

ATLANTIC CROSSING

by
John Harrison

I had heard it before. The stomach knotting explosion of a fitting letting go under stress followed by the crash of the rig going over the side. But this time it was a bit different. We were in mid Atlantic on passage from Bermuda to Southampton and the weather was not good.

It all started late in 1981 when Richard Matthews invited four of Gunsmoke's crew (unemployed, the boat having been sold) to join his Stormbird (ex Nadia) for the RORC's Caribbean Race, with the intention of then going on to Florida for the SORC series and returning to Antigua for Race Week 1982. I could not leave England, home and duty for the whole stint, but gratefully signed on for Antigua Week and the passage home to the UK.



History reveals that Stormbird won just about everything in the IOR Division of the RORC Caribbean Race which finished in Antigua via Las Palmas from a start off Cowes early in November. This was a highly popular event amongst those taking part and it seems likely there will be a lobby for a repeat sometime (Ed: it is now the ARC!) Similarly, it is now history that Stormbird was umpired out of her top boat SORC position in the protest room, while it has probably gone unnoticed that under Antigua Race Week Committee's ingeniously pragmatic rating rule her performance in that delightful series was mediocre!

There were to be five of us in the crew for the passage home. Four of the 'originals' who had been in the boat since she left England, plus me. The youngest was Andrew Hill, better known as 'Cleater', just 18 and son of Rodney 'Morningtown' Hill. At 23, my son Paul was second in 'juniority'. Next came Haven Collins, 25, from Cambridge, New Zealand, one of those down under yachties apparently with suckers on their feet and born with an instinct for making yachts go fast. Then there was Donald 'Paddy' McClement recently retired from the RAF, our navigator, radio-operator and sea-cook supreme. As for myself, well, age not admitted!

Basically, Paul and Haven were the hard-men who ran the work on deck, Cleater had a bent for electronics and slept with an electric soldering iron under his pillow (plus a stack of technical literature on flying have recently qualified as a pilot), Paddy had a pretty full life whilst wearing his three hats, and I steered and helped keep out home clean.

As to the boat; she was the prototype Oyster 43, 13'6" beam, 7'9" draft with a big, fractional rig and kitted out pretty typically as a top-line minimum rating Admiral's Cupper. The hull was Kevlar reinforced polyester resin and 'tough like old boot'! Oh yes, she had an excellent three pot Volvo auxiliary.

Having seen Richard and Gay Matthews off on the flight home after Race Week, it was a bit of an anti-climax to slip out of English Harbour, which was still crowded with Race Week yachts, on a short overnight hop to St. Maarten as the first stage of the long haul to England. Rumour was that the shopping was better at Philipsburg in the Dutch half of the island than in Antigua and it would be a good place to store ship. This proved to be a mistake. Prices were higher than in Antigua and the island (or at least Philipsburg where we anchored off) a bit over-done by American tourists. Mao Vroon's Tina, Zeehas, joined us there, the magical warmth of the water making mutual visiting by swimming a rare pleasure.



expending energy setting sail. It was hot!

With 40 gallons of diesel aboard in anticipation of the usual calms encountered on the passage north, we motored out on the morning of May 4th past a huge four masted schooner which takes tourists around the islands, continuing to motor when we found insufficient wind to make it worth while

Trolling a lure concocted from the finger of a Marigold glove whiled away the time and it was not long before a thing like a giant mackerel came aboard. Here, a word of warning for intending anglers. The fish in these waters tend to be both big and possessed of demoniac energy. Our gear, GRP boat rod and multiplier quite capable of cranking in a 20lb cod from the Wallet was just not up to it. Soon after the mackerel came aboard, 150 yards of 50lb line went smoking off the reel against full brake, a thing like a silver torpedo burst out of the sea far astern – and that was that. Looking reflectively after it, Haven commented: “Yer could tell it was p...ed arf!” I can recommend trolling as good fun and a useful supplement to the diet, but you do need a powerful rod and a reel like a Lewmar 43! We did get a 10lb bonito which was a gorgeous fish.

