

Walton-on-Naze to Holland.

After months of careful preparation and financial outlay my annual leave from work had begun with a period of unsettled weather, as depression after depression tracked over the British Isles. The synoptic chart resembled the situation that one would expect during the winter months not that of late June, early July.

Working on a fixed shift system in the oil industry, my 17 day break is rostered into the system and is non-negotiable. The fact that I had spent a small fortune on a liferaft, GPS, charts and other items for my planned trip to Holland was of no consequence to mother-nature.

My 14 foot home-built boat, a Lynx 14 named Diddy-Da, sat fully prepared at Titchmarsh marina, Walton-on-the-Naze awaiting a break in the weather. The passage plan was all mapped out and two weeks supplies stowed, everything had been checked and double-checked ready for departure on 26th June. The weather however had other ideas, the forecast for the Thames shipping area consistently forecast force 5 and 6.

Having spent 12 years as a navigation officer in the merchant navy I am well aware of the power of the sea and have a healthy respect for it. I had no illusions as to the degree of exposure that I would be putting myself in whilst crossing the North Sea. As well as completing my adventure I also wished to enjoy the experience, so I imposed certain criteria before I would embark on the 109 nm trip. Firstly the wind direction had to be in my favour and as the course across would be almost due East I wanted the direction of the wind to be between NE to SE through W. As the boat is small I felt that the wind strength should not be greater than force 4, which should equate to a wave height of 1 metre or less. Aware that the shipping forecast is only valid for 24 hours I scanned the long-range weather charts to ensure that a weather window of at least 2 days was available. This would allow for the fact that my boat was likely to make a slower passage than that normally achieved by larger yachts.

I was acutely aware of the criticism that would justifiably be levelled against me should this adventure not go according to plan and I put other peoples lives at risk attempting a rescue. If all went well then I may be considered to be adventurous and daring, but should I need outside assistance then foolish and stupid would be how I would expect to be described.

Initially the plan was to depart Titchmarsh Marina at Walton-on-the-Naze on Friday 26th June, or as soon after that date as possible once a settled period of weather arrived. By Wednesday 1st July I had all but given up hope of making a crossing to the continent.

My wife Diane drove me to the marina at 0500 on the Wednesday for what I expected to be a coastal trip to the River Crouch. The two day outlook for the weather

didn't look too bad and at the back of my mind there was still a longing to make the crossing.

The shipping forecast for the Thames area at 0535 was much better than I expected, wind NW veering to N then NE later 3/4 occasionally 5 in the showers with good visibility, moderate in the showers. A snap decision was made to make the passage to Holland with a view to checking the midday bulletin once underway where I could abort the trip if the weather forecast had changed for the worse.

By 0540 I had completed the last minute checks and taped the cockpit lockers shut as an additional precaution against water ingress. I motored out of the marina into the Walton backwaters, raised the sails with one reef in the main, stowed the outboard and settled down for the long haul across the North Sea.

The wind was as forecast NW 3/4, which meant that as I turned the corner at Stone Point, the wind was nicely on my port quarter. High tide was due soon and once the ebb started the north-easterly flow would also be in my favour. Diddy-Da was progressing very nicely at a speed through the water in excess of five knots which is about as much as I could hope for.

Gradually the Essex coastline faded into the distance and the wind increased another notch. The second reef in the main sail was soon put in. I didn't wish to be overpowered and risk any mishaps. The great thing about Diddy-Da is that all sail handling can be done from within the safety of the cockpit and reefing the sail takes less than a minute to perform. Being so easy to alter the sail area is a great asset, as having the correct windage reduces the risk of accidents from over optimistic speed aspirations for such a small boat.

The south cardinal, South Cork buoy past down the port side at 0735 and the shallow waters of the East coast of England gradually increased in depth from four to five metres to double figures. Once the depth of water exceeds that in which one can stand up the actual distance to the sea-bed below matters not a great deal to ones chances of survival, however, I find it of great psychological value to know the depth of water below the keel of the boat as well as the obvious navigational importance.

Twelve miles off the coast of Essex the last significant evidence of mans existence is the Sunk light-vessel. This now unmanned light-ship passed down the starboard side of the boat at 0845. It never fails to amaze me how boats are attracted to man-made objects at sea. No matter what course one steers when approaching a navigational mark or a sandbank one's boat seems to suffer a strange magnetic attraction to these objects and is drawn magically into there proximity. True to form the light-vessel slipped down the starboard side much closer than I had anticipated. This proved a welcome distraction from what would soon be mile after mile of open seascape. From now to the Dutch coast the only man-made objects would be a few buoys and the occasional ship. With 95 nms to go, this was the point in the trip that I could easily turn to starboard and follow one of the channels down to Burnham-on-Crouch, which was to be my alternative destination should the trip to Holland be considered too risky. Although

the swell had increased since reaching the open sea, this was to be expected and all was going according to plan so far.

