

The day "Eclipse" came of age by Chris Welland

A personal account of the 64th HOYA Round the Island Race

Like all the best ideas, entering "Eclipse", my 19 ft Cornish Shrimper, in the 64th HOYA Round the Island Race, was hatched late one winter's evening in the bar of Bosham Sailing Club. Once committed and the hangover gone, the enormity of the task became quite apparent! The organisers of this great event, alleged to be the largest and most popular yacht race of its type in the world, had strived to get 2000 boats on the line for this the year of the Millennium. In the event some 1587 yachts started and "Eclipse" along with five other Shrimpers, was the smallest of the competitors.

My team, Adrian Weller & Jo Black, had both competed before, albeit in bigger yachts, and their guidance and sound advice both before and during the race was an invaluable asset. We had pre-positioned a very well-stocked (thanks girls!) "Eclipse" in East Cowes the day before as we were to start amongst the first of the eight fleets at 0630 the following morning. A short sharp run ashore in Cowes including excellent fish and chips allowed us a few hours sleep before the 0430 alarm call heralded the start of what for me was to be one of the most exhilarating sailing experiences of my life. Working on the principle that it is not what you know but whom, I had been in close contact with the Royal Navy's Fleet Weather Centre at Northwood for some days prior to the race. They forecast the day beginning WNW at 10 knots gradually backing throughout the day to WSW and increasing to 15-20 knots - ideal Shrimper conditions. As it turned out they were spot on - thanks chaps! Adrian, my tactician, therefore advised we position to the north end of the line keeping in as much clean air as possible whilst taking maximum advantage of the westerly tidal stream. The start is, quite frankly, chaotic and in light dirty airs and a strong ebb we struggled to stay to the east of the difficult to see line as the other seven fleets jockeyed for position very close astern. Very small, we were the proverbial jam in the sandwich and once over the line there is no getting back!

Our 0630 start was safe and legal if not spectacular and along with the bulk of our fleet of some 200 boats (including "PlayStation" and three Ultra 30s!), we commenced a long beat to the Needles. Many chose the Island shore and perhaps the strongest of the ebb whilst, to the north, we commenced a tight duel with another Shrimper "Tinker" which was to last almost to the very end of the day. As one of her crew said to us early in the race "there will be many another opportunities to get our own back before the day is out" and how right she was! By now, as we beat past Newtown, all the other fleets were racing having started behind us at ten minute intervals, and we attempted to stay out of the ever increasing amount of dirty air and close quarter encounters as the faster boats came through. By late breakfast time, in clearing skies and a backing and freshening breeze, we approached the Needles. We had decided on the inner passage through this hazardous area but, inevitably, the wind died and the westerly stream conspired to take us right over the "Varvassi" - no problem for a Shrimper with the plate up! Lunchtime saw us clear of St Catherine's, picnic and beers in hand enjoying the sun on a dead run, with Jo on the foredeck using the boathook as a whisker pole (only for two hours!) and "Tinker" ahead as we shaped up for an extended leg to leave a mandatory exclusion zone mark to port off

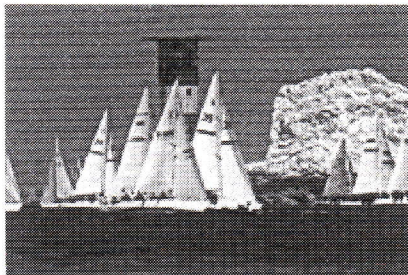
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Sandown Bay. Now on the broadest of reaches, the tactician's brilliant move of taking the shortest route to Bembridge Ledge over the Princessa Shoal, at last saw "Tinker" off and we never saw her again until after the finish. Just brilliant! By tea time we cleared the Ledge and in a strengthening WSW force 4 gusting 5 and an adverse tidal stream, foulies back on and weather boards back in place, we commenced an exhilarating three and a half-hour beat to the line. For the first time we all had our work cut out but these conditions suit the little well found Shrimper and we certainly put the skids under some bigger boats! Eventually, we crossed the northerly finishing line at 1818, giving us an elapsed time of 11 hours and 48 minutes, well within our guesstimate, and a fourth place out of nine in our new gaffer class. Wearied but thoroughly elated we collected our momento from the declaration barge and headed for Island Harbour and much celebration - but that is another story!

My most unforgettable moment was, when just past the Needles, being completely surrounded by an unbroken circle of multicoloured spinnakers spread as far as the eye could see. We calculated that at about tea time the eastern half of the IOW would have been completely surrounded by a continuous line of yachts making for and in the Solent - I sincerely hope someone somewhere has this on photographic record. It was certainly most spectacular! As for regrets, just one. Why, oh why, is this momentous event not given so much more media coverage akin to that given, for instance, to the London marathon, a similar type event in so many ways?

Thank you Adrian, Jo and "Eclipse" for a truly memorable experience. Would I attempt it again - oh most certainly!

Next year's race will be held on Saturday, 16th June, 2001



More details can be obtained from the Island Sailing Club website on
<http://www.islandsc.org.uk>.

Their website provides live pictures at key locations around the island so you can join in from the comfort of your armchair!

Congratulations to this year's winner of the Shrimper Whale Trophy
William Simpson ("Little Owl" 754) of Jersey.