

Delivery of the new "Gwendoline" by Bryn Bird (823)

On 31st July 2000 our old friend Gwendoline (sail number 533) was stolen on the very day we were to tow her to Pembroke for Roy Harper's Welsh Shrimper Rally. We went anyway and Roy helped us salvage one week of our holiday. It was an excellent week and we will let Roy tell that tale. We were then faced with the prospect of being shrimperless for Falmouth Week and gave in to this eventuality with gloom and misery. A talk with Cornish Crabbers had opened the prospect of buying the Southampton Boat Show Shrimper, which we could take possession of at the end of September. After some thought we decided to go for it so that at least there would be a positive outcome for all of the time, trouble and expense. We found a place for it at Hythe Marina in Southampton and it was delivered and launched for us there on 24th September. Also called Gwendoline we took her for her first sail the following day.

We decided to try to sail our new boat round from Southampton to Rotherhithe so on Saturday afternoon 23rd of October caught the train, arriving after dark just in time for the restaurant booking we had made at the Italian restaurant in Hythe Marina. That was excellent and made sure we slept well. On Sunday we set off at a leisurely pace down the Solent and along east past Portsmouth and Hayling Island into Chichester Harbour where we continued past Chichester up to Dell Quay. We had a nice pub meal before battling through the rain back to the boat. We slept well enough until we dried out and tipped over. Fortunately I was on the low side and George and June got tipped into the middle. I spent an uncomfortable half hour though fending off as we floated earlier than the neighbouring boats and nearly swung into one. It occurred to me later that I could have dropped the centre plate, but then hindsight is one of our greatest strengths.

June and George (our oversized 12 year old) had to go back to London on Monday for music events and Alice (now a full-grown 17) and I were to sail round to Brighton. So having seen them off at 07.00hrs we got ship-shape and motored round to Chichester Marina to get bread, charts, flares and, I hoped, seasickness pills but the pills were not to be had being only available from Chemists. We picked up the Vodafone marine forecast: 06-12 23/10 SSW 15-20KT INCR SW 20-25KT. RAIN/PATCHY MIST. VIS 5 TO 15 KM. SEA MOD. Not great I thought. I wasn't worried about Alice; she is not prone to seasickness and is a pretty unflappable captain of her school sailing club. The question was would I survive without getting seasick. I knew it would be a hard sail out of Chichester Harbour and far enough south to miss the sandbanks before heading 135 for Selsey Bill. We had the engine to assist so decided to give it a try. After all it would be easy to turn at any time before Selsey Bill and run back into Chichester. Two other sailors were braving it, which gave some comfort. We felt the omens were with us because having just fixed our brand new compass to the coach-house Alice closed the roof with a bang and the compass shot out of its bracket rolling rapidly leeward towards the sea. I let go the helm and dived forwards just managing to catch it as it bounced over the gunwale. After this we felt lady luck was looking after us.

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Outside Chichester the sea was very lumpy but assisted by the engine, we managed to pinch up enough to stay just outside of the breakers crashing on the lee shore. We reached the south cardinal where we could turn onto 135 degrees and head for Selsey Bill. Cutting the engine made no difference now, with two reefs in the main and half a jib we were creaming along at I guessed more than maximum displacement speed. We were more comfortable too and with Gwendoline at a much better angle to the waves we even heard a weather forecast for the afternoon on the VHF: SW rising force 6, sea state moderate increasing rough. We were having such a wonderful time that I reasoned one more Beaufort scale as we turned onto the run into Brighton would be no problem. The compass was of some concern. Not only was there the fear of losing it but trying to head 135 was in reality a guess somewhere between 120 and 150 and on occasions it even did complete somersaults. During a rainy squall we lost sight of land and the compass was our only guide. I began to think we should turn back. Then the sun came out and there, right on the nose, were the two buoys marking the channel off Selsey Bill. How silly of me to have worried!

Now we could head 90 and skirt the north edge of the charted bank with about one hour to its east cardinal buoy. Time for Alice to helm and she seemed to do well with a grin from ear to ear. But now the waves were getting quite serious and the combined effect of wind and waves turned Gwendoline into the wind with each wave taking quite a fight to get it back on course. Then right ahead my eyes caught the profile of a wave like I had never experienced before except in the film 'Perfect Storm'. It seemed every bit as high as Gwendoline's mast and illuminated by the sun from behind it was a sheer cliff of carved onyx. I was glad we were broadside on because, had we been running down its face then surely the nose would have dug in and we would have been pitch-poled over. What really alarmed though was that the top three or four metres was forming the classic surfers tunnel so if we weren't rolled we would surely be filled up and possibly washed overboard. Then, dumbstruck, we watched as the base of the wave seemed to overtake the top and that dreaded curl turned to mush and sped harmlessly beneath depositing a mere bucketful onto four wet feet. It wasn't even cold! Several more of these were to come, one even catching us at its very peak but Gwendoline just seemed to tuck them underneath and charge confidently on sometimes with bow waves as high as the gunwale as we surfed at an angle down the face.

