

The Ferry and the Commodore's Cruise 2011

Photos can be viewed at

<https://picasaweb.google.com/113004977129750187786/CommodoreSCruise2011>

Tuesday the 2nd. I had an appointment with the Registrar at Raigmore and if that was successful then off to Peterhead to join the Commodore's Cruise aboard Tom's boat, Baccarat, a 35 foot Bolero.

Perhaps I should first explain why I had to go to the hospital.

I had committed myself to be one of the skipper's aboard the Cromarty ferry for the season and had started operations during May. On the 1st of June, I had decided to end operations early, at 1.30pm, because of high winds and the swell which was making landing on the slipways dangerous. We had tied up the boat at the pier but the wind was blowing her off and we were trying to pull her in to be able to get off, when the rope I was heaving on, came away and I fell about four feet onto the bare steel car deck. I had put my right arm out to break my fall but it went underneath me and I heard a loud crack. I lay still for a few moments and then tried to move my arm. It was a very odd sensation when the top part moved but the bottom part wouldn't do anything. It didn't really hurt at that stage so I just lay where I had fallen and called out to Barry, the crew, to ring for an ambulance. Bill, the engineer, was also on the quayside asking if I was hurt. After ringing the emergency number, Barry answered the usual load of silly questions and eventually I started shouting out "I know I've got a broken arm so cut the crap". I lay on the deck and gradually manoeuvred my broken arm from underneath my body until it was laying by my side, a much more comfortable position.

The ambulance turned up after an hour, for a journey which should have taken no more than 30 minutes, Barry having rung three times to find out the reason for the delay. The ambulance crew turned out to be from Lochinver and after delivering their emergency from there, were commandeered to fetch me. As they did not know the area, they had to use the sat-nav which had taken them, according to one of the paramedics, up mountains and down single track roads, this being the shortest distance but took no account of the route with the shortest time.

Soon I was not caring about anything, having taken good lungfuls of the gas and air anaesthetic. My arm was splinted and I was able to get up, climb off the boat and into the ambulance. During the journey back to Raigmore, I gave the driver directions and we took the quickest route, despite the bleating of the sat-nav that we had gone the wrong way and should turn round.

In A&E, I was booked in, x-rayed and plastered within the usual time frame and arrived home after 10pm.

I returned to out-patients for the following two weeks and was seen by the registrar, a shortish man with dark hair and a distinctly chilly bed-side manner, but the third week I was seen by the consultant. We looked at each other with the dawning of mutual recognition, having both been working on our boats a few weeks before, which were stored in Inverness Marina. After that my appointments were fine, 5 minutes talking about bones and 10 minutes talking about boats.

At the last appointment before the cruise I was given a partial clearance but was told to be careful not to do anything silly as the bone could break again quite easily. I said that I would continue to wear the arm brace which would remind to be careful.

So I persuaded my long-suffering wife, a boat widow, if ever there was one, to run me to Peterhead Marina because the public transport links were awful and I had a very heavy kitbag. We arrived late afternoon, Bill having already telephoned to say that they were in the marina, and found that the Cromarty boats were tied up on the outer pontoon, nearest the seaward entrance. They were Octopus, a 35ft Atlantic Ketch, with Oliver, Andrew and Barrie; Baccarat, a 35ft Bolero, with Tom and Bill; Moonshadow, a 31ft Jeaneau Rush, with Willie and Pete and last, but not least, Heart of Gold, a 26ft Westerly Griffon, with George and Gingo.

George, as the sailing secretary of the club had organised the cruise to Anstruther, relishing the chance to meet up with his old sailing buddies from the Forth, and had prepared the passage plans for each leg of the route. Before I joined the little fleet, they had visited Lossiemouth and Whitehills with, from what I could gather, fairly uneventful motor-sails apart from Rattray Head, which was quite lumpy.

After taking a taxi to Peterhead town centre for a few drinks and a late night kebab, we retired, not very early, to be ready for the trip to Stonehaven the next day. George, in particular, was quite tired and emotional.

