



Prawle Point

No: 52

'eyes along the coast'

Autumn 2015

FASTNET RACE 2015

On Sunday August 16th at 1300 hours, *Volunteer*, a First 40.7 Bermudian sloop, crossed the 1¼ mile long start line off the Royal Yacht Squadron headquarters at Cowes for the 2015 Rolex Fastnet Race.

Known as the world's largest, most diverse offshore race, 375 yachts set off that day in 7 different classes, multihulls being the first to start at noon with the intention of staying ahead, well clear of all smaller craft.

With a west wind rather less than force 2, *Volunteer* drifted across the start line in second place among her class of 70 boats, well positioned at the southern end with her crew lying down on the leeward rail helping the sails to fill. On approaching the Needles, a strengthening SW wind building to force 5 and a fair tide of 4/5 knots soon caused a convergence of all classes off Hurst Point, in the narrowest part of the channel where skills of seamanship were tested to the limited; among such professionals, problems were avoided but the experience must have been heart-stopping. Any advantage of a staggered start was now all but lost.

By evening and nearing St. Albans Head, the first tactical decision now must be made on how to cross Start Bay, whether to stay north in stronger tides or head south for more favourable winds and tack along the top of the Casquets traffic separation system, then head towards Start Point. *Volunteer*, along with half the fleet, chose the southern option arriving off the Casquets by midnight in light airs. All yachts in the race must stay clear of zones or incur a 20% penalty. Some were inadvertently swept into the area, *Volunteer* managed to stay clear. However any elation soon drifted away with the knowledge that yachts staying north, although needing to kedge off Portland Bill, were rewarded with 2.5 knots of tide and a useful wind in the early hours of Monday, enabling a fair passage to Start Point in positions ahead of rivals from the south. Although, by now, *Volunteer* benefitted from increased wind and favourable tide towards Start, wind died in the afternoon leaving her to wallow in a millpond.

A second tactical decision to head offshore, this time, paid off. With the wind veering north and filling, they headed south from Bolt Head on starboard tack gaining position over 60 boats during the passage south of Eddystone Rock towards the Lizard. By Tuesday morning, when reaching 4nm off the Lizard, they sighted many fellow competitors stalling in dying winds ahead. *Volunteer* was fortunately blessed with crew member, Richard Hamilton, an expert in light airs, who, by encouraging colleagues through the techniques of ghosting, (no unnecessary movements, sail trimming and helm correction by minimal tweaks only) maintained a course through the fleet to pass below the separation zone between Land's End and the Isles of Scilly

thence east of the archipelago on a fine port reach in winds of F3-4, into the Irish Sea, carefully passing and keeping west of the penalty zone before clearing the islands to head northwest for the Fastnet Rock.

Reefing was necessary as south-westerly force 6 winds picked up overnight with gusts of 25 knots enabling a close reach. Another zone, south of the rock, needed avoiding by rounding its eastern end then tacking off the Irish coast, aiming for the iconic lighthouse and turning triumphantly homewards below it at 1317 on Wednesday, accompanied by winds of force 3/4. On this leg, courses were laid to avoid two more Isles of Scilly separation zones - those to the west and south of the islands. *Volunteer* stayed outside the former and inside the latter and, aided

by force 5 winds, completed her journey to Plymouth, averaging 10.5 knots from the Lizard onwards sporting her asymmetrical spinnaker. Navigator, Peter Costalas took the race and boat speed record at 14.5 knots during this leg and *Volunteer* finished just before 2300 on Thursday, 60th out of 70 in her class and 190th out of 375 starters. Time for beer and a party.