Eventually, the wind began to fill in, not from the anticipated sou’east quarter but from the sou’west. The 1 oz tri gratefully accepted this modest offering and we were on our way praying it would hold. That night, inevitably whilst dinner was on the stove (said bonito), black clouds built up on the western horizon and spawned a vicious rain squally which veered through something like 80 degrees, the resulting toil on deck being illuminated by impressive electrical activity. When the tumult subsided, we were down to No.4 and two reefs; almost continuous rain provided a surplus of water for those who felt like washing. Stormbird smashed along under this reduced sail on a close reach, giving us a hard ride but eating the miles and cocking a snook at this attempt by the Bermuda Triangle to slow her up. Most of the time we had 7 knots plus on the clock and it occurred to me that a dyed-in-the-wool offshore racing outfit just doesn’t know how to take it easy.

By this time, Stormbird, launched as Nadia for the 1981 Admiral’s Cup, had logged 12,000 miles and there was some concern for the rig, a big ‘flexy’ fractional set-up with double spreaders and diamonds. Haven Collins, our Kiwi demon boat driver, tended that mast like a mother her first-born, squinting up it to check bend and deflection and fine-tuning runners and check-stays. All seemed well and

eventually the No.4 replaced the storm jib when we were about 250 miles out from Bermuda. First light on the 9th May coincided with a marked improvement and it seemed that the last bit would be nice. Not so. The Bermuda Triangle hadn't given up hope yet.

A metallic thud from aloft brought a quietly conversational announcement from Haven who was on watch that "the forestay's gone!" Thanks to his instinctive action in running off and easing the weather runner, the mast stayed up. The genoa and spinnaker halyards were used as ersatz forestays, our super-reliable Volvo-Penta 17C diesel rumbled into action and there was no real problem as we had enough fuel to comfortably motor-sail the remaining distance. Investigation revealed the T bar terminal attaching the head of the forestay to the mast had sheared through, $\frac{3}{4}$ " of solid stainless snapping like a carrot.

There followed an enforced stay in Hamilton, Bermuda's capital while a new T bar was flown out from England. With this method of attachment there was no other way we could devise, with engineering facilities immediately available, of safely connecting the rod forestay. Mind you, if you have to be stuck somewhere for an extra week, Hamilton is not the worst possible place by a long chalk! We used the time in running a check on the rest of the rigging, servicing the Volvo and refrigerators which were kept happy by driving a compressor, washing our smalls and generally putting things into good shape. And in sampling the hospitality of the island the excellent patriarchal RBYC (No! Not you Burnham – sit down).

The replacement T bar eventually turned up, the forestay was refitted and with the ship stored for the long haul home we departed the delights of Bermuda on May 20th. Paddy McClement, radio operator par-excellence, contact Portishead Radio with a passage plan and ETA for Falmouth Coastguard and the boat-drivers settled down to making the fastest possible time as the boat was already entered for the RORC's Round Ireland Race on June 19th. Needless to say we were going the quick way on a great circle course rather than the pretty way via the Azores.

Things looked good on the first day out. Stormbird whizzed along with a firm sou'easterly up her skirts, but by the second day the wind veered and took off. We ghosted along over a smooth sea under the floater surrounded by a big shoal of what looked to be bonito, impervious to any lure offered, and all the time a long, long swell built from the nor'west. It was swelteringly hot and by evening the swell had hauled round to nor'east almost on the bow so that it was impossible to carry even the floater. The diesel went on to keep us going and for an essential battery charge and refrigeration session. These engine runs were a part of the ship's routine, at least 30 minutes in 24 hours being necessary to keep the systems in good order.

With the wind filling again we were off once more. In radio contact with the Swan 51's Pulsar and Scoundrel which had left Bermuda at much the same time as ourselves on passage to the Med, via the Azores, we exulted in the fact that on their more southerly course the calm persisted and we were rocketing ahead! By the fourth day, the weather signs were ominous with a great bank of cloud boiling up from the nor'east and a barometer which was unstable, if not particularly low. Come midnight, we were down to storm jib and three reefs, hard on and unable to lay the course. The seas had become big, confused and distinctly hostile while torrential rain, which was to be with us for day after sodden night, lashed the watch on deck.

