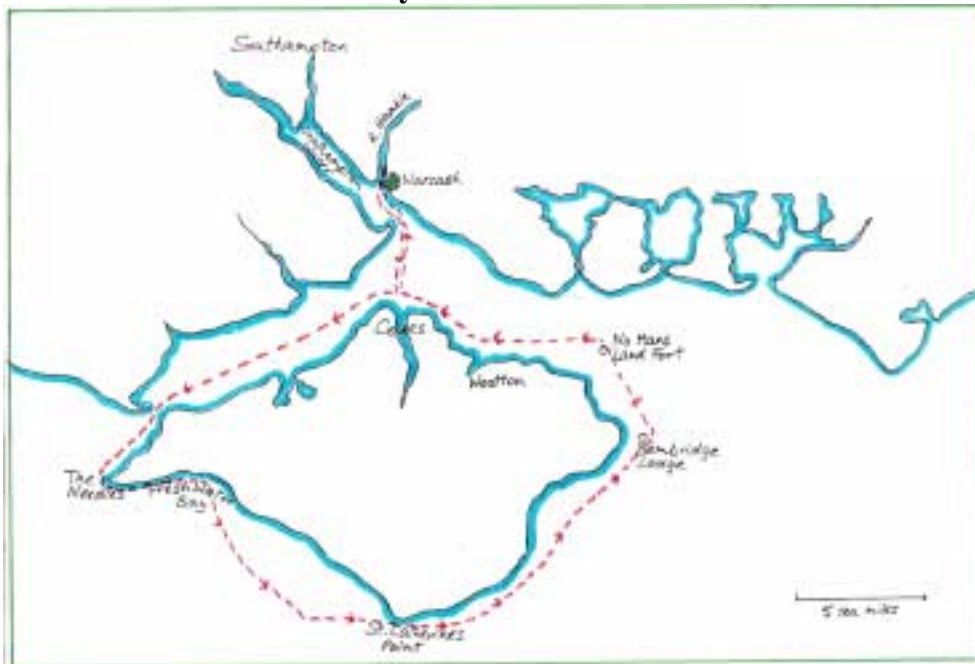


Round the Island Race in Cornish Shrimper 2003

by Robin Whittle



This year was going to be the year of Bumble Chugger (BC)! Our Cornish Shrimper (No. 124 with a blue hull) was entered in the Modern Gaffer class with nine others in a total of 23 entries for the class. The course of over 50 nautical miles is quite an endurance test for such small yachts, but I had persuaded a rather reluctant Gillie, my wife, that we could do well in it. Our previous three attempts had all been in quite light winds and on two of them we had had difficulty reaching the finishing line within the set time limit of 14 hours! The first of these we had made with 30 seconds spare and the second missed by 5 minutes. On the latter occasion we had been lucky to have still been given a tankard for our efforts.



This year I had taken more care to establish the exact state of the currents at each stage. I had copied the Reeds Almanac mini tide charts for the Isle of Wight and had written the actual time of day for each hour on the charts. I had also prepared two summaries of where we would be on the course at various times, one assuming a slow average speed and the other assuming half a knot faster, with notes on the best course to take depending on when we had reached each point.

I had decided to use the old original sails (1983) which had proven to be faster than the new ones in our Deben Week races.

The antifouling had been sanded down and repainted. Unnecessary things had been removed from the boat to ensure the weight was down to a reasonable minimum.

So all that was left in doubt was what wind the weather would produce on the day. I checked the forecast every day during the week before and as time got closer it looked as though we would have 2/3 knots from the SE. We would have preferred 3/4 but it was an improvement on some of the earlier forecasts which had predicted almost no wind.

We decided to launch at Warsash on the Hamble and I thought that it would be easier to do so at high water. This was my first mistake for when we arrived, an hour or so before high tide (7pm), it was clear that the slipway was very flat and not very suitable for launching a Cornish Shrimper off a four wheel trailer. The steepest slope was in fact at low water not high water! We decided to wait till the ebb had got well under way and after we had completed rigging the boat, used the spare time to have supper aboard.