An hour had nearly gone and the east cardinal should have been visible off the starboard bow but nowhere was it to be seen. Had we sped past it in that last rainy squall? We scanned 360 degrees and soon spotted it at the limit of visibility off the port beam. It hit me immediately what this meant. We had sailed straight over the bank that the buoys were there to guide us past. How come I was so good at hindsight! Now we needed a new course as I had only memorised it to this point. The chart needed removing from its sleeve and re-folding. So far the exhilaration and energy had kept seasickness at bay but just a few seconds of

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concentration on folding a chart ended all that. I knew I couldn't do it but I had to. The thought of being immobilised by seasickness leaving Alice to cope was simply not an option. I guessed that heading about 60 would do for now and resolutely pinned my eyes on the horizon. Gradually the urge to vomit faded and I could once more contemplate a quick look at the chart. I calculated that 10 seconds would make me sick, so 5 seconds would get me half way there and three seconds might be safe. This gave one second to find our position, one second to find Brighton and one second to visualise an angle and a distance. Without looking at it I opened the chart right out, risking having it blown away. Then go – east cardinal – Brighton – angle and distance – look up. Concentrate on the horizon but don't let the image fade. Yes 60 would do given that plus or minus 10 was accurate in these conditions and proportioning from previous distance made good I reckoned three or four hours would get us to Brighton.

Land was one or two white specks on the far horizon glinting in the sun but now rain set in and visibility a mere few hundred yards. This time it continued to rain and we were moving through the water so fast that I feared we might easily overshoot. I knew we had to head north until we could see the coast. This meant a gybe yet already half a jib was too much and the shrouds looked like they were about to snap. We reduced to a quarter jib and tried to work out how best to time it with the waves. Heaving on the tiller made no difference, the wind and waves seemed to have complete control of our direction (luckily this was about 60 degrees). We just had to brave hauling in the main and try to turn quickly in a trough whilst the next wave gave some protection from the wind. We went for it and I don't know precisely what happened but we were soon on a port tack having spent all day previously on starboard. An hour on, land came clearly into view and sure enough right on the nose was Palace pier Brighton and yes I was sure I could make out the old stump of West Pier as well. All we had to do now was avoid overshooting the marina.

I haven't mentioned the spectacular show of rainbows and special effects that nature had put on for us during the day but now it was the turn of the windsurfers. The two companions out of Chichester went off in another direction so we had been on our own all day and it was nice to have company. They descended on us as Alice said like a flotilla of butterflies on a cabbage leaf. At times leaping and looping in the sky and at others buried beneath the waves. What sheer exuberant fun and why did I give it up! (I know really – its called old age). One came close enough to speak and we asked him where the marina was. He made some sound then splat. We had gone by the time he got going again.

Looking back we saw Palace pier disappearing over the horizon yet still no marina – hells teeth we've blown it! Alice just had to read the chart, I couldn't risk being seasick and in a panic. She identified that Brighton had a mast above it – but there was no mast – there was a chimney though – but that was not on the chart. We could have been in Wales for all the sense it made. Then I noticed something

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like a cathedral. There's no cathedral she said. Suddenly all was clear, its Lancing chapel and the pier was Worthing. The chimney was Shoreham and yes sure enough there was Brighton and the mast an hour still ahead. Panic faded and I phoned June to tell her our ETA for Brighton was about 17.30hrs and all's well.

The sun was sinking fast though and lights were coming on as we scurried past Hove. But nature hadn't finished with us for here was the force 6 whisking us past the real Palace pier and onto the marina. There, like a scene from Fantasia, waves were exploding against the breakwater sending spray high above the marina in perfect time with the pulsating howl in our own rigging. We planned to keep off about a hundred yards then gybe onto port, switch on the engine and charge in. It occurred to me that I should call the marina on our VHF but holding on had to take priority. The time came to gybe just as the outer breakwater and light were off the port beam and there before us was a sea blocking the entrance like we ain't seen nothin yet! Rebound waves were meeting the incoming sea and fighting like a maul of enraged crocodiles over a hapless prey – us in a mere coracle by comparison. For half a second I contemplated staying out and going on past Beachy Head to Newhaven perhaps but no, Brighton had one compelling merit – it would at least be over quickly.

We had done it twice today already so threw ourselves into this last and final gybe. Made it round, then on with the engine and charge for home. The entrance seemed unbelievably narrow such that we were bound to hit one side or the other but we didn't know which. Oh hell! I had started the engine in full astern so simply pushed it full ahead. There was no discernible difference! We surfed down our last wave and suddenly there was an eerie calm – we had made it. A bit close to the outer breakwater but we breathed a sigh of relief. Then the weighty rain of a wave topping the outer breakwater reminded us to be on guard and get the sails down. We did but soon the wind caught us under bare poles and pushed us remorselessly towards the empty visitor's pontoon. Alice turned in with a modest bump and I leaped ashore and made fast a bowline. She made fast a stern line double-quick. We looked at each other briefly and just hugged. It was something special we had done and for that moment anyway, words weren't quite up to it.

There had been no damage to the boat, we had shipped merely one bucket of water plus lots of spray and we had come through the most amazing experience. We signed the forms and packed up ready to go home. As we calmed down hunger came to dominate our thoughts. We had eaten nothing and had just sipped a little water in seven and half-hours. An Italian meal in the marina solved the problem though it took a push to get Alice through the door. She just knew that everyone was looking at her feet wearing my thick socks and June's shoes! I had other worries like at what stage should we really have turned back but I was not going to let my conscience spoil the memory.