The weather remained persistently heavy for the next five days but with the wind finally settling in the sou'west Stormbird fairly flew eastwards under single reefed main and boomed out No.3 genoa, the speedo hitting the stop at 15 knots at times with the bow-wave squirting up half the height of the lower spreaders. On the 10th day we had run 1570 miles and had passed the halfway mark.

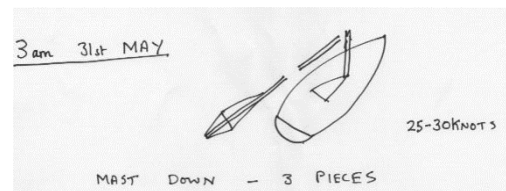


Day 11 gave us a breather. The wind took off until it was so light from the west, we again squandered diesel to keep up the average for the noon to noon run (our best 24 hours had been 214 sea miles). A watery sun and heat from the engine allowed us to dry out a little. No one had succeeded in staying dry and a leeward quarter berth had been washed out pretty thoroughly. I knew about this have been in it at the time!

The barometer, though not particularly low, was going up and down like a yo-yo and all those classic signs of bad weather which the old-time sailors immortalized in doggerel verse were with us. Storm petrels flickered over the waves and all around the fulmars skimmed the surface stiff-winged. A small school of porpoises joined us for a while and later, after the wind had picked up and we were reaching fast on port tack with the light fading, I saw a big shark lying doggo just awash. By nightfall, the wind had backed into the sou'east and by midnight we were once again down to No.4 and all the reefs with the rain doing its best to flatten us into the ocean.

Stormbird was trimmed to sail herself (no auto-helm for this racing machine), close-hauled on starboard and making about 6 ½ knots. It was Andrew's watch and he was sensibly seeking shelter from the cold and rain under the main-hatch pram hood when at 04.10 the rig went over the side. Much later he admitted that the time it took all hands to turn out was the longest minute of his 18 years!

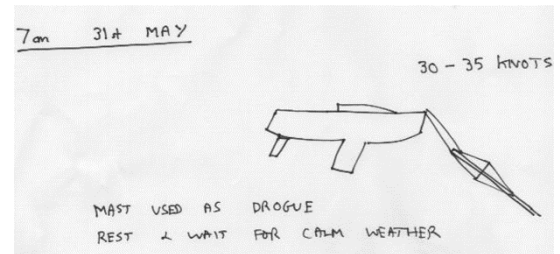
The mast had broken five feet off the deck and again about ten feet above that. The wreckage had taken out the port side guard rails and quarter pulpit and lay alongside in a tangle of rod rigging and sails. The night was inky black and the rain still lashed down interminably as we struggled to salvage what gear we could.



Our young hard men, Haven and Paul, performed wonders of strength, balance and know-how and eventually we had retrieved everything except the intact 40' top section of the mast which we knew we had to retrieve if we were to set up a viable jury rig. The weight of this water-filled, double walled, ally spar was too much for our combined strengths to lift aboard, especially as by now the wind had backed rapidly into the North and increased to gale force 8. There was also the danger of a mast fitting puncturing the hull as breakers smashed it against us.

With the ship's no-mast-motion getting wilder, tiredness setting in and no guard rails, I was beginning to worry about the dangers of someone going over the side. It was decided that in the conditions it was just not possible to retrieve our jury mast until later.

Stormbird's super-effective bolt-cropper were broken out and all the rods cutaway, leaving just the wire runner and backstay attached to the mast. Haven and Paul worked these forward until the top section of the mast was suspended from the stem 40' below the surface and so safely clear of the hull. There was nothing more we could do until the weather abated, so it was a batten-down job and hot drinks before turning in.

