

Our International Shrimpers' Week 2013

Last year, arriving at ISW 2012 we were newcomers who had never properly raised the sails of a Shrimper. During our stay on the Fal the wind was relatively gentle but we nevertheless learned a great deal and, after an excellent week, returned to the Dart with a lot more confidence, feeling that we had now mastered the Shrimper.

Although the weather last summer was disappointing our boat did get quite a lot of use, but mainly with the outboard. From Totnes down the twisting river to the open sea takes the best part of two hours and so opportunities for free sailing are limited. On a couple of occasions we completed what (for us) is the South Devon equivalent of the 'Transat', the notoriously challenging voyage from Dartmouth to Brixham, where, on one passage in a tricky force 3, we even sailed the whole way. In these taxing conditions the lower, green reefing lines were sometimes required. As for the upper, red reefing lines, it seemed difficult to imagine us out in a situation where they would be required, and they were never used.

When spring finally arrived after a very hard winter we started to prepare ourselves for the Solent. The previous year at Mylor, we had simply followed everyone else, with the Fal chart something that I examined at the end of each day to see where we had been. Now, after watching a Youtube video of a tanker colliding with a yacht in the same waters off Cowes that we would be sailing in, I had suspicions that the cruising format of the next ISW might be a little more demanding, and therefore bought all the necessary charts and also taught myself to plan voyages around the Solent using GPS waypoints.

Remembering the heavy rain in Mylor, we made sure that we would be better prepared this time and so a complete set of heavy weather gear was taken on board and the shorts and tee shirts of the previous year left in the cupboard at home, (although as the ISW approached the weather did indeed look reasonable, so a few summer garments were hastily stuffed in at the last minute). A lot of spare space in the boat was packed with easy to cook food and bottles of wine. Several books were also included just in case, although in Mylor there had been so much to do that we spent very little time sitting quietly in the cabin.

The important week finally arrived and we took our boat out of the river and carefully strapped everything in place for the journey. We decided to travel to Chichester on the Thursday to give ourselves plenty of time for setting up, and on a beautiful warm summer's day drove the 170 miles from Totnes to Birdham Marina, stopping at a pub with a large car park for the trailer near Wimborne, where we ate lunch in the sunshine outside. Under a cloudless sky we arrived mid afternoon at the Marina that looked and felt like somewhere in the South of France. What a contrast with last year! There were already several shrimpers near the slipway and we spent the rest of the day chatting to fellow owners, rigging our boat and launching it. We then went into Chichester where we bought supper and 12 litres

of petrol for the outboard. (After seeing that video I was taking no chances of getting becalmed in the middle of the shipping lanes). Later that evening our neighbour on the pontoon who was alone aboard his 36 foot yacht, came over to ask us lots of questions about Cornish Shrimpers; apparently he was seriously thinking of buying one as he wanted something smaller and envied the friendly group of Shrimper owners that he had witnessed earlier.

Friday turned out to be another beautiful day, and the forecast for the next few days was continuing sunny and warm. In the local force 4 chandlery on impulse we both bought some expensive sailing shorts, something we hadn't once needed in Mylor. More and more boats arrived and we were pleased to meet up with a lot of the 'old salts' from the previous year. The weather was wonderful but later some discussion ensued about the forecast with one Jonah announcing that a force 6 was due for the Saturday 22 mile passage to Cowes! Although I didn't really believe it, in the light of this disconcerting news I decided to prepare the previously unused red reefing lines and make sure that everything was in order as they might be needed. I also replaced the rather tired line on the jib furling drum.

We enjoyed the briefing supper in the clubhouse lounge which had been decorated for the event, and in the cheerful atmosphere everyone was looking forward to a good week's sailing. Trevor Thomas and the other organisers then briefed us on what was going to happen over the coming seven days, including locking out of the marina and passage making in the Solent. He also reassured us that, although it might get a bit breezy, there should be nothing a Shrimper couldn't handle. From the balcony we had a panoramic view as the sun dropped over the estuary leaving a reassuring 'red sky at night'.



