

Shrimping for Dolphins

The cruise of Shrimper No.620, “*Victory*”, to the Isles of Scilly in August 2017

In August I realised a long held ambition to sail our Shrimper out to the Scilly Isles. With my son James and brother in law, Martin, we trailed the boat down to Penzance, launched at a very good slipway and did a little “shake down” cruise to Mousehole harbour 3 miles down the coast. Even a good meal and a pint or two at the Ship Inn didn’t enable me to sleep through all the bumps in the night as the boat first grounded and settled on the falling tide and then refloated again by morning.



After postponing the trip three weeks earlier due to gales it was with some trepidation that we saw the forecast for SE force 4/5 but, crucially, easing off later in the day. We put a couple of reefs in the main to be on the safe side but dawn brought a lighter breeze and once we were out and heading for the Scillies we settled onto a broad reach and just flew along. With the big blue seas of a sizeable swell following us, sunshine, a good breeze and spring tides all in our favour it was perfect sailing as we rolled along the last bit of Cornish coast.



Just as it couldn’t get any better, about a mile off Porthcurno and the Minack Theatre, a school of dolphins appeared and swam along with us for a few minutes. Fast beautiful creatures that darted around and under the boat in the clear water.

We crossed the shipping lanes with barely anything in sight, saw more dolphins and a sunfish and then passed the 1889 pilot cutter *Marian* coming the other way, close hauled in the stiff breeze; a very fine sight indeed.



The long low smudge of the Scillies eventually hove into view on the horizon and quite soon we fetched up off the Eastern Isles of the Scillies; a scattering of small islands and reefs and a distinctly unwelcome looking landfall in a heavy swell and stiff breeze. We decided to run further south to enter St Mary’s Sound, the main channel into the islands, but this meant crossing the heavy swell diagonally and, as well as the double reefed main, we had to reduce the jib to just a couple of square feet for a while. The crossing took 6 ½ hours at an average speed of 5.25 knots.



After entering the Sound we sailed further SW in the gradually calming waters and eventually dropped anchor in the tiny sandy cove of Porth Conger between St Agnes and Gugh. This idyllic NW facing anchorage has a matching SE facing cove on the other side of a narrow causeway that joins the two islands. The causeway is covered on a spring high water. It's also just a stone's throw from the Turks Head..... Despite anchoring in 4.1m of water the bottom was clearly visible and, sure enough, half way through the night we were awoken by the boat grounding on the one rock in that bit of sandy bottom. Martin heroically jumped out and hauled the anchor into deeper water.



After a leisurely start and a brief exploration of St Agnes to view the Bishop Rock lighthouse in the distance we sailed NW up past Samson and into the channel between Bryher and Treско. The falling tide left very little water under the keel but we scooted gently across the sand flats until coming to a standstill about 50m short of deep water. Despite an attempt to get out and push we were stuck fast one hour before low water. This was fortuitous as we abandoned ship (in glorious sunshine) and walked to the pub on Treско, had a bite to eat, walked up to the other side of the island and then ambled back to the boat to find the water lapping against the sides again.



Sailing resumed in a light SW breeze and we went past Cromwell's Castle (where the old Brixham trawler *Leader* at anchor made for a good picture) past Hangman's Rock up to Hellfire Bay (great names) then around to the NE and back down the other side of Treско. The islands themselves are all beautiful; tiny fields, practically tame birds, no traffic, tremendous granite outcrops, clear waters over white sand and sea views to die for in every direction.



Our plan had been to catch some mackerel and have a beach BBQ but the ones James caught were distinctly small so we opted to forage for proper burgers on St Martin's



instead. We dropped James at the west end of St Martin's and he walked the island and took some pictures of us sailing around to the High Town beach at the other end.

Having acquired all the victuals for a BBQ we sailed off to Little Arthur, an uninhabited island about the size of a playing field with a tiny little NW facing beach where, watched by seals, we anchored. After a splendid BBQ we hunkered down for the night on the boat whilst James opted to sleep in the open alone on the island. *Victory* settled comfortably on the sand before we turned in and then refloated before dawn.



The forecast for the following two days was for light SW breezes but fizzling out to almost nothing so we opted to sail back the next day. Dawn brought a very light breeze and we crept past the Eastern Isles which have such fantastically shaped rocks that they are reminiscent of the Easter Island statues. Half way across we were surrounded by two or three Minke whale as they circled a shoal of fish which were right under the boat. Minke are about 9m long and weigh 4 to 5 tons so it seemed more like a submarine surfacing next to the boat.



On the return voyage of course the tides were no longer in our favour and with a feeble breeze we had to motor sail most of the way. Close to Land's End over the Carn Base shoals the tides were very strong. We only averaged 1 knot for a while and the voyage back to Mousehole took almost 11 hours in all. The swell was gentle but enormous; one minute we'd be up on top of a wave with coast, lighthouses and other vessels in view and then we'd drop right down into the dip with nothing in sight but mountainous waves.



The hours of motor sailing were enlivened by the sight of three more schools of common dolphin which came and swam alongside us for five minutes or so at a time (again, not far off the Cornish coast). We considered jumping in to swim with them but the best photos are to be had by leaning over the side and holding a Go Pro camera under the water. The dolphins are the most friendly, inquisitive and



sociable of animals and, beside a Shrimper, very fast agile swimmers.

After managing without the engine for the last hour or so we slowly entered Mousehole harbour at 6pm and resumed our acquaintance with the Ship Inn. Sleeping aboard a boat canted over at 20 degrees was, by now, no problem at all though James (“sleeping” in the cockpit) had to keep adjusting the warps to the Cornish Crabber we moored alongside as first one and then the other vessel grounded, canted over and then in turn later refloated.



The following morning we motored back to Penzance, retrieved the boat and drove back to Somerset. There is a Scilly Isles parking company that will store your car and boat trailer on the outskirts of the town and, if you time it right, drive you to and fro. All in all the Scillies, and the voyage out there, are thoroughly recommend for Shrimping.

APPendix

We used two phone apps on the voyage. *Boat Beacon*, which shows the position and course of nearby vessels and gives collision warnings is absolutely fascinating BUT it doesn't work between Cornwall and the Scillies due to lack network coverage. We had a series of emails the following day giving us collision warnings..... thumbs down!

The *Navionics* app on the other hand was brilliant. Full charts, zoomable, overlaid with real time weather, tides and your own position and actual course over the ground was very user friendly. Navigating between the islands on the Scillies was like playing “Minefield” as we tried to dodge the big red blobs (underwater rocks) on the Navionics chart. Despite having conventional paper charts, compass, dividers, GPS etc on board I have to say that the app just makes all that a thing of the past (until the battery fails or the touch screen doesn't respond due to damp salty fingers) and it does need auxiliary power supply as it drains the phone quite fast.

We kept an hourly log and recorded our position (from GPS) on the paper chart but reviewing it when we got back I found that the accuracy of our chart plotting was very poor!

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