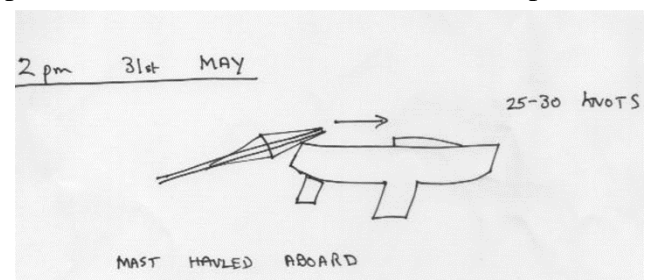


We had hoped that the mast section hanging off the stem would help Stormbird to lay-to bows on, but not so. She lay with her long, flat stern overhang partly up into the Northerly gale and the next five hours were just about the worst we had spent at sea. Without the steadying effect of the rig, the motion was pretty horrible and even through the hull one could hear the snarl of an on-coming breaker before it crashed into us, hitting the aft overhang with a venomous explosion followed by a roar of solid water on deck. Laying in my bunk feeling poor Stormbird quivering like a jelly under these assaults I found myself wondering if Kevlar, like stainless steel, suffered from fatigue fracture!

Come mid-morning Paul, Haven and myself turned out for a council-of-war. The weather showed signs of clearing and if we were to continue the passage there was no point in lying around any longer. Perhaps it was inevitable that all three of us came up with much the same solution as to how we would re-step the jury mast if we could only get it back on board. Mine was based on a modicum of military training plus some years spent in the construction business where lifting spars is one of the stocks-in-trade. Haven had read how his fellow countryman Peter Blake coped with Ceramco's jury re-rig and Paul had worked it out by a spot of common sense aided by having been in close contact with the world of offshore racing from a very early age. But the big question remained: "how were we to get that pig-heavy, awkward top section aboard without putting it through the hull?"

Paul came up with the answer which, if not unique, was new to me and the rest of the crew. We would motor dead down-wind towing the spar by the back stay attached to the mast-head. This should bring the mast to the surface and we could then winch it within the reach of the stern-mounted boarding ladder, get a line onto the mast head, through a snatch block on the stem and thence back onto one of the main genoa winches.

Fortified by some grub, fossicked for as best we could with the boat still apparently doing her best to get rid of us, all hands turned out to put this master plan to test. Of course, all this had taken place in a shorter time than it takes to tell, conversation being somewhat monosyllabic – not from lack of morale but more as a result of the dead tiredness and the urgent need for action. We had decided that as we were no way in any danger, there was no point in putting out a radio call until we had got things sorted and knew where we were going, and how.



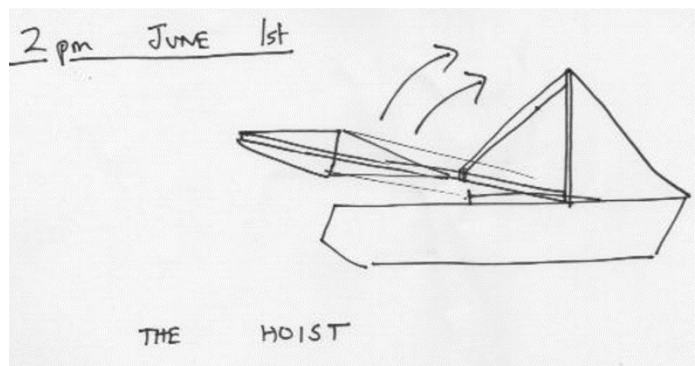
On went that marvelous Volvo diesel again, I was elected to steer and off we rumbled, dead down the faces of the seas at a steady 5 1/2 knots. By now it was approaching noon, the clouds had broken up and the cold northerly had dropped to about 6-7 with a tendency to veer. The seas were around 10-15 feet with the odd much bigger one breaking. The Paul plan worked! There was our potential jury mast, creaming along awash at the surface, a 40' assegai aimed at Stormbird's elegant jacksie!