The morning arrived with thick fog and we set off with the hope that it would lift before too long. The other three left the marina but Baccarat grounded just before the entrance, despite the harbour master saying it would be deep enough, so we reversed back into the pontoon mooring and waited for the tide to rise further. Whilst waiting we heard some interesting radio transmissions about people going round in circles and heading directly for the Skerries. After an hour we tried again and managed to get over the bar before the marina entrance, then set a course of 90 degrees by the compass to the harbour entrance as we could not see it in the fog. Safely through we set another course by the compass to miss the Skerries and motored for 12 minutes at 5 knots before turning south onto the next heading. In the fog it was difficult to gauge how far you could see as there were no points of reference, the only other thing we saw was a fishing boat which was judged to be visible for at least half a mile. The sun tried to break through a few times, without success, and then the mist would close in again and you would start to think you could see shapes that were not really there. We approached the Stonehaven waypoint blind and then followed a compass course towards the harbour. It was then that Octopus and Heart of Gold appeared out of the fog and fell in behind us. The harbour wall soon loomed out of the mist, visible only 20 metres off, and we gratefully made our way behind it, to tie up in the berths indicated by the harbour master.

That evening we had a fish supper from the chipper that claims to have invented the deep fried Mars bar. The service was slow but the supper was fine. Feeling exhausted from the intense concentration needed to navigate in fog, an early night was called for.

The next morning dawned with the fog having lifted a little so that it was possible to see the hills behind the town. Some of the skippers were concerned with the possibility of the fog returning but as we were not leaving until midday, a decision would be taken nearer that time. The destination for that day was Arbroath, which had as narrow and dangerous an entrance as Stonehaven. All morning the mist gradually rolled back in on a gently strengthening east wind so that by 11.30am it was as bad as the previous day and the decision was taken to remain in harbour and make the long leg to Anstruther the next day.

A quiet day followed with a walk into town and a visit to the excellent butchers in the square, McHardys, where several different types of pies and sausages were purchased.

The next day, we set off a couple of hours before the tide turned south and made good progress with

a westerly wind. Instead of hugging the coast, a course was set to take us to a waypoint two miles west of the Bell Rock. Later, the wind went into the south-west, almost in the direction we wanted to go, so the iron spinnaker was hoisted.

Approaching Fife Ness, I took a radio call from Willie saying that his engine had problems and that he needed a tow. The old one cylinder Yanmar was revving out of control and the only way to stop it was to put a hand over the air inlet. Willie later confided that it had sounded like a very sick F1 engine which, in a thirty year old model, was not good news. After consulting with Tom, we agreed that the cleats and engine on Baccarat were not up to the job, especially as the sea had got up, so I radioed back that he should ask Oliver or request assistance from the local lifeboat, which was based in Anstruther. Oliver agreed to go to Willie's assistance, managed to get a line aboard and started towing. After a short while, Oliver came on the radio to say that his engine was overheating and had to abandon the tow. Willie then bit the bullet and radioed the coastguard for assistance. By that time we were nearing Anstruther, keeping a sharp lookout for the myriad of buoys, plastic bottles, milk cartons and anything else that floated as pot markers, so we did not see Willie's rescue. We did learn that, after a slow start, he had a high speed tow into port and was left, tied to the wall in the outer harbour. Robert was driven down by Jock to join Willie's boat and the next morning started to strip down the engine in Moonshadow to try and find the problem. After cleaning and putting it all back together, the engine was run and seemed to be fine although no obvious fault had been found.

We were tied up on the north wall of the inner harbour and on the quayside above was the marquee where the events of the muster were held. During the weekend there were cooking demonstrations, a kids disco (not attended), a ceilidh, a dance and operatic singers, all included in the harbour dues, which were a very reasonable £10 for two nights. At the dance, the Cromarty Boat Club was awarded the trophy for the longest distance travelled to attend the muster. On the Sunday, four of us walked the mile or so, via the coastal path, to Pitenweem which was hosting an arts festival with over 90 venues to visit. There were visits to the pub, naturally, the fishing museum and the famous Anstruther Fish Bar, which lived up to its reputation as one of the best chippers in Scotland, although the queues, for both take away and sit-in, were quite lengthy.

After consulting the weather forecasts, a skipper's meeting was held on Sunday morning, and we decided to defer our departure to Monday. The forecast for Monday were for the winds to come round to the south later in the day and as a last check, At 11.30am, I rang the harbour master at Stonehaven to make sure he had enough space to accommodate us. He strongly advised not to try and enter the harbour as there was still a large easterly swell running, which was breaking over the harbour wall, making the entrance very dangerous and the berths very wet.