The boat is owned by Volunteer Yachting Ltd. under the auspices of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Yacht Club and skippered by Joseph Macdonald with a

crew of ten, (five on watch, five off) of which half must have already sailed at least 300 miles with the same skipper and yacht in RORC approved races. *Volunteer* was the official entry of the Royal Naval Reserve. Preparation for the race is meticulous and expensive. Cruising layout is retained below but, on deck, all cruising gear is replaced with racing essentials such as offshore racing sails comprising main and storm trisail, four headsails, a storm jib and three spinnakers - 2 symmetrical and one asymmetrical. Weight is kept to a minimum, optimum velocity demands constant attention to sails, wind, speed instruments and innate feeling for the boat's responses particularly at change of watch when movement about decks can cause the boat to be momentarily unsettled in light airs; maintaining way is crucial. Each boat was fitted with a race tracker and had AIS receiving and transmitting capability. Cooking duties were rotated and meals kept simple with instant dishes, boil-in-the-bag fare and plenty of chocolate bars and pork pies. The use of bottled water for drinking, sea water for cooking and washing up and baby wipes for personal cleansing meant water tanks could be empty, not adding to weight and possible imbalance.

Successful offshore racing requires everyone on board to be aware of the importance of looking after each other, the boat and its gear.

Grateful thanks to Peter Costalas who kindly supplied information needed to write this article.



BY “WHERRY” DOWN THE THAMES

On June 10th this year, four women and a furry toy dog set out on a journey to row 120 miles down the navigable part of our longest English river.

The journey started at Lechlade in Gloucestershire where the river becomes more easily navigable. Lechlade owes its location and prosperity to having long been the highest point on the Thames that laden barges could reach. The riverside is still busy but where once Cotswold stone and Gloucestershire cheeses were loaded up for London, it is now the gleaming white pleasure cruisers that congregate at the head of navigation.

Tom, our skiff-hire man had towed the “Wherry” by road from its base in Walton-on-Thames and our departure point was to be just below St. John’s Lock at the back of the old Trout Inn. Tom had helped to build “Wherry” twenty-five years ago. She is an exact copy of a 150-year-old Thames Waterman’s ferry, the original of which is on display in the London Maritime Museum. She is 26 feet long, made from oak and sweet chestnut, has swivel-rowlocked double sculls and is pointed at both ends so the ferrymen did not need to turn the boat but merely swivelled the rowlocks. These “wherries” are now obsolete as ferries so many have been transformed into camping skiffs, as per “Three Men in a Boat”, with four iron arcs fitted across the beam, over which a tarpaulin is hauled and secured at the bow and stern to provide a cosy tent.

Tom briefed us on the do’s and don’ts of the operation of the skiff, river etiquette, mainly drive on the right, steer clear of the weirs and give way to bigger boats in the locks, and more importantly, the operation of the very long oars which overlapped at the handle ends by about six inches. We had to learn pretty quickly how to preserve our fingers and thumbs once we started “sculling”.

Having packed the skiff and waved goodbye to family and friends, we manoeuvred agonisingly slowly out of the backwater into the main river but once we got into a rhythm, things became a lot easier. With two of us manning the oars, one steering and one reading from the Thames Path book, we made our way into a pretty brisk easterly wind which worked against us for much of our journey. This was relieved by the many twists and turns in the river which made steering a full time task, and the river was low for the time of year so not much help from the current. We soon learned that a momentary lapse of concentration when steering with the rudder (ruddy) ropes, could quickly land you amongst the willows on the riverbank, and that getting out of them is much more difficult than getting in.

These upper reaches are extremely tranquil and we were soon aware that apart from the very occasional boat, our main companions came in the form of the multitude of water fowl - swans, geese & ducks of all varieties and because of the time of year, they were all showing off their new families and were an enchanting sight the whole way down the river. On one occasion a disorientated duckling started paddling furiously after us, mistaking our stern view and wobbly rudder for mother duck. We had to stop while it found its proper Mum. An angry swan also clambered off her nest of eggs and, wings arched, escorted us quite a way to the next river bend before she was satisfied we were no threat.

Apparently, during World War II, the natural defence line of the river was “Stopline Red”, a last desperate bid to keep invaders from the Midlands. WW2 concrete pillboxes are dotted menacingly at intervals along the northerly banks of the river between Lechlade and Buscot.

Before we knew it, we had covered 10 miles. We had negotiated three locks and passed under Radcot Bridge, the oldest on the river, and Tadpole Bridge, but then realised that we had overshot our campsite by 2 miles and the site at the Trout Inn was not open. We had no choice but to start looking for a suitable place to moor up and camp for the night. This we did, two of us sleeping on the boat and the other two in a tent straddling the Thames Path. We were in the middle of nowhere and saw only two other human beings during our stay.