Arrival in the sunshine



A good omen?

Saturday arrived with bright sunshine, but there was a worrying whistling coming from the hundreds of masts and the trees were being twisted alarmingly by the wind. At the briefing Trevor gave us the disturbing news that the wind would be force 5 gusting 6! This was far stronger than we had ever been out in before, but there was no question of remaining in harbour. The good news was that it would be sunny all day.

Although no one seemed too concerned, we anxiously returned to our boat and attempted to prepare for the coming endurance test. I decided to follow our previous policy of staying behind the leaders in order to see how they got on before following. Our pontoon

neighbour, the wannabe Shrimper owner with the 36 footer looked at the bent trees and said that he 'didn't think he would be going out today'. He suggested however that we call up the lock keeper immediately as there is 'always a long wait'. Worried that we would get left behind, we called and were told to proceed immediately to the lock. We were then dismayed to discover we were the first Shrimper out! Instead of proceeding on down the river we quickly tied up on the outside pontoon, and waited until about a dozen boats had gone ahead before timidly following them downstream using the outboard. On this sparkling Saturday morning the river was crowded with dinghies and larger sailing boats making good use of the increasingly stiff breeze in the sunshine, although the sight of a yacht lying on its side on the shingle close to the river mouth did nothing for our confidence. Once we had arrived just inside the entrance we motored in circles through the choppy waters and, buffeted by the gusty wind, watched other Shrimpers proceed over the bar, seemingly without mishap. Eventually, frightened that we might get left behind, we had no option but to raise the (fully reefed) mainsail, unfurl about a third of the jib and, tightly gripping the tiller, follow them into the unknown. The water over the bar was lumpy, the following wind pushed us hard and I lost my favourite cap and didn't fancy turning round to retrieve it, but once out in open water, although the wind was strong and conditions 'lively', everything suddenly became manageable and what followed was one of the most exhilarating sails I have ever had. With maximum reefing the boat was certainly not over pressed and, helped by a following wind and tide, we briskly headed up towards Portsmouth, the GPS taking all the worry out of the navigation.



First boat through the lock. Are we nervous? Hmm.

Finally relaxing and enjoying the sail to Cowes

Later, crossing the shipping channels the big ships didn't appear too threatening, the water was fairly flat and we were able to relax and enjoy the scenery under a cloudless sky. By late afternoon we were off Cowes, dropping the sails and, along with dozens of other boats, motoring in to the Medina and up to Shephard's wharf. The whole journey including the river took us nearly six hours, although it hadn't seemed like it. In fact it had been a wonderful sail and something of an achievement for us. I now know how Francis Chichester must have felt as he arrived back in Plymouth (and he lost his cap as well).

That evening, although tired, we enjoyed discovering old Cowes and went for a long walk before meeting many of our intrepid fellow sailors for a convivial dinner in the Island Sailing Club.

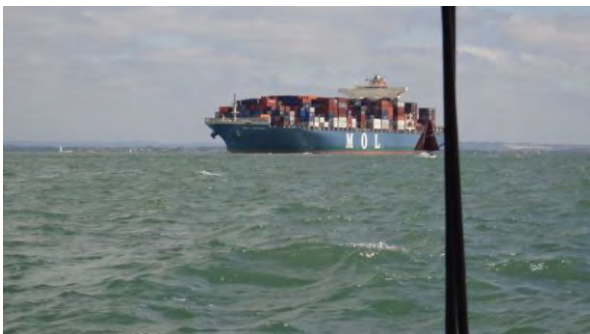


Safely arrived at Shephard's Wharf



Morning briefing from Trevor

Sunday promised to be a good day. The wind had moderated and, now feeling increasingly confident in our boat and having carefully plotted a course, we waited until the ferry had left then threaded our way out of the river through hundreds of other boats. Keeping well away from a couple of enormous cargo ships, we made our way out into the channel. There then followed a sparkling sail down to Lymington with hardly another Shrimper in sight. Quite relaxed, we enjoyed eating our sandwiches 'en passage'. Arriving, unusually for us, we were one of the first boats in as many had stopped off at Newton Creek for lunch.