We launched at about 9pm and set off under motor with the ebb to find an anchorage closer to Cowes. We crossed the entrance to Southampton Water and tucked ourselves into a little bay near the Lifeboat on Calshot Point. There was a spare mooring which we picked up and quickly settled down for the night. The mooring turned out to be horribly exposed to the waves set up by the ferries et al and, quite the contrary to what I was expecting, the traffic kept up throughout the night. What made things even more uncomfortable was that BC lay broadside to the waves. To add insult to injury our petrol tank, which I had overfilled slightly, had spilt enough petrol to cause a distinct smell in the cabin. Neither of us got much sleep.

It turned out to be an earlier start than planned. At 5am I decided to get under way and while I started the engine and unhitched from the mooring Gillie set about getting breakfast. This consisted of a bowl of sugar puffs, a piece of bread and marmalade and a mug of tea.

The weather forecast at 5.35 am confirmed that there should be a reasonable wind for most of the day. In fact the wind started as a force 2 to 3 from the ENE. It was sunny and with over 1500 entries things looked promising. We had read that the beautiful J Class "Velsheda" (K7) built in 1933 was to take part and sure enough about two hours after our start she sailed past us with a crew of thirty aboard - a wonderful sight!

We motored up to the start line. For those not used to sailing at Cowes and who are unfamiliar with the landscape it can take a little while to find the relevant features. It is formed by bringing the RYS flagstaff into line with the white line on the Orange Diamond painted on the castle behind. The outer distance mark is the West Bramble buoy. I had decided that the current, which by now was a good 2 knots westwards, would be strongest close to the island until we reached Hurst Point. From there to the Needles a course down mid channel would be best.



I was distinctly nervous as the wind and tide were together and we could easily be swept over the line and not be able to get back against the current. We hoisted sail and made our way to the south side of the South Waiting Area, an area which was marked up on the sailing instructions just off East Cowes. Here we found the current less and I switched the motor off with fingers crossed. After a couple of tacks we confirmed that we could make over the current. There was a continuous stream of yachts coming out of Cowes and many of them

were so huge that we felt dwarfed by them. There were also some yachts anchored to hold themselves against the current. It was difficult to ensure a course that avoided a collision. By now time was getting close to the first start at 6.30am. This included the multi-hull division. The modern gaffers were scheduled for the second start at 6.50am. Our class flag was brown and the starting sequence included the fleet warning signal at 6.40am, followed by the five minute 'P' flag at 6.45am. This was dropped one minute before the start.

Considering that we were faced with a fourteen hour race the need to get a perfect start was not essential. However it is difficult to control the adrenalin on such occasions and I positioned BC to within a hundred metres of the shore and hoped that I had allowed enough distance to offset the current. In fact there was still about twenty metres to go when the gun went (a second gun was fired immediately afterwards to indicate that at least one boat was over the line - unlucky for some!). It is quite a moment to remember. Looking back there were over a thousand yachts getting ready to give chase. Half an hour later the view was transformed into a myriad of brightly coloured spinnakers stretching right across the whole channel. A wonderful sight!



We settled down on starboard jibe with the jib goose-winged and looked around for the other Shrimpers. 'La Mouette' (No 379 with a grey hull) was close by to port, 'Eclipse' (No 785 with a blue hull) was ahead and about 50 metres inshore, and 'Folly' (No 121 with a yellow hull) was about level and 200 metres to starboard. After an hour we had reached Hamstead Ledge and by now some of the fleet which had started later were catching us up. The faster larger yachts were tacking down wind and this meant that we found ourselves surrounded by these jybing heavy weights. One of these, 'Yes!Bellerose', a black monster, from the fourth start (7.10am) came by us as if we were stationary. A cry came from the man at the wheel 'Hi, Robin, where's your five-o?' - a voice from the past referring to the happy years in the 505 fleet. It was Osie Stewart looking his confident self (an obvious pirate from years gone bye!). Within a few minutes it was just another yacht disappearing in the growing fleet ahead of us.

By now it was becoming clear that we were losing ground to 'Eclipse' and 'Folly'. Both were a quarter of a mile ahead of us to starboard. 'La Mouette' remained reasonably close and about 100 metres behind. We could see no sign of any of the others.

