibly difficult conditions.



At the risk of being considered completely brainless, I will give you we more quote, this time from a magazine article: "If you keep your boat anywhere on the South Coast between Dover and Lymington, - and if it is high water when you arrive at the mooring at midday for a weekend of sailing, then you will know without looking at the tide tables that you have to cope with a weekend of fast-running spring tides".

Well, here's one yachtsman who doesn't know this. Oh yes, we have a local tide table, but it's getting the man in the moon to read it, that is the problem. The tidetable says Spring tides, and at low water, to our surprise we have plenty of water to row our to our mooring - the tide table says Springs are over and Neaps starting, Hey Presto we are met with yards of mud stretching right out to our mooring with *Webfoot* sitting in the little hole she has dug for herself.

That's what happened to us the night we arrived at Poole after a sunny day at home in Gloucestershire. Standing at the end of the jetty in the rain looking at the sea of mud seemed like a typical yachtsman's dream. We had no option but to drive round to Poole town for something warm to eat while we waited.

Eventually we got everything aboard. After a comfortable night spent on our mooring we woke to find a normal dismal wet July day. We motored round to Poole Quay, for even after all the planning we still had items we needed, items not easily found in our home town. We have two safety harnesses on *Webfoot* and I decided that we ought to have one each, to enable us all to adjust them comfortably and to wear them ready for use. I should say here that my son Peter aged 25 and my daughter Pamela aged 26 were crewing with me, my wife deciding she would prefer not to be with us while we tried putting into practice what we had only read. Needing one more safety harness, we, of course, found none in the chandlery. So I purchased some dinghy tostrap webbing, D rings and two clips to make one up. It was quite easy if you can handle a palm and needle, and proved very successful and worked out considerably cheaper than a branded one.

Now we come to one more item in the preparation that always sounds so easy when you see it in print. The books say before you go to sea make sure your compass is accurate. So we set out in the rain to swing the compass Oh how easy they make it sound; going by the text books, Poole should be ideal with plenty of nice clear landmarks in every direction, plenty of water to swing in, smooth water that should make it easy to align up. We tried first adjusting the screws on the compass base but could not make any apparent correction so we put them back to neutral and tried drawing up a deviation curve curve. Ours looked more like a sketch of the Himalayas.

I still wonder, after spending an afternoon motoring up and down the harbour, and then trying to swing round one of Poole's many stakes, why we never see anybody else doing it? Has every body else. got an easy answer that the text books leave out?

Well, we had a deviation curve of sorts, we were nearly ready - just a visit to the fuel barge to top up with diesel fuel for our iron topsail - in our case a Yanmar 8. We had decided to do the trip textbook style, sailing during the night so as to arrive at the French coast at dawn while as they say you can still see the lighthouse lights and identify your landfall.

So off we went - well not quite - our log paddle wheel decided to go on strike. So we ran into Shell Bay at the entrance of Poole Harbour and tried swimming under the boat to clear it but luck was not on our side, so I had to take the unit out from inside the boat. It's the first time I've tried to do that while the boat was afloat -it's amazing how much water can come in while you pull out the unit and replace it with an old unit to act as a plug.

With the unit back in place and the water bailed out we were off with the now functioning log reading 0956. As we left Poole Bar Buoy it was 1830. We could not set our worked out course of 180 degrees as it would have taken us right smack into Old Harry. We tacked across Bournemouth Bay on a course of 060 until we could clear Old Harry. I



Old Harry Rocks, Studland Bay

then went below for a nap leaving Pamela and Peter in charge. At 2130 I awoke as Peter had just taken a bearing of the lighthouse on Dalston Head which gave us a second good fix, the first being Old Harry and Christchurch Abbey.

Webfoot was sailing at about 4 knots, sea not too rough, but tossing the boat about a lot. Quite unusual for me I felt really queasy plotting those bearings on to the chart, and came on deck to be sick - not a lot but enough to leave a nasty taste in my mouth. I think it was more likely the stress as I am not usually sick.

Peter went below to take my place. We had not organised any direct watch system as we did not know what to expect or how we would feel. Up in the cockpit I felt much better. We had made up the two main bunks with old sleeping bags and lee cloths so that we could .flop down in traditional style in our wet weather gear and not get told

off next time my wife came down about spoiling the bunk cushions. Peter, who never has been good at sea and hadn't felt too good as he went below, was soon asleep and that was the last Pamela and I saw of him. With the boat sailing well and steady we thought best to leave him asleep and only to call him if we had a problem. We had the Iron Topsail ticking over, so we could maintain a steady speed and be sure of our position on our worked out courses from the Stanford's Tidal Atlas. We, or should I say I, was concerned that we should arrive as near slack water as possible, to enable any corrections as we neared the French coast to be easily made. Having read horrific stories of the tides I did not wish to contend with these until I had at least seen what the coast of France was like.