Setting off early the following morning, our journey began in earnest.

We had to row an average of 17 miles per day, our longest day being 21 miles. This took us through 40 of the 45 locks which control the 361ft drop of the river during its slow meander from source to London. We camped and self-catered along the way on Lock Islands and campsites, many of which offered “Gents urinals only”! (Not much use to four gals but thankfully we were always alone and there was plenty of vegetation). We took the huge loop northwards to the water meadows of Oxford, across which the dreaming spires could be seen on the skyline. Travelling south now leaving Oxford, on through Abingdon, Dorchester on Thames and Wallingford to Goring, where we had a lunch stop in a borrowed boat house in the Goring Gap. Here the Ice Age Thames cut a new course through the chalk hills between the Chilterns and the Berkshire Downs. An early start after an overnight stay in Pangbourne Meadows took us on through Purley, Reading, Wargrave and Henley to our next stop at Hurley Lock. We gatecrashed a rowing Regatta at Reading when we were told that our technique could be improved! However, in Henley which was extremely busy with Sunday boaters and serious rowing teams practicing for the forthcoming Henley Regatta, we rowed our fastest and keenest down the famous Henley Reach and were encouraged by the coaches on the towpath. They also pointed out that our stuffed dog was hanging over the bow and being towed underwater by his lead. If we had lost him, I don’t think I would have been allowed home!

As we progressed down the river, we were very aware of the increasing density of population and noise pollution. Overhead, the ever present red kites gave way to international flights to and from Heathrow and Gatwick and there was the constant roar from busy roads and motorways. Gliding under bridges carrying the M4, M3 and M25, the noise was almost unbearable. We were open-mouthed at some of the many luxurious and flamboyant residences on the riverside and fantasised about which ones we would choose to live in and gave the thumbs down to the inferior properties. Sadly, George Clooney wasn’t at home in his new property at Sonning as we had hoped he might invite us in for lunch. Approaching Windsor, there were glimpses of the Castle through the trees and after brunch by Windsor Bridge we headed off towards Runnymede and Magna Carta Island, one day after the Queen had joined in the celebrations there. Once again, we were disappointed that the Queen was not at Windsor to welcome us but she had had a busy week.



Photo by Janet Kenny

After our final night at Laleham, we had just a five mile leisurely row to Walton-on-Thames where Tom was waiting anxiously for his precious skiff. We congratulated ourselves on having no blisters, thanks to gloves and plenty of seat padding, only having one partial immersion (she shall be nameless) and suffering only two days of wet weather. Grandchildren, family and friends greeted us with medals and champagne. We helped Tom load Wherry on to her trailer and wished her a fond farewell before being whisked off to catch the train back to Totnes.

Apart from the pure enjoyment of this challenge, for many personal reasons we were also raising money for Cancer Research UK. On behalf of Jackie, Jules, Sue and myself, we thank everyone who contributed to the £4,717 that was raised. With the skiff adorned with CRUK bunting and balloons, we

collected about £500 on our way down the river; from the clients of the pubs and restaurants, the delightful little family in the uncontrollable hire-boat at Henley, to the huge Gin Palaces which manouevred alongside and gave us handfuls of notes, and all the unfortunate fellow boaters who got trapped in the locks with us.

PS .If we had continued down the river into the tidal reaches, we could have been logged by the only NCI Station on the Thames, at Hole Haven. The station overlooks the Sea Reach to the Mid-Blyth sector of the Thames and is flanked by oil terminals. They monitor all manner of commercial vessels, a small fishing industry, leisure craft and those moored in "the Trot" of Holehaven.

Jo Laphorn

NCI PRAWLE POINT: INCIDENTS TO DATE



25.07.15 Fishing vessel *Noah Gil* contacted Falmouth Coastguard reporting engine failure. We had the vessel visual and reported that there were two other vessels in the vicinity. Fishing vessel *Hustler* went to help and towed the vessel into Salcombe.