We reached Hurst Point at 8.30am and the whole channel had become packed with boats. At this point 'Folly' went right, 'Eclipse' went left and we went straight down the middle of the channel. It turned out to be in our favour as 'Eclipse' sailed into a hole and 'Folly' took a much longer course round the fleet to the south west. The outcome was that we reached the Needles ahead of both at about 9.15am nearly two and a half hours after the start.



Our plan was to cut round the lighthouse as close as possible missing Goose Rock and the wreck of the 'Varvassi'. A rubber duck was motoring around the position of Goose Rock and hailed us to keep clear. Although I was confident that we could have sailed closer, we played safe and gave it another 5 metres room before turning sharply onto our new course up the side of the Needles and cliffs. At this stage of the tide there was still some westerly current and it was important to tuck ourselves close into the Needles to pick up a small eddy. We had the wind against us now, force 2 almost due east, and it became a drawn out short-tacking period. When I say tucking ourselves close to the Needles, I mean this literally. We found ourselves sailing inside some of the spectator boats which had anchored close to the Needles to get a good view and delayed our tack until we were within 10 metres of the rocks. It was a balance of having less wind and less current, close in, against more wind but the possibility of being swept back, further out. In previous years we had done well initially but had missed the time of the turn of the current and had not gone out early enough to reap the benefit of this and more wind. This year I was determined to get it right.



At first, like the previous years things looked good. We were well ahead of 'Eclipse' (about half a mile) which had followed us close into the cliffs. 'Folly' was behind but further out. Other Shrimpers appeared round the corner and followed the trend that we had started making short tacks close to the cliffs. After three quarters of an hour 'Folly' was beginning to overhaul us. It took us a few tacks to realise that there were big gains to be made by tacking further out. We lost out on one tack when we thought we had got into an eddy inshore only to find that Folly had got well ahead when we crossed. Luckily she continued to sail inshore and we decided that this was the moment to stay out. It was a dramatic twenty minutes as we picked up a fresh breeze and 'Folly' became becalmed. We never saw her again and were sorry to read in the results that she did not make the time limit.

However our next spot of bother was a boat that we had not seen during the four hours of the race so far. 'Mustang Sally' (No 790 with a green hull) suddenly appeared on a similar course to ours and looking as though she was going at least as fast. We made a long tack back towards Brightstone and crossed well ahead of her, but on the next tack she had caught us and two tacks later she had gained over half a mile lead. She appeared to be making a long tack to the south amongst a lot of the fleet. We were losing ground all the time and I decided that we had to do something different and so tacked towards St Catherine's Point. It was a big gamble and only two or three other boats were taking this course. However it paid off dramatically, probably because we picked up a bit of the race, if you can call it that, just off the point. We reached St Catherine's Point at 2pm, seven hours after the start and were now on port tack sailing about ESE. We were surprised and thrilled when we eventually saw 'Mustang Sally' to find that we were now a good quarter of a mile ahead. Five minutes after we had crossed we tacked on to starboard and headed for Dunnose, the next headland.

The wind dropped to force 1/2 from NE. This turned out to be our *bête noir*! It was clear that 'Mustang Sally' was sailing faster and pointing higher. She tacked ahead of us and having

crossed, tacked again to cover us. A quite unnecessary ploy, as it turned out, as we could not compete at all. Things became a complete nightmare, not made any better by my lack of energy. We were now eight and half hours into the race and I was finding it very difficult to keep my eyes open, let alone find some way of making BC move a knot faster. I think if I had been feeling more alert I would have moved forward and had a look at the shape of the sails and adjusted the settings to provide a little more power - but I didn't! - and we dropped further and further back. It is difficult to describe the feeling of awful emptiness in the pit of the stomach when things go as catastrophically wrong as this, even though the overriding desire is to go to sleep. Gillie realised that I was in a bad way and started to chat and get me to talk, to try and break the spell! It just got worse. This leg to Bembridge Ledge was turning out to be a real back breaker for us. It would have been a different story if the wind had kept up above force 2 or had come from the direction forecast, from the SE. But no, it was on the nose from the NE at barely more than force 1 and these were the worst possible conditions for us!