Shrimper versus container ship



Following the ferry into Lymington

Eventually everyone turned up and the yacht haven, on a bright and warm Sunday afternoon surrounded by dozens of boats with cheerful crews relaxing on board, was everything we had hoped for in Shrimpers' week. Even better was when our daughter arrived with her fiancé and we motored up the river with them before returning to the marina for a delightful meal together sitting in the cockpit. Later we wandered around the pontoons to look at the amazing results of the cookery competition. As usual a number of crews had gone to enormous trouble to produce elaborate meals with the very restricted facilities on board. That evening we were invited aboard a Dutch Shrimper and admired what must be the finest cockpit tent around. It made a humble Shrimper cockpit into a very

comfortable saloon, but we felt it was probably rather unnecessary with the wonderful weather we were having.



Dutch East Indian Dishes



The judges take their time over the tasting

Monday morning was cooler and less settled. A number of boats went out for some racing, but we explored Lymington and went shopping in town for tomorrow's barbecue. Later we non-racers sailed over to the hidden inlet at Keyhaven where we anchored in threes before being picked up in a launch and taken ashore to visit historic Hurst Castle where we had a picnic lunch. The visibility was good and the views of the Isle of Wight and the western Solent from the top of the ramparts were spectacular. While at Keyhaven the wind changed direction (and became much colder), however the new direction meant we had a broad reach for our next destination, Yarmouth. We had been warned that, although the wind would be favourable, this time we would have a strong tide against us and it would be better to head almost back to Lymington before shooting across the fast stream in the middle. A group of us set off and were soon having an exhilarating sail with speeds of nearly 6 knots. Yarmouth seemed hardly any distance away; surely with the speed we were doing the tide wouldn't make much difference, so we decided to head diagonally directly across. The wind was ideal and the boat powered ahead, sailing well although we were taking far longer to get to our destination than expected. Looking at the log I was surprised to see that, while the boat felt as if it were about to plane, our speed over the ground was less than one knot. Suddenly the display on the plotter flipped over and the chart was upside down. What a time for that expensive GPS to play up! I then realised that the display was set to show track up and, in spite of the boat sailing like a racing dinghy, we were actually going backwards over the ground. Hmm, perhaps we should have followed instructions and approached Yarmouth from the north but it was too late now and we had to fight against a fierce tide, inching our way to the harbour entrance. At least we weren't the only ones. Finally, once safely in our berth (and saying nothing about our course across) we went ashore to explore Yarmouth (all of ten minutes) and then enjoyed fish and chips in a pub. Many people went to the yacht club for dinner. Yet another evening when our large stock of on-board provisions went untouched.

Tuesday dawned cool, dull and blustery. After the usual comprehensive briefing from Trevor, at ten o'clock, in a stiff wind and under low clouds the fleet raced back across to the

mainland and into the Beaulieu River. Once in the river we jostled for position as we ran upstream. Our destination was the pontoon at Buckler's Hard although a number of us continued all the way up to the pool and anchored just outside Lord Montague's stately home where we had a charming lunch surrounded by swans and ducks. As soon as we had finished however the threatened downpour arrived and, heading back down river, we wondered if the evening entertainment might be cancelled. There then followed an afternoon of steady rain, when our small sunshade did little to keep us dry while the Dutch in their shrimper nearby relaxed, comfortable in their large cockpit tent. Miraculously however, the sky cleared just as we were ferried ashore for the evening. On the foreshore just below picturesque Buckler's Hard we all congregated in the late sunshine for a very convivial grill party.



Wet afternoon at Buckler's Hard...



But a fine evening for a barbecue

Some crews even cooked the mackerel they had caught on the way over. Later we were entertained by the 'Portsmouth Shantymen' who encouraged us to join in the singing. It was a magical evening in beautiful surroundings and many bottles of wine were consumed. There was some talk of bad weather arriving but, thanks to the drinks, once ferried back to the pontoon, we went to our bunks contented. The warm feeling didn't last long however, as in the night the rain returned with a vengeance and the wind got up, making the boat jerk against the pontoon and unsecured halyards slapped against masts while awnings flapped noisily. Sleep was difficult, and I lay awake wondering how rough conditions were likely to be in the morning. To make matters worse we had been told that an early start was essential.