Concentrating on steering accurately down the waves, I did not actually see the vital part of the recovery operation when Paul, with safety harness attached, went over the stern to perform the rodeo-like feat of getting a line onto that monstrous silver spear. Paddy gave me warning of the rogue breakers and he, Haven and Cleater backed Paul up riding that kicking boarding ladder. And it all actually worked! With the line attached and strong man McClement on the winch, the mast was launched aboard as the boat slid down a wave. Now near to the point of balance, it was comparatively easy for the four available hands to manhandle the spar the rest of the way and in short time it was lying along the port side deck with the last of the North Atlantic draining out of it.



Morale rocketed. Kiwi war-whoops celebrated the occasion accompanied by a photographic session (Haven clutching mast-stump in mock horror). Then it was on with the next phase of the plan of campaign we had formulated during that mid-morning council meeting. While I steered and Paddy warmed up the MF radio prior to putting out a PAN call asking all stations to report our position and circumstances to Falmouth coastguard, Paul and Haven, aided by Cleater, set about the erection of Jury Rig Mk I with the double aim of making some progress and providing some much needed stability on deck.

Fortunately, we had acquired a second spinnaker boom at the end of Antigua Race Week and this made all the difference. Paul spotted that the sliders on the spi-boom mast attachment fitting mated to the genoa tracks, which, on this small fore-triangle fractional rig ran well forward. Thus it was possible to rig the two spi-booms as a bi-pod which could be moved fore and aft and raised and lowered derrick fashion. A block lashed into the apex of this bi-pod carried a halyard to hoist a sail and become, potentially, the upper block for the crane which was to hoist our jury mast.



The wind was still nor'east 6-7. There were still plenty of breaking crests and the colour of the water was a deep indigo. By late afternoon we were under sail, the storm jib hoisted by the tack with its clew



forward and the head sheeted aft. We could hardly believe it but under this tiny sail area Stormbird settled to an easy 5 ½ knots and we could lay sou'east. By now we had begun to realize just how tired we were. Except for Paddy, who had that uncanny knack of being able to sleep through seemingly anything, none of us had got any sleep during the enforced spell below after the dismasting and we had been hard at it ever since. So, after about 36 hours of no kip it was a relief to get back to our regular watch pattern of 2 hours on and 8 off!

Paddy had continued putting out a PAN call during the listening periods but it was not acknowledged by anybody which seemed odd as we had seen a ship two days previously so assumed we were not in completely uninhabited waters. Late that night and now with the situation well under control, we decided to book a call through Portishead Radio to Richard Matthews who it was felt should be the first to know what was happening to his yacht. By virtue of his RAF training Paddy has an amazingly polished radio operator's technique, and thanks to those patient and helpful guys who man Portishead was soon speaking with our owner, safely tucked up in bed at West Mersea. Richard was his usual affable self : "Hello lads, how are you doing?" Paddy said "We're alright Richard but we don't have a mast anymore!". This was the first time I had ever heard Richard rendered speechless, even if only momentarily! "Um, ah! Well, you seem to have a small problem!" The conversation developed with the usual element of yachting badinage and ending with Paddy arranging to call back with a shopping list for the gear which would be needed to put Stormbird back into fighting trim when we arrived at Southampton

During the night the wind backed into the nor'nor'west and took off to about 25 knots. It was June 1st and we were 12 days out, closest dry stuff being Greenland. Soon after daylight we were able to hoist the tri-sail in place of the storm jib. Set with the tack at our bi-pod masthead it worked well as a sort of triangular spinnaker and we had good control of sheeting angle. Our speed went up by a knot and Stormbird's bow was once again aimed at England.

Rested and fortified by one of Paddy's 'full BR' breakfasts – eggs, bacon, sausages, beans, tomatoes and fried bread-we were ready to tackle the problem of setting up of the Jury Rig Mk II. First move was to hoist out the broken stump. No problem, it did not stand a chance against the combined muscle power of Haven and Paul, yielding like the rotten stump of an old tooth. Then the 40' section of the mast, which had come over the stern head first, had to be swung through 180 degrees. Paddy had taken over the



steering and did his best to hold the boat steady while the remaining four of us teetered precariously around the deck until we had grunted the spar into submission. The seas were still running at 8-10' but were more regular and what breakers there were showed little menace. It was also a lot less cold.