Almost imperceptibly the wind increased in strength, although still on the port quarter. The boat speed gradually increased to five and a half knots with an occasional burst of six knots on the downward slope of the swell, which was becoming more evident as the lee of the English coast diminished. The new roller-reefing system that I had installed during the winter turned out to be a real boon, with two reefs in the main this became the equivalent of the throttle control. In reality Diddy-Da is designed to be safely sailed within the confines of a river or used close to shore. To expect the boat to perform under the conditions that I expose her to is asking a lot. On every occasion that I have pushed the limits of my seamanship, Diddy-Da has risen to the challenge admirably.

The morning passed quite quickly and by 1105 the South Inner Garbbard buoy was close on the port beam. This navigation mark is twenty miles off the East Coast and very definitely in the open sea. Although only one fifth of the way into my voyage this would be the point of no return for me. The following wind made any attempt to return to England almost as difficult as to continue onward to the continent of Europe. I can't recall making a conscious decision but one was made none-the-less and now I was out on the North Sea, alone in a fourteen foot boat, with only waves for company for the next twenty hours.

Although normally content with my own company the sense of isolation was a bit overpowering. With the many tasks that I had to administer, there was not much time to dwell on the fact that I would have only myself to rely on for the crossing.

Being so small, my boat is easily deflected by the seas off-shore. Although equipped with an auto-pilot, Diddy-Da lacks the stability and weight of a larger yacht and finds maintaining a steady course difficult with a sea coming from behind. Today was just such a day and as the seas built up during the afternoon I found that I was having to do more and more steering by hand.

Gradually, the wind increased in strength to a point that hand steering became essential. Each wave could then be treated on its own merits, as opposed to the auto-pilot that would try to maintain the course regardless of the sea conditions. This posed no problems for most of the time. The difficulty arose when an additional duty had to be performed such as plotting a position on the chart, having a bite to eat or a drink. One of the most demanding acts was to answer the call of nature. To allow enough time to remove a life-jacket, several layers of clothing perform the necessary in the bucket then replace all the above, took a considerable amount of planning and luck with the wave pattern. A strong bladder is almost a prerequisite for single-handed sailing and I don't recommend All Bran for breakfast!

There was very little traffic in the North Sea on this particular afternoon and only one small German coaster passed close by. The mate on watch gave my boat a long hard look with the binoculars. I wondered at the time what he must be thinking with such a small yacht so far out to sea, with such scanty crew!

Throughout the afternoon the depths had relentlessly increased and between 1200 and 1430 the depths were always greater than 50 metres and on several occasions exceeded 60 metres, the greatest depths recorded for this passage. With a completely open seascape, the depth below the keel assumes an importance out of all natural reasoning. Once the depths dropped below the 50 metre mark again it felt that a great mile-stone had been reached.

I began to cross the main shipping channel at 1630, there was little traffic on this day, and without reference to the chart it would have been difficult to know that this point of the voyage had been reached. The only event of any significance was that as I reached the Dutch side of the channel I passed a submarine with its escort tug. This proved a welcome distraction for an hour.

I completed crossing the shipping channel at 1915. My last log entry was for 2040 and reads, "Wind increased to force 6 with large seas, decide to make for Flushing". As the weather deteriorated further it became impossible to write as all my attention was focused on remaining afloat.

My attempt to turn starboard towards Flushing proved to be a disaster. The seas instead of being on the quarter of the boat were now coming almost right astern, within a few moments I was having the first of many waves crash into the boat. Following one of my previous adventures, I learnt that the bucket for removing water from my boat must always be close at hand. I am grateful that I learnt this valuable lesson beforehand. The sea is an unforgiving environment and by the time that the third large wave had filled the cockpit, I got the message that going to Flushing was not a good idea. This particular avenue of escape now being cut off, I resumed the course to my original destination, Stellendam.

As night fell the conditions worsened, the wind worked on the seas to increase the wave height in excess of two metres. To say that it was uncomfortable would be an understatement, but being trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea, it was a case of gritting ones teeth and getting on with it. All the washboards were put in place to make the cabin watertight to provide reserve buoyancy in the event of a major mishap. The only problem with this was that all the charts, the navigation equipment and GPS were unavailable. Before the last board was in place I snatched a last desperate glance at the chart, I tried to memorise the buoys I expected to encounter upon approaching the Dutch coast. From now on it was down to good old seat of the pants navigation, fortunately, I tend to practice this quite a lot, admittedly in areas that I am more familiar with.

With the last of the twilight now gone the world took on a whole new meaning, as sight, one of my major senses was effectively out of action for the next five hours. Up to then I hadn't realised how much I had depended on the ability to watch the wave pattern and pre-empt each wave as it approached. Surprisingly enough I found that sound had become an important substitute in the battle to position my boat. Each wave had to be taken at the best angle of heel and attack to prevent the North Sea from joining me in my small cockpit. Diddy-Da behaved beautifully, riding the waves majestically as if on a

rollercoaster ride. The contest was an unequal one though, the North Sea won on many occasions, partly filling the cockpit with salt water. The trick was to heel the boat just enough so that the weather side presented enough freeboard to stop a wave crashing over the side, while at the same time not letting the leeward side become so low that the water poured over the gunwale. Every ten minutes or so an extra large wave would hit or I would slightly mistime an average one, causing the cockpit to be flooded. It was then a case of bailing with the bucket to put the North Sea back where it came from. The saying goes, "that there is no more efficient bailer than a panicky man with a large bucket" and when the chips are down I would whole-heartedly agree with this adage.

