

## Rounding the Fastnet Rock, by Martyn Todd

In August 2002 three Shrimpers - *Betsy* (Jane and Martyn Todd), *Blue Chip* (Leslie and Jessie Hughes) and *Lady Eleanor* (Roy Harper) - spent a week in West Cork, joined for part of the time by Barry & Carol Mellor and John Clogg. Barry wrote a fine report of the trip in *The Shrimper* at the time.



Before and during that week there was much talk of rounding the Fastnet Rock! However the weather was against our aspirations. The closest we came was on 16 August, when we had clear views of the legendary lighthouse during a glorious sail after an equally legendary and glorious barbecue of mackerel freshly caught and cooked by Roy (*see picture*).

For an hour or so, sailing briskly in the shelter of Roaring Water Bay, we regretted not making the attempt, but the forecast had been Force 6-8 SE and, in fact, this is what we experienced later that night. Discretion had been the right decision. But we promised we'd be back.

In August 2005 only two Shrimpers - *Betsy* and *Blue Chip* - were back in West Cork, but the aspiration to round the Rock was stronger than ever, except, perhaps, for Jane! Having heard about two sinkings of 40ft yachts in the area the week before, one from the mouth of one of the skippers, she said she would wait for us in Baltimore if the weather were not perfect.

On 13 August our two Shrimpers left Castletownsend in a moderating SW F4 and sailed in lumpy seas around Toe Head and inside the Stags to Bar Logue, the mouth of Lough Hyne. At our passage planning session on *Blue Chip* that night, Jane said that it was just wet and lumpy enough for her close inshore and she did not want to risk the seas five miles off the tip of Cape Clear. A second nightcap did not seem to moderate her view!

The morning of 14<sup>th</sup> was warm and calm and a forecast of NW F1-2 with a rising barometer promised settled weather. However, it was actually SW F2 as we gently sailed along the coast to Sherkin Island, so plan A - our attempt to round the Rock - was confirmed. This meant heading for South Harbour on Cape Clear for

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the night. According to the excellent Irish Cruising Club Sailing Directions, South Harbour is “not safe for anchoring except for small yachts in settled N winds”. The forecast was for the wind to moderate and veer to the NW and Shrimpers are quite definitely small yachts, so we reckoned we were safe.

We left Horseshoe Harbour after lunch with the wind having strengthened to F3-4, still in the SW, so we motored along the craggy shores of Sherkin and Cape Clear, allowing for the strong cross tides. On arrival in South Harbour we had the reassurance of three other yachts at anchor. As the evening wore on, however, one by one they departed, leaving only two matching small blue hulls veering in harmony to their anchor lines in the gentle swell and puffs of breeze. At the nightcap planning meeting we agreed to time our passage to arrive at the Fastnet at low water and return to the North Harbour on Cape Clear with the flood. This meant an early start. Jane said she would wait for us on the island unless the conditions were perfect in the morning.

The conditions were perfect in the morning - for Jane, that is. We woke to clear skies and flat calm, with a gently rising barometer and a forecast of variable 2-3. When we left the shelter of the harbour we could see a small white needle shining white in the bright morning sun. As we gently motored the four miles from the tip of Cape Clear, the occasional small group of gannets accompanied us, while shoals of sprats jumped from the water and landed like a handful of silver gravel scattered on the surface.



The Teardrop of Ireland, the last sight of Ireland for emigrants sailing to America, grew in size. From the east, the base of the main tower is hidden by the natural rock and we saw steps, storage tanks and a landing stage. It was not until we rounded the Rock from the south that its great size and massive strength was clear and intimidating. The skills and perseverance of those who built such a lasting structure in such an inhospitable place were awe-inspiring.

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Building started in June 1899 and the final light was tested successfully on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1904. The tower comprises 89 courses and 2,074 stones weighing a total of 4,300 tonnes. These were laid in 118 working days, each one personally supervised by foreman James Kavanagh, who went ashore, ill, as soon as the work was completed and died the following month. The granite was quarried in Cornwall, each stone being cut with dovetail joints in all directions. No stone can be removed unless all the stones above it are first removed.

The entire tower was erected in sections of 6-8 courses in Cornwall for the resident engineer's approval and then again at Rock Island in Ireland before being transported by a specially built boat, the SS *Ierne*, to the Fastnet. The lantern weighs six tonnes and Trinity House sanctioned its characteristic of a single flash every five seconds in 1902. It has a nominal range of 27 miles. (For an excellent history and description of the lighthouse see [www.mizenhead.net/fastnet-rock](http://www.mizenhead.net/fastnet-rock)).



Even with a calm sea we saw the slight swell leaving six feet of white water on the jagged rocks below the tower. I would have preferred enough wind to be sailing briskly, but, remembering photographs of white spray breaking over the top of the lantern 160 feet above HW mark, I settled for the flat calm. It is sobering to think that, from the Fastnet, the nearest landfall to the south is the Antarctic.

We felt a great sense of satisfaction at achieving a long-standing ambition. As we reluctantly left, motoring gently back to North Harbour on Cape Clear, I thought about those lives saved by the lighthouse and those lost in the 1979 race. We were tied up safely in North Harbour in time for a late cooked breakfast and spent a few hours lazing in the sun, and sending a few postcards of the famous landmark. I think Jane was very pleased in the end that she had stayed on board when *Betsy* and *Bluechip* rounded the Rock.

**Martyn Todd, *Betsy* (459)**