26.07.15 Yacht *Saltire* reports to Falmouth Coastguard that she has a rope round her propellor and requires assistance. We had the vessel visual and informed Falmouth that fishing vessel *Emma Jane* was close. *Emma Jane* began motoring towards the yacht. However, the yacht decided to sail for Dartmouth.

30.07.15 Lone kayaker spotted struggling against tide and wind. We asked Salcombe RNLI for advice and as the Inshore boat was already launched to an earlier incident they went to help. Assistance was refused and kayaker continued on their way.

30.07.15 Yacht *Starspray* reports to Falmouth Coastguard that she has lost her rudder. We inform CG that we have the yacht visual and offer assistance as the Salcombe Lifeboat has no AIS. Salcombe Lifeboat is tasked to tow her into Salcombe.

08.08.15 Two canoeists in difficulties off Start Point. Salcombe AWLB launched to their assistance. The Lifeboat stopped off Peartree Point and could not see the canoeists. We suggested they search west of Start Point and they then found the casualties. The AWLB shadowed them to Hallsands.

18.08.15 Rib *Heatwave* radioed Falmouth Coastguard with engine failure. Yacht *Crazy Bear* was in vicinity and offered to help. We gave the rib's position to the Coastguard and in the meantime the Salcombe AWLB was tasked and arrived at approximately the same time. The AWLB towed the rib into Salcombe.

26.08.15 4 people observed on rocks off Peartree Point. They were jumping across the gully. We were concerned for their safety and contacted Falmouth Coastguard. They asked us to keep watch as they were busy. Salcombe ILB and AWLB were tasked to the position, but found nothing.

12.09.15 Coaster in excess of 2000 tons sighted travelling east with no AIS. Reported to Coastguard who requested more details from us and were furthering investigations.

19.09.15 Dinghy spotted floating with nobody on board, although fishing rods were sighted. Alerted Coastguard and both Salcombe Lifeboats were tasked to the position. Casualty found floating in the water. Casualty was airlifted by helicopter to hospital.

Dolphins were sighted on July 12 and August 7.

On September 20 a large chunk of submerged timber was reported to Falmouth Coastguard who then issued a securite to all shipping in the area.

SALTY SUPERSTITIONS

Fiddler's Green: Sailors believed the spirits of those who die at sea can enjoy an afterlife in the celestial tavern of Fiddler's Green but only, some believed, after 50 years of service at sea - an unlikely attainment.

Davy Jones' Locker: Those not qualifying for the above, i.e. most sailors, would accumulate barnacles in the seabed 'locker' of the fiend who presides over evil spirits of the deep.

St. Elmo's Fire: This atmospheric phenomenon appears as a blue or purple glow flickering and buzzing around the masthead as an electrical charge associated with thunderstorms. Named after St. Erasmus, the patron saint of sailors, it was, by some, believed to protect the vessel and signify the end of bad weather, others thought if it illuminated a man's face he would shortly die.

NCI WORM'S HEAD

Named after the Viking 'wurm' meaning dragon or giant sea serpent, the mile long promontory of Worm's Head can be reached on foot for just 2 ½ hours either side of low water via an exceedingly rocky causeway.

A disused coastguard station which, at 50 metres above sea level, overlooks the causeway, was offered for lease in 2005 by National Trust owners who agreed with NCI that surveillance of the area was high priority due to huge numbers of visitors, a very dangerous coastline and the second highest tidal range in the world. Thanks to one thousand working hours from volunteers, the newly refurbished lookout was accordingly opened in 2007 and currently functions with 44 watchkeepers.

Perhaps uniquely among NCI stations, focus at Worm's Head centres on people rather than shipping. Visitors average more than one thousand per day, attracted by the sandy miles of Rhossili Bay and the lure of a remote headland with its tidal challenge, blow hole, natural arch and Devil's Bridge. On reaching the lookout, a mile from Rhossili village, walkers pass an information board giving times each day for safe access and return across the causeway, then descend a stepped path to begin the laborious clamber out to the 'Worm'. One of the first watchkeeping duties of the day is inserting access times on the board and keeping a loud hailer handy, yet advice may be ignored and strandings frequently occur. If, at the projected close of watch, the Causeway has not yet flooded and there are members of the public still out on Worm's Head, the watch is kept open until everyone is safely back on the mainland.