We needed a solid gantry on which to support the mast, both whilst we worked on it and then to give a 'starting' angle when the time came to hoist. This was solved by lashing the 10' 'spare' broken section across winch handles locked in to the main genoa sheet winches. A secondary benefit was that we also had sufficient clearance to be able to use the main hatch with the mast secured along the centre-line of the boat. There was much work to do in converting the spar to a satisfactory keel-stepped mast-head job and we blessed the fact that the ship's tool kit had been put together by Richard's Dad, Bob, a superior engineer who knew what it's



at when it comes to yachts, having in times past built his own. Apart from those excellently powerful croppers, we possessed a 1/42 pop-rivet gun, a 12 volt electric drill and a whole gamut of files, hacksaws, punches, sharp cold chisels, etc., plus the usual selection of screw drivers and spanners.



Paul sawed off the ragged broken butt end of our Mk II mast and fitted the original heel plug while Haven and I riveted on mast-bands and generally prepared the top of what had been a fractional rig mast, to accept its new role. Cleater backed up all round and had the presence of mind to keep

the camera in action. Paddy steered and steered uncomplainingly whilst we continued with cutting a new luff entry for the mainsail, riveting on the original goose-neck, modified to accept a spi-boom as main boom, and even riveting on a length of track on the forward side of the mast to take the remaining spi-boom.

By late afternoon we were ready for the great hoisting operation. The tri-sail was lowered and the halyard made ready to act as the running line for our derrick. The line which had been the forestay for our Mk I bi-pod mast was led aft through a block on the stem so that we could use it to control the lifting angle of the bi-pod or derrick. Haven lashed the heel in a position which would feed it into the deck-ring and Cleater was down below at the chart table using trigonometry to calculate the exact position for the lifting strop so that at full hoist the heel would just clear the deck.

At last the moment of truth was with us. Could we hoist that 40' section to the vertical without dropping it over the side as Stormbird, now back under power, rolled downwind in the still moderately rough sea which was running? Power man Paul got his shoulder under the spar and gave it a starting boost off the gantry. Haven took the strain on a Lewmar 43 self-tiler halyard winch. I handled the athwartship steadying lines, led through blocks port and starboard to the mainsheet traveller control line winches. Cleater clicked his camera when not zooming around the decks to assist as and when needed and Paddy, yes, he kept steering.

There came a moment of tension and drama. For the first time I sensed strain and impending defeat in Haven's voice when he said "She's bar tight and not lifting. I don't think we can do it." Then Paddy, bless him, spotted that a cap shroud had hooked itself under the stripping arm of the starboard runner winch. That cleared and it was all over bar the shouting. With Haven winding, first to swing out the bi-pod to the vertical and then to complete the hoist with the crane line, and myself easing the steadying lines to maintain tension, our new mast rose until it was upright with the heel, guided by Paul and Cleater, poised over the deck ring.

Then, after a brief delay while Haven struggled to cut away the heel lines which jammed in the deck-ring, came the moment of truth as we lowered away and our Mk II mast located perfectly on the original step above the keel. By 1930hrs we were under sail again with the storm jib set full-hoist to the mast head off the stem and the tri-sail in the mast in the conventional way with a spi-boom as our main boom. We were justifiably proud of that jury rig. The diamond struts had remained intact so these became the spreaders for our wire cap shrouds. The original primary check stays were lead to the rails where they could be set up by tackles and became running jack-stays. The ex-diamond stays became our permanent lowers, led through blocks to their rigging screws lying along the deck and shackled to the alloy slotted toe-rail. The runners did duty as the fore and back stays. The whole thing was very adjustable and could be set up solid as a rock.