With the log reading 30 miles, Pamela went below for a sleep. At that point Peter came up and immediately went to sleep again, laying along the lee cockpit seat. I had to change course as the wind had gone due South so sailed for two miles on 210 degrees, then two miles 130. By then the wind had moved round to SW and I was able to resume 180. During this period the wind had risen, so I reefed the working jib to storm sail size. We have a set of reef points along the sail to do this – it makes it easier and quicker when one is alone. Peter was still asleep.

Webfoot was now much easier to steer. We were now passing through the shipping lanes as we saw several large vessels, but they were only in the distance. It was a dry night but much colder than I expected, as I settled down for a long slog in the dark. All I have read is true - the phosphorescence is beautiful and the occasional splash of spray through the navigation lights all red and green is very pretty. There is a tremendous feeling of power as the boat surges along in the dark, water swishing by unseen. But how awful it is watching the compass all the time. You can't leave it for a moment without the boat swinging away. It makes ones eyes so tired and tends to make one feel sick, the way the card never stays still.

Pamela was back with me now in the cockpit. She hasn't felt sick at all, except for stomach wind. I was OK now. We took it turn and turn about each dozing in the



Cherbourg western entrance

cockpit for the rest of the night. I couldn't have done the trip without her, she steers much better than I do, much less swinging about. She's a natural. While Pamela was dozing we had a thick patch of fog and the wind dropped, so to keep up our speed I revved up the Iron Topsail.

It was quite frightening if you let your mind think of all those large ships you had just passed, for you couldn't see beyond the small circle round the boat. Luckily it did not last long. Dawn came up as the mists cleared, very grey and even colder: I got another

coat for Pamela to put on. They are certainly right when they say that the hour around dawn is the worst.

Well, so much for the books. Here it was 4 am, not a lighthouse in sight to check our position, just grey sea. Eventually we sighted land with 60 miles on log, we both wondered how near we were to the point we had planned? It turned out that we were perfect, dead in line with the west entrance of Cherbourg. We passed through the entrance at 1000 with the log reading 67.5 miles after 15.5 hours. We certainly couldn't claim a record crossing but we had made it safely. The sun came out to greet us and I must say we all felt very pleased with ourselves.

One comment I should like to make - I now know why so many people work without safety harness. My, how they get tangled up as you move around the cockpit if you sit with them clipped on. Having purchased our French watering can to prove we had got there, enjoyed the town and a day on the beach, albeit a rather foggy one, we set about the return trip like seasoned yachtsmen. We started with a dead calm: hot sun and no wind. It was pleasant motoring along in the sun and it gave us opportunities to try out the Seafix technique. Peter, feeling much better having tried out a new pill, was getting some very good crosses which we marked carefully on the chart.

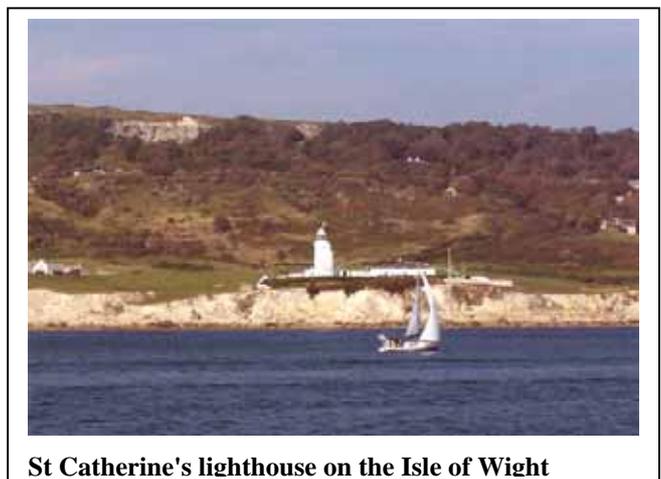
Now we began to get a problem, for the course we were following drawn from Stanford's Tidal Atlas and the position dots from the Seafix began to diverge. We decided that as we had been so correct on the trip over following Stanford's we put the divergence down to our poor use of the Seafix. Apart from this the trip back followed the same pattern as before. Now this time we were able to spot our position by the lighthouse lights, but something was wrong, it was St. Catherine's we were heading for on the southern tip of the Isle of Wight, and just to prove it we ran into St. Catherine's race which tossed us around something cruel. Well, at least we knew where we were.

It turned out that when we worked back over the course the Seafix had been right and shows that the clock technique worked well. It was our Himalaya like deviation card that was the trouble. Turning left at St. Catherine's for Poole meant we were punching a foul tide. After two hours hard sailing we still hadn't reached the Needles. What a drag after a long trip.

When we eventually made Poole entrance we had clocked up 87 miles, 20 miles out of our way. At least it showed the importance of having the compass correct. What problems we might have had if our compass had been out in the other direction. I now really believe that St. Christopher was a sailor.

Our first check through customs surprised us too. They just couldn't believe we had gone all the way to France just for a watering can, they pulled the boat to bits nearly.

Having got that out of our systems we can join the ranks of "We've done it". It was worrying but the feeling is great. See you over there next year !



St Catherine's lighthouse on the Isle of Wight

John Freeborn