Views from the lookout extend west to St. Govans Head in Pembrokeshire and across the Bristol Channel to Ilfracombe, Morte Point, Bull Point, Lundy and, in good visibility, Hartland. Daily vessel logging may include a few motor cruisers, a couple of yachts, the local dredger, a few commercial ships, small fishing vessels and RIB trips in the locally owned *Sea Serpent*. Watchkeepers use a telescope, binoculars, a centrally mounted pelorus, weather station and AIS fulfils identification requirements on computer, as radar has been judged unnecessary. DSC watch is maintained and radios are tuned to channels 16, 0 and 65. A pair of binoculars is placed outside the lookout for visitors to watch the many seals on Worm's Head. A cliff patrol during every watch extends one quarter mile in both directions. Electrical energy is supplied by wind generator and solar panels and a wood pellet stove provides winter warmth, water is brought to the station by Land Rover. A small parking area for watchkeepers enables driving to within easy walking distance from the lookout. Station Manager, Andy Bowen with Deputy George Mobbs, who is also the Training Officer, are aided by 5 trainers who include specialists in first aid and radio procedure; an average of three or four trainees join annually. Committee meetings are held

monthly and a general meeting for all watchkeepers occurs at two monthly intervals. A roster manager issues a rotating roster in which he attempts to ensure that all watchkeepers fulfil duties with different colleagues over a period of time. It is posted one week ahead to allow for watchkeepers, with essential other commitments, to organise necessary changes. NCI Chairman of Trustees, Alan Richards is a watchkeeper here.

Incident records indicate a sorry lack of consideration, on the part of some members of the public for their own safety and that of others and a disregard for those who care about their survival. A list of strandings, viewable on the website, makes repetitive reading. A typical incident (of which there are on

average three per week) involves watchkeepers spotting swimmers and waders attempting a reckless return to the mainland, or individuals still traversing the promontory outside the period of safe return. They may be spotted sitting by the bell on Inner Head, where a notice board gives the telephone number to ring in emergency, or waving for attention.

Despite warnings by siren and loud hailer, too often the only resort is for watchkeepers to inform Milford Haven Coastguard who then task the Rhossili Coastguard Rescue Team to co-ordinate a rescue helicopter if casualties are injured or the D-class ILB from Horton, four miles to the east. Uninjured casualties are landed at Kitchen Corner. Thanks and apologies are sometimes received. Other incidents have involved the recovery of bodies, attempted suicide, unexploded ordnance, abandoned clothes or body boards and even someone asleep on a potentially perilous ledge.

On July 5th this year, when researching for this article, another typical incident unfolded during a watch manned by Peter Lewis and Bill Bradley. A member of the public called at the lookout to report a seemingly abandoned tent below Kitchen Corner. It contained new camping equipment, remnants of a possible party and plenty of alcoholic supplies. Fear for the occupant's safety could not be ignored, consequently Peter went to investigate and secured the partially collapsed tent. A grid reference was supplied to the Coastguards, thence Rhossili rescue team was paged and arrived speedily to begin searching the whole area. As a missing person had recently been reported in Cardiff, police must also be notified, two arriving within the hour. Later the Horton ILB joined the search which was eventually terminated without result. An obvious assumption that ravers may drift from one impromptu party to the next, indifferent to 'disposables' left behind or the recovery procedures set in motion, must make SAR service very frustrating at times.

Worm's Head lookout attracts much interest also from passing walkers on the Gower Way and Wales Coast Path being located in an area of great natural beauty. The importance of a unique type of watchkeeping here is indisputable.

Photo by Peter Townsend



Please help us to maintain this valuable service by making a donation and becoming a supporter of NCI Prawle Point or becoming a watchkeeper.

Please contact: The Secretary, PO Box 58, Kingsbridge TQ7 2QZ

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