We considered taking the main apart and reconstructing to fill the 30' hoist we had available, feeling that if we had to beat to windward this would be better than the tri-sail. However, as the wind remained in the nor'west and we were making good progress, it was decided to delay action on this ploy.

During the night the wind backed some more and in the search for extra speed, Paul set the No.4 with the head folded down and lashed to reduce the hoist to what we had available, boomed out to weather. Stormbird responded and we were up to 7 ½ knots at times. In the first 24 hours under our Mk II jury we logged 154 miles, a minor triumph as this was nine more than our old friend Peter Blake had made when he got Ceramco going again after her epic dismasting on the first leg of the Whitbread Round the World Race!

By the evening of June 2nd (our 14th day out) we had run 2056 miles and were 796 miles from the Lizard. This by decree of Henry the Sat Nav with whom Cleater had achieved a close working relationship, soothing its troubled chips when necessary and generally jollyng him along. It was a sell that we had pushed on with the re-rig job for despite Paddy's protestations that I was a pessimist, all the signs of deteriorating weather were with us again. Stormbird was surging along in a rising wind and sea with 10 knots coming up on the surfs. By midnight it was blowing hard from East of North and were back in torrential rain.

Something was obviously up. That barometer fell so fast that I was reminded of those old sea stories when the master hopes to find a leak in the leather bag containing mercury! The wind became fitful, then came in hard from the sou' east to persuade us that tri-sail only was enough. It soon veered southerly and increased to gale, the veer accompanied by even heavier rain. Stormbird charged through an utterly black night at 7 ½ knots, the only things visible on deck being the dim glow of the speedo and the brighter glow of the centre-line compass, its card leaping and spinning but indicating that we were again on course after being headed off earlier by the sou'easterly slant.

Come daylight and Paddy was doing his two hour stint at the helm. It had gone strangely quiet after the wild night and he was in optimistic mood, saying that it was going to be a nice day as he could see blue sky directly overhead. I sat up in my soggy berth and took a look through the hatch with a sinking feeling in my tum as I had seen something similar in the North Sea – and didn't much like what happened then! Paddy was relieved by Cleater and it stayed quiet for perhaps another half hour before a hard gust thrust Stormbird forward.



Then it hit like a hammer from due west. Haven was out of his bunk like a cock pheasant out of a covert, still in colourful Y fronts and shouting for all hands. Stormbird was barely steerable and our



poor jury rig was taking stick in a big way. Haven took over the helm from the less experienced Cleater who, with Paul, wrestled the Storm jib down.. By then I had climbed into heavy weather gear and with Paddy turned out to give a hand. Haven and Paul got the tri-sail off and below while I steered and the crew put double lashings on the storm jib and everything else movable.

By now it was 0930 but barely light. The wind screamed through our stumpy rigging and it was almost

impossible to look into the rain and spray. Haven, now in full skins, reappeared on deck carrying a tea towel which he ripped in halves, tying a section to the shrouds, port and starboard, as a steering aid. These indicators were invaluable in conning the boat dead down-wind and so stern-on to the now viciously rising sea. The gale continued to increase: Paddy, who had been through the '79 Fastnet , reckoned that there was definitely more wind than then, but clear of the Continental Shelf the seas were longer and less dangerous.

More for company than any other reason, we departed from our usual routine of having only the helmsman on deck and ran a rolling watch system of three hours on so that the steering could be shared in half-hour stints. I was with Cleater whilst he finished the watch he was on when the storm hit, and it seemed natural to sit either side of the tiller so that extra beef could be applied when necessary.

Brothers, don't do this in heavy weather. It can be dangerous! When we were side swiped by a breaker running diagonally

across the general send of the seas, I was hurled off the high side of the cockpit and was only just able to avoid head-butting poor Cleater full in the face! We were clipped on, but it is not really practical to hitch one's safety line short enough to prevent this happening. From then on we were careful to stagger the watch bodies fore and aft.