Our notes showed that the current would change at Bembridge Ledge at 5.30pm and although there should have been plenty of time the likelihood that we would make it by then looked more and more remote. By 5pm other Shrimpers were coming into sight. 'Kingfisher of Poole' (No 466 with a blue hull) came past sailing faster and pointing higher. This was the first time that we had seen her and we wondered what had happened to the three boats that we had been vying with for the first four hours of the race.

The tide turned and the wind seemed to drop even further. Bembridge Ledge lay a mile away and it seemed to take an eternity to claw our way up tack by tack towards it. It was a real test of stamina and conviction to keep going. However at last, close to 6pm, we did make it and turned thankfully on to our new course, heading for No Mans Land Fort. We were now into the Solent with the wind and tide behind us. The prospect was a little brighter. We had two larger yachts on either side with which we were keeping pace. The one to starboard was a white sloop with a graceful looking wooden hull by the name of 'Siona of Fyne' from the Class A yachts. The wind picked up a little as we approached the fort but ten minutes later at 7pm the wind started to drop. Although we had two knots of current we were now doing barely one through the water.

I realised that if we did not make the finishing line by 9pm the current would start setting against us and with a typical evening flat calm we could miss even finishing this marathon. I remember pronouncing "There is a strong chance that we won't finish the race". The awful empty feeling in the stomach returned and we just sat there waiting for it all not to happen. There was now a haze gathering in the distance over which we could see the chimney at Fawley power station sticking out into the still air. Our two companion yachts with their higher masts managed to pick up a little more air than us and were both edging away from us. We just had to wait patiently and hope. What happened next was a complete surprise.

Although we had seen clouds slowly gathering over the island and to the west there was no hint that this was to be the first sign of a radical change. However at about 7.50pm we suddenly felt the cool touch of a freshening breeze. For a few minutes it came and went and we were left in suspense to know what was to come. We need not have worried as it steadily picked up and before long we were driving along at five knots - what a relief! We were going to make it. We were now in sight of the finishing line which lay close to the Prince Consort cardinal buoy and realised that we must complete the declaration form. Each competitor that completes the course has to fill in one of these noting the sail number of the yacht immediately in front and behind. Gillie started to complete the form noting the rather splendid Gaffer coming up behind. It appeared to be flying every conceivable sail on board

including topsail and spinnaker - a truly stirring sight as she frothed down towards us. She had accelerated so much in the last few minutes that it became clear that she would take us just before the line. And so it was - she came roaring past at ten knots to beat us over the line by 15 seconds. The time was 8.30pm. We had finished - what a sense of relief! We learnt later that we were the third Shrimper and had come 6th in our class.

Looking back we could just see yachts on the horizon still trying to get round Bembridge Ledge. It looked as though there would be an awful lot of non-finishers! Checking the log we discovered that our average speed through the water had been 3.3 knots. Taking account of the current and discounting all the tacking the average speed around the course had been 3.7 knots. The maximum speed over the whole day of 6.1 knots was achieved close to the finish.

We were quite elated to have finished the race and after dropping the main and furling the jib made our way to the barge to collect our 'goodies' bag. We then hoisted sail again and headed off back to the Hamble thinking that all the excitements of the day were at an end. However, we had not counted on what the weather had in store for us.

The wind had risen to force five and we shot off on a broad reach. As we looked back across to Cowes and up the channel to Hurst Point we became aware of a thunderstorm which was gathering its forces. Massive shafts of fork lightning illuminated the sky. It was approaching from both the south and west and we realised that we would be surrounded by the time we had reached Warsash.

And so it was. We moored up on the mid river pontoon with thunder crashing all around and some quite amazing patterns of lightning. One, looking like a horizontal sine wave with four or five ripples showed sharp against the clouds for several seconds - truly remarkable! We were very lucky that we had still time to secure BC before the rain and hail started. We had a celebratory drink before going below. The storm lasted for most of the night.

Although we had not achieved what I had hoped and we were both feeling shattered, it had turned out to be a very exciting day. The memories will linger.

rtw 29/6/03