Wednesday morning was all that we had feared. Low dark clouds scudding across the sky set the scene at a wet and windswept pontoon briefing when Trevor announced that he was having difficulty getting a signal, but that the forecast the previous night had been for a force six, maybe seven, with poor visibility. The only good news was that, for the journey to the Hamble we would have both wind and tide with us so the sea state shouldn't be too bad. The decision that the fleet should set off was a big responsibility for Trevor who insisted that, fully reefed, our boats would handle the conditions with no problem. He assured us that he had sailed a Shrimper quite safely in far worse weather. In spite of this the atmosphere on the pontoon was rather subdued. For those who had previously

considered going out in anything above force four to be taking a bit of a risk, this was a big challenge indeed! Some people cheerfully prepared their boats, while others stood around looking pensive. Rather reluctantly it seemed, the fleet slowly set out at nine o'clock, (I later learned that only one boat stayed behind) and under a threatening sky we motored down the river to the entrance where, once again we waited to see that the first boats out to sea remained upright before following them. This time we didn't bother with the main, just unfurled a scrap of jib which was enough to keep us steadily moving along the coast.



Leaving Beaulieu. What would it be like outside?

It could have been worse!

Unsurprisingly on the cold grey seascape there no other boats to be seen. At least our fleet remained together which was reassuring. Although the wind was strong, it wasn't quite the screaming hurricane that I had expected, but I did keep the radio ready on channel 16 just in case something went wrong. The waves weren't too bad apart from one disconcerting area of overfalls at Calshot Spit, and we slowly began to hope that perhaps we wouldn't need to call out the lifeboat, and that we might indeed eventually reach our destination. By Calshot Reach the entrance to the Hamble was in sight and there was evidence of relaxation as crews started to wave to each other and take photos. At last we entered the river and, in spite of the dismal weather, there was another feeling of achievement – if we could get through that we could sail a Shrimper anywhere...couldn't we? Apparently during the crossing some crews had even managed to complete a treasure hunt, and talking to others later, the opinion was that it had been nowhere near as bad as forecast. I wasn't so sure.

Mercury marina was welcoming and soon, showered and warm again, we thoroughly enjoyed the drinks party in the clubhouse where the atmosphere was even more relaxed than usual, possibly as a result of crews relieved at having survived the perils of the journey to get there. Later that evening we all sat down for a very noisy dinner followed by drinks in the bar. The weather outside continued foul with the rain beating against the windows, but in the clubhouse a very warm and cheerful atmosphere reigned. There was talk of not leaving the marina the next day which suited us fine. In spite of the noisy wind we slept well that night.

On Thursday morning the expected announcement came that, due to the continued forecast of strong winds, the trip to Haslar marina was cancelled and we would be staying an extra day in the Hamble, sailing back to Chichester on Friday. Nobody seemed too

surprised at this news, but it meant a lot of inconvenience for some, and a number of people decided to forego the final sail to Chichester, getting lifts over to Birdham to collect their cars and trailers. We stayed in the clubhouse drinking coffee and doing puzzles, but as is often the case the weather brightened during the day and the afternoon became quite promising; blustery but cheerful. We were offered a lift to Portsmouth by car and gratefully accepted. A group of us shopped at Gun Wharf quay before walking to the historic dockyard to see the Victory. We very much enjoyed our afternoon 'ashore' and returned to the Hamble via the pretty countryside around Netley. That evening our group walked through the narrow streets of Hamble village before a pleasant dinner together in the Victory pub. Returning to the marina clubhouse we discovered that many people had dined in the club and a large group of Shrimper sailors was now drinking and chatting in the bar. Trevor approached and asked if there was any chance of organising the quiz I had suggested previously and then completely forgotten. An impromptu noisy and rather undisciplined quiz about Cornish Shrimpers and sailing in general ensued, with a lot of good-natured argument with other teams and challenging of the quizmaster. I'm not sure who won and there was not even a prize, but the unplanned evening in Mercury Marina ended in typical good-humoured Shrimper sailors' manner.