By 0300 lights from the Dutch coast could now be seen. This was a welcome sight and it would have been nice if it was possible to look at the chart to establish my position. At the time this was unrealistic, as this would involve opening the cabin, which I neither had the time or the inclination to do. Action of this nature would present an open invitation for a wave to flood the entire boat.

The wind during the night gradually veered from NW until at daybreak it was NNE. To maintain my desired course of 067° T meant that the boat was now close-hauled. This improved the ability to take the seas on the bow but slowed the progress of Diddy-Da to its destination.

Having the light restored enabled me to anticipate the wave action better but it didn't do a lot for my confidence to see what I had to confront, if I was to make a safe landfall that day. By this time my arms and shoulders were aching from having to bail the cockpit every ten minutes or so for what was now approaching six hours. I hadn't eaten or drunk anything since late that afternoon although I didn't feel the need to do either, I felt that I should maintain an intake to enable my body to function in this hostile environment.

Around 0600 the wind increased by another notch and veered more to the NE which was right on the nose for me. Things were looking a little desperate now as my little boat was struggling to cope with the worsening conditions. I was getting to a point of exhaustion, that of not steering as well as needed in the circumstances. More than one searching look was made at the life-raft sitting a few inches away and a little prayer was said although I am not at all a religious person.

To maintain my north-easterly course was not an option with the wind coming from the direction that it was at present. To my right I spotted a green starboard hand buoy that I felt might be part of the channel to the Oosterschelde. As it was possible to make the course to the buoy I decided to sail over to identify it. The buoy turned out to be "MD3". This was the first part of my plan completed. Next, I had to locate it on the chart which was secured inside the sealed cabin to protect it from the elements. There was no alternative now but to hove to whilst I fixed my position. Very gingerly I positioned Diddy-Da to ride what was now a very nasty sea whilst I opened the cabin. There followed a major operation to check my position and decide what to do next. I found that I was eight miles south of my position-line and that MD3 was not in fact part of the

channel to the Oosterschelde but a buoy marking the coastal channel. To navigate from here to the shelter of the Oosterschelde I would need the Dutch charts that were in the forward part of the cabin. Trusting in the auto-pilot to keep the boat heading into the seas I entered the cabin. It was like stepping into a tumble-dryer and thirty seconds inside left me feeling sick and dizzy but in possession of the all important chart.

Although the MD3 buoy was not part of the channel into the Oosterschelde, the position that I found myself in wasn't hopeless. I was in fact ten miles to seaward of the Oosterschelde dam and the lock at Roompotsluis. The coast of Holland runs almost north-east along this part of the coastline, which was the direction that the wind was blowing from. Large rollers were running down the coast. If I could gain the shelter from the bulge in the land formed by the former island of Schouwen, then I stood a chance of reaching safety. This was the good news. The bad news was that to reach this location of relative calm I would have to alter course to the south-east putting Diddy-Da beam-on to what was now a very large sea. This direction would be similar to that which I tried when I attempted to make for flushing and the memories of that were still fresh in my mind. The maxim "do or die" took on a whole new meaning as I prepared physically and mentally for my attempt to reach safety.

From being hove to on the port tack I gradually altered course to be close-hauled. The wind was by now coming from 050° T. This gave me a course of 100° T which was 30° s short of my desired course of 130° T. The change in course from 100° T to 130° T was made in steps of 10° s at a time. Each time I altered course I spent ten minutes getting accustomed to the different motion before turning any more. This was a slow process but it worked and it felt good to be heading into the coast. Once settled on the correct heading it was still far from plain sailing but every wave that swept under the boat was another milestone passed. The hiss and roar of the waves as they passed was quite intimidating but once I got the measure of the seas I began to enjoy the challenge of battling all that nature could throw at me. Every wave was a personal challenge and the fact that I could see the coastline getting nearer was an added spur, not that I had much of an alternative to pressing onward.

Between me and safety was a shallow bank, Banjaard, with depths of only one metre in places on the chart. To skirt around this would involve a major detour and I was in no mind to turn to any direction other than that which I was travelling. I expected the water to cut up pretty rough over the shallow ground but hopping over sandbanks is what Diddy-Da does best so Route One was chosen and proved to be a good choice. It was great to see the depth decrease and in fact it didn't drop below two metres, a considerable depth for a East Coast sailor.

Once over the sandbank I reached the real channel to the Oosterschelde and the relative shelter of the coast. The seas were still large and troublesome but felt like a mill-pond compared to the previous few hours.

By 0830 I was safely tied up outside the entrance to Roompotsluis totally exhausted from all the mental and physical exertions of the last twenty-six hours. The

two other yachts that were also waiting to go in were amazed that this little boat had completed the crossing and I must admit that at that moment in time I agreed with them.

To tired to bother eating I bailed out the boat for the final time that passage and crawled into my sleeping bag for a couple of hours well earned rest.