

'A BIT LUMPY'

Robert Carter's Marcon Trophy winning log of a cruise in the Trident *Trifler* (No 30)

Most of the logs which I've read, following the adventure recounted here, are masterpieces of understatement, sticking so closely to the factual that one has to read between the lines to imagine the sometimes grim reality of the events described, the mariner preferring to hold any mistakes close to his chest and out of view under his streaming wet sou'wester. So I hope the reader will forgive a novice if some little emotion seeps into the pages of this account of mistakes made and lessons learned.

I had bought *Trifler* for a song and knew she was a real bargain. Built in 1966, she had lain at Shalfleet Quay for 50 years and, like a beauty who retains her exquisite bone structure despite the passing years, all that was needed to bring

back her former glory were a few licks of paint and varnish. She had elegance, the shape and lines of a real boat. As she came to life, I felt a warm glow of pride and confidence. She had the original mainsail which had been repaired and a spare.

My inaugural trip out was a short hop across the Solent to Beaulieu. The tide was just at the end of the flood, there was a warm breeze from the South-West, the Solent was full of white sails in the warm sun and the light glittered on the calm sea.

Trifler managed, with only a little help from me, to judge a slight wind and gentle currents without trouble as we sailed up the tree-lined river to arrive at the marina at Buckler's Hard and moor on a pontoon, to be welcomed by efficient and polite staff before lunching with my father and sister at The Master Builder.

As we downed pints of delicious nutty brown ale, I found my confidence grow exponentially

with each question from my relatives about my new boat until (my mind filled with pictures of friendly sunlit waves and warm fair breezes) I risked boring them with my plans to cross the Channel. Anyway, safe to say that the intake of ale made it easy to accept my sister's kind invitation to stay with her overnight in Lymington rather than attempt to hurry back to catch the ebb-tide.

The next morning over breakfast, things seemed to have changed a little bit. Even well inland, the trees and bushes in my sister's garden displayed an unusually energetic activity and, remembering what real sailors do, I asked my sister to check the weather forecast. She muttered,





Beaulieu River with Buckler's Hard (right) and the Solent and Gurnard Pt on the Isle of Wight beyond

looking at her smart-phone, “Forty four, but the BBC says it'll all be clear by 1100.”

She looked up at me over her boiled egg, “What's 44?”

I shrugged, my visions of friendly sunlit waves and warm fair breezes still in my mind together with a slight hangover from the previous day. “Well, whatever it means, it'll be over by 11 and we'll get back to Beaulieu by then.” I poured myself another coffee, “Anyway, the wind and the tide will be in my favour...”

I thought I sounded pretty much like a real sailor.

Back at Buckler's Hard, I did notice that the relentlessly courteous morning staff did look at me a trifle strangely as I paid my overnight dues and declared that I would be leaving that morning. I caught the muttered words, “A bit lumpy” as I left and bounded down the long pontoon to greet my pride and joy. Single-handed, I raised the mainsail, started the engine and cast off, relaxed and full of confidence.

I switched off the engine as the wind was easily strong enough to give me way under sail alone. But half-way down the Beaulieu river the thick wall of trees on the shore gave way to open flat marsh and the full force of the South-Westerly gale hit us as *Trifler* heeled right over and shot forward with the ebb-tide between the lines of

moored boats which suddenly seemed horribly and dangerously close together.

I knew I needed to reef but we were going very fast so I took a practical (but probably most unseamanlike) decision to bring her up into the wind and ram her softly into the mud so I could at least gain a respite and the stability to leave the tiller and go on deck to roll down the mainsail by about 2 feet. I then wrenched the tiller over and backed the genoa so she turned in the mud and yawed off sideways. I was grateful that nobody was about on the large, elegant yachts in the river to witness my embarrassing behaviour as they sipped their gins and tonic and dusted off their white flannels.

Despite the new reef, we shot between the remaining yachts out into the Solent, me struggling with the surprising new weight and obstinacy of the tiller. The sky was dark and I began to feel a tiny bit uneasy as I fought to keep her from heeling too much and too suddenly, noticing that the Solent (unlike the day before) was empty of sails and empty of any life except for a dark-grey naval destroyer which had anchored over to the east by Gurnard.

To the West, a long black cloud spread its dark fingers towards me over Hurst Castle, the wind blowing sheets of rain hard against the sails and the sea breaking into high waves and deep troughs. For the first time in my short career as a

sailor, my confidence was punctured and doubt crept in. I tried to point her up into the wind to go about, but no use. The gale (even I had no choice but to recognise the screaming wind as a gale) was too strong. I managed in the split-second we fell into a trough of a wave to reach into the cabin to re-start the engine. As I did so, I realised that I had forgotten to switch on the instruments switch which fed the VHF radio.

Two hundred yards out into the Solent, the black fingers in the sky above Hurst Castle twisted and clenched into a dense fist. This black fist hardened and then hit us with malice - a vindictive direct blow which howled across 10 miles of water and had *Trifler's* gunwhale under water. A black finger shot out at us in the sky and under its cruel direction the water reared into an army of short deep trenches across our bow, each trench about 15 feet high and each trough as deep as I clung to the tiller and the poor boat pirhouetted over the top of each crest, effective as a lame ballerina before crashing down into the next trough. But this is, I realize, not suitable language for a nautical log, so I'll try to stick to the facts. They are:-

1. The mainsail tore itself in half down to the reefing points;
2. Then the Genoa sheets tore off the Genoa;
3. Then the Genoa sheets split from each other;
4. Then one of the Genoa sheets went over the side;
5. ...and wrapped itself round the propeller shaft...
6.so the engine stopped.

If I may be forgiven for a non-nautical aside, I



Trifler at Shalfleet in the Newtown River, Isle of Wight

would remark in hindsight that the usual words (panic, terror, blue funk, etc) do not do justice at all to that unfamiliar feeling of complete helplessness in the face of the evil which was contained alive in the wind and sea at that moment and for the ensuing hour and a half.

No engine, no sail, no radio. Only me and the boat. Blinded by spray, I stared out over the sizzling white tops of the green moving water mountains and peered at the grey shores on either side. Drawing comfort from using every foul swear word in the language, I wondered aloud how nobody could have noticed me?

Where were the coastguards? Where were the lookouts on the destroyer? Where was everyone? Why did the superstructure of the destroyer suddenly remind me of green mildewed coffins stacked up on a sloping sacrificial altar?

I and my beauty eventually limped into the narrow entrance of the Newtown river, helped by what was left of the sail, the fair tide and more than I deserved of good luck. We reached our mooring in Shalfleet and the sun came out and the wind died down. In the new calm I lowered the mainsail and contemplated the 3-foot gash. I saw that the genoa sheet couplings had also torn away and I did my best to tidy up, trying to remain calm and composed as I considered the cost of a new mainsail, of the genoa repairs and of the task of lifting her out to repair the prop-shaft. As I hauled the dinghy tender out of the water onto firm gravel the Boatyard owner was just back from lunch. He looked at *Trifler* reflectively as he finished off his sandwich and spoke.

“Bit lumpy?”

Understatement or truth then? I looked over the water at my pride and joy, an uncomfortable swelling of tear-ducts behind my eyes as I realised how foolish I had been and how close we had come to disaster.

The Boatyard owner finished his mouthful. “She look after you?”

“Yes, she did.” My voice came out as a croak. But then I rallied and I opted for the traditional response, doing my best to introduce a light note. “Yes.” I agreed. “It was a bit lumpy.”

Robert Carter