A blustery Southampton Water- from the shore



The Impromptu quiz

The weather forecast for Friday yet again wasn't too promising; the usual force five gusting six that we were used to by now, with rain during the morning. There was just a chance of things improving later. From the Hamble all the way back to Chichester is about twenty five miles through busy shipping lanes and ferry routes. This would be by far the longest leg of the week, and once more in less than ideal conditions. We were again getting the sailing jitters when approached by experienced Shrimper sailor Karen Macey who asked us if we could give her a lift back to Chichester in our boat. We were delighted and relieved to take an experienced extra hand on board, and as we went to bed the morrow's marathon now seemed less daunting.

The next day, on a wet and windswept Friday morning we left the pontoon and headed back into the Solent. In spite of the conditions the atmosphere on our boat was relaxed and it became evident that Karen didn't just intend to sail back; we would be racing. After a short distance she had the jib completely unfurled and the upper reefing expertly shaken out

without losing speed or changing course. The boat surged ahead and was soon overtaking other more timid or less hurried, sailors.



Off Portsmouth with the weather improving

In bright sunshine heading towards the harbour

We pressed ahead, making full use of the stiff breeze, and what had previously appeared as a very long way passed quickly. Approaching Portsmouth the clouds lifted and the sun eventually peeped through. We grinned at each other as we (deliberately) narrowly missed the stern of the ferry, then raced on through the restricted gap of the submarine barrier and, now in bright sunshine, continued towards the West Pole beacon. Our boat was still rigged exactly as it had been when it left the factory and Karen pointed out several things that would make sailing it easier: We needed an extra purchase on the boom outhaul to better flatten the sail, and the line should be brought back to within easy reach of the cockpit. The same for those awkward reefing lines; make them longer and as easily accessible from the cockpit as possible. The jib sheet fairleads were wrongly adjusted and above all we needed better sails, the tired main being almost certainly the original from 1990. Even with all those faults we managed to make excellent time in our boat and overtook a number of others.

By the time we entered Chichester harbour the summer had returned with quieter winds, and we had a very civilised final sail up the river, the charm of which we were able to appreciate far more than on our nervous descent. In warm sunshine we went back through the lock and directly over to the slipway, for we intended to get the boat out that evening.



Back through the lock

Sadly the week has come to an end

A lot of others had the same idea and we were not short of help so the boat was very quickly persuaded back onto its trailer and parked in the yard where, in warm sunshine, we

proceeded to drop the mast and start to prepare the boat for the journey home. Most of our provisions and all of our books remained untouched!

The busy day was far from over however as we had to get ready for the final dinner in the clubhouse. This was quite a grand affair with everyone dressed in their finery (well, some in ties at least). After an excellent meal there were a number of speeches and presentations. Everyone agreed that, despite some 'challenging' weather, the week had been a great success, due, in no small measure, to the excellent organisation at every step. We Shrimper Owners are indeed fortunate to have such a well-run organisation with efficient and willing volunteers. The proceedings were rounded off, as in previous years, by a singing group whose rather risqué song summed up some of the pleasures of owning a Shrimper. We all had an excellent evening before returning to climb up the ladder into our boat, now high and dry in the car park. Cosy in our bunks we listened quite happily to the whistling around us as the wind again increased in strength, for tomorrow the only waves we would be seeing would be those of our friends as we said goodbye!

What an amazing week! On a cruise in some of Britain's best sailing waters we had been surrounded by cheerful fellow crews who were always ready to help and give advice when necessary, and who were excellent company, remaining good-humoured throughout. We had thoroughly enjoyed both our sailing during the days, and the social activities in the evenings.

And this time as we returned home we really would be more confident, more experienced sailors who, above all, are reassured of what an excellent sea-going boat our Cornish Shrimper is!



