

Singlehanded Shrimper Solent Sailing

A Cornish Shrimper is a small 19ft yacht with a lifting keel and a traditional gaff rig that sails rather well. Down below it is a bit like being in a small 2 man tent. In July I was lucky enough to join 10 other Shrimpers on their Solent Cruise Week. Of these 4 were single handed including me. The plan was to gather at Shephards Wharf in Cowes on the first day with boats coming from Chichester Harbour, Langstone Harbour, Warsash and Lymington. I was able to get to the mooring in Emsworth Channel by 1000, leave before 11 and with a nice NW breeze was out of the harbour entrance by 1200. It was an hour before high water with the westerly stream just starting. Not unusually there was less breeze outside the harbour, a F2/3 from the SW, ie a beat to Cowes! Three other boats sailed from Chichester Harbour and I could see another boat from Emsworth ahead of me. The wind gradually increased to a good F5 and by the time I was off Portsmouth I was fully reefed. Fortunately I reached Cowes just before the tide turned at 1700.

Dinner had been arranged at the Island Sailing Club and we were given a long table overlooking the Solent. The World Cup final was taking place as we eat and some of us drifted off to an adjacent room to watch the period of extra time and see the winning goal. This year is the ISC's 125th anniversary and surrounding the room were portraits of all the previous Commodores.

The next day it was only a 3 mile beat to the Beaulieu River entrance. However, the wind was still SW F4/5 and we were beating against the last of the flood for an hour, so progress was slow. The tide turned as we approached the entrance causing the wind to increase to F5/6 with a corresponding increase in the sea. It was warm and sunny though! The wind direction meant motoring straight into it with a fair bit of spray flying until the first bend in the river and some welcome shelter. After that it was a lovely trip right up to the pool by the bridge at Beaulieu where 4 boats rafted up at anchor for a shared late lunch.



Higher Reaches of Beaulieu River



Rafted at anchor in the Pool

It was then back to berth 2 abreast on the fuel pontoon at Buckler's Hard followed by an evening BBQ on the green. This was next to the demonstration area for wooden ship building skills and we were able to use the oak chippings on the BBQs!

The following day brought a forecast of less wind, but still SW. However it was a lively run down the last section of the river to the entrance and it was clearly still blowing F5 in the Solent, so therefore fortunate that we had all retained our 2 reefs. We again had to oppose the last hour of the flood meaning calmer water, especially close into the mainland shore, this time heading for Yarmouth some 7 miles distant. Of course no-one was racing, but everyone was keen to see how their boat speed compared to the others! The key to success seemed to be judging the right time to cross to the island shore. I lost some 10 minutes on leaving the entrance as a turn managed to jump off my jib furling roller and tangle requiring a heave to and a stretch out to the end of the bowsprit to sort it out. Once I was going again, I was very pleased at how the boat behaved in the choppy conditions with wind against tide for the second part of the passage.

Very light spray came over much of the time, but only one serious soaking. After a while, the boat and I seemed to get “in the groove” and the wind strength, sea and spray and the relaxed tacking just became “normal”. On arrival at Yarmouth, due to the rate of the current, it was necessary to get the sails down and ropes and fenders attached in good time to avoid being swept past the narrow entrance.

The following day there was a more moderate SW F3-4 and the plan was to sail to Newtown Creek for lunch and then back to Lymington. As I was wanted to attend an important meeting in Emsworth that evening I decided to miss Newtown and sail the couple of miles straight across to Lymington, catching the train back in the afternoon. The next morning I caught the 0725 from Emsworth and Gordon from Lymington very kindly picked me up from Brockenhurst station and I was back onboard “Breeze” at just after 9am!

All but one Lymington boat left the rally at this point, and 2 boats elected to sail (or rather motor!) back to Chichester Harbour due to the forecast thunderstorms that evening due to a small thundery low coming up from France. The wind had now gone round to a light easterly and it was a gentle beat back down the western Solent with the tide and then a dead run up Southampton Water to Hythe Marina. During the morning there was a VHF forecast issued for Gale Force 8 “soon”, causing one shrimper to turn back to Lymington. In the event, although we had a couple of thunderstorms during the night, the gale never materialised. That evening, we enjoyed a lovely end of cruise dinner with some arriving by road, sitting outside the restaurant in the warm evening sunshine thinking we could easily be in the Mediterranean!

All that remained the final day was to set sail back to our home ports; for “Breeze” and “Redwing” from Bosham it was a run with the tide in a light westerly that turned into a light sea breeze off the harbour entrance. It took five and a half hours from Hythe to my mooring, a distance of 25 miles, and I caught a nice mackerel across Hayling Bay! My grateful thanks to Julia Slatter and Mike Hunter (Redwing) for organising such a splendid week!

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