At the height of this blow , the seas became truly impressive and I got some inkling what it must have been like in a Corvette on a North Atlantic convoy patrol in mid-winter!!The surface of the sea seemed to conform with all that Admiral Beaufort had to say about 'storm force' and with Stormbird surfing down the faces of the waves



under bare poles we wondered what it would have been like with the full height of her fractional-rig spar above deck! It continued to rain like there was going to be no tomorrow and we got wetter and wetter below decks, heavy condensation adding to the joys of yachting. I abandoned my berth and wedged myself on one of the narrow settees where it was less wet and the motion a little easier.



Even with the gale at its worst there were still storm petrels about, sheltering from the blast in the wave troughs and finding gaps through the great breaking crests down into the next valley. A Fulmar petrel gave us a studied exhibition of his mastery of the elements: riding the air currents on nearly motionless wings he would come sliding upwind, only visible as he rode the crests until close alongside, turning his head to watch us with his yellow-ringed black eye before arcing up like a boomerang on locked wings to hurtle down-wind and then repeat the performance. Once a gleam of sunshine broke through the wrack and patches of spume and spray to leeward took on a strange bronzy hue, for all the world looking like a sand storm as it raced away from us.

After 23 hours under bare poles we had run 132 miles at an average of nearly 6 knots. At last the noise level below decks began to drop and by 0335 on June 4th, our 16th day out, the log entry by the watch coming below read: "lovely and calm, only Force 8". We got the tri-sail back on deck and re-set, soon followed by the storm jib. This was a sign for the wind to come again and a few hours later we were back in a southerly gale and depressingly familiar heavy rain. This was the last effort by the really bad weather and before midnight the storm jib was back on we were reaching with the wind just forward of the beam.

Two days later the sun came out. We started to dry out and at noon on the 19th day we were within motoring range with only 134 miles to go to the Lizard. Cleater's Dad, Rodney Hill, (with whom we had been in radio contact) very kindly volunteered to come out and meet us in his Oyster 46 Morningtown in which he himself had only recently made the passage back from Antigua. We met Morningtown off the Bishop in flat calm. Rodney and his crew trans-shipped various goodies which included several issues of 'Nen Only' and such like for which we were duly grateful, but the 10 gallons of diesel were of more practical value, the calm continuing as we motored up Channel past the familiar landmarks of the Lizard, Portland bill and the needles.



The wind, when it came in, was from the east and it was not until we bore away past Calshot Spit and into Southampton Water that we were able to realise our ambition of setting a spinnaker, the wind since

setting up the jury rig having been too strong or forward of the beam. With a knot tied in the head to reduce the luff lengths, the Hood spinnaker set passable well and Stormbird put in a final spurt, touching 8 knots at times.

We had never expected not to make it, but I know we all felt quiet satisfaction as we brought up at Shamrock Quay at 1318 on June 9th, only 2 days later than our original ETA, and unloaded the broken mast sections onto the pontoon. We had brought home our dead! Shamrock Quay had been advised of our



arrival and within half an hour, the jury mast had been lifted out and Stormbird was in the travel-lift and ashore. There was no hull damage apart from minor chips in the gelcoat at deck level and she was none the worse for the hard time she had had during the 15 months previous. Since leaving West Mersea in October '81 she had sailed 14,120 miles and 20000 miles since her launch in April the same year. We had averaged just about 6 knots from Bermuda despite the dismasting: which all says something about the sea-keeping abilities and speed of the modern racing yacht.

On June 14th, after a complete re-rig and re-fit, Paddy took Stormbird to sea once again bound for Ireland. She arrived in good time, competed in the RORC Round Ireland Race and was placed second.

The reason for the mast failure appeared to be a fatigue fracture at the attachment of the starboard lower to the mast. The fracture was actually inside the mast

fitting, the broken end remaining in position so that there was no doubt as to where the rod had failed. The inference has to be that nothing less than full articulation at the attachment points of rod rigging is good enough, even if this means some sacrifice to windage.



Author: John Harrison (1922-2000)