As we were late leaving Anstruther, Pete, who had other commitments, left Willie's boat. Also on Monday, Oliver moved Octopus onto the end of a pontoon in the inner harbour to fill up with water but with the very strong winds, and the consequent difficulty of tying up, Andrew managed to take an unscheduled swim. He claimed that Oliver had said to jump ashore and it was just too far but I don't think we got to bottom of the story. In any event, Andrew was, sensibly, wearing a life jacket and managed to climb the boarding ladder.

On the Tuesday morning, George and Willie got away early but we had to wait for a couple of hours to get enough water under the keel. Oliver radioed to say that he was having problems starting his engine and requested engineer Bill to have a look. It turned out that his starter motor had given up. He contacted a local dealer and was told that a replacement would be available on Tuesday and agreed that we should carry on. Leaving Anstruther, we again kept a good lookout for pot markers and managed to sail on a beat up to the Bell Rock, although we did have to tack westwards at one

point in order to get round it. The wind died away a few miles short of Stonehaven and we motored in, passing Willie, who was still sailing as they had tried the engine but the old problem had re-emerged. Willie later arrived after sailing as far as possible then using his engine for a short while to get alongside. He later decided not to go any further and have his boat craned out and taken by road to Inverness. After arriving, we were just in time to get a pint and a fish supper at one of the harbour side pubs before retiring early after the long day.

Wednesday and there was only George and ourselves to set out for Peterhead. The wind was quite fresh but still manageable under full sail on a fine reach. We had a good sail all the way with the wind strengthening, and the swell growing larger, as we neared Peterhead. Rounding the Skerries, I asked harbour control for permission to enter and to be able to take down our sails inside the harbour wall. Our requests were granted and we safely made our way into the marina. George arrived not long after followed by another yacht that had tracked us, albeit much further inshore, all the way from Stonehaven. We later chatted with Simon, the skipper, who was a doctor at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. I received a telephone call from Oliver who said that his starter motor was fixed and that they would be setting off shortly to come direct to Peterhead. They arrived at 4.00 am on Thursday morning after encountering some heavy seas, which Octopus coped with magnificently. Luckily, we were not scheduled to leave until midday so they were able to get some rest.

George and I reviewed the timings for the passage around Rattray Head and left the marina at 1.00pm, Thursday afternoon, about two hours before the tidal stream was due to turn northwards. The swell outside Peterhead Harbour was quite large and we were heading straight into it until a mile offshore. There were only a couple of small, rough patches of water to cope with where the tide flows met and after turning eastwards, the wind was aft of the beam and progress became very easy.

The thirty miles to Whitehills went by quickly and after tying up to the visitor pontoon in the outer basin, we hurried up the hill to the chip shop for fish suppers, before they closed at 8.00pm. The evening was spent aboard Baccarat with Ginga as our guest, the others having gone to the pub. Ginga has a seeming inexhaustible supply of stories, most of them very amusing, such as a bad welder he once knew who was more dangerous to metal than rust.

Friday morning, George and Oliver left at 5.00am but we had to again wait for the tide until 9.00am. The forecast was for winds from the south at F3/4 at first, later increasing to F5/6. With our direction of travel being mainly eastwards, this was ideal. We started with full main sail and number 1 genoa and were consistently achieving 8 to 10 knots. After 3 hours, the promised wind increase arrived, on a rolling deck, Tom and Bill changed to the number 4 jib and put a reef in the main. From Whitehills to Lossie took about four and a half hours and then to the Cromarty Fairway Buoy in another hour and a half. However, our fortunes were about to change.

Just after the Fairway Buoy the wind died to almost nothing, so it was on with the engine and down with the genoa. After ten minutes, Tom reported from below that the engine overheating light was on and pulled the kill switch. We sat there, not making much progress, but, luckily, the wind picked up again and we started sailing along the side of the Riff Bank and down into Rosemarkie Bay. We had to tack a four times to get around Chanonry Point and continued to the Munloch Buoy where the wind died completely.

We sat, drifting slowly with limp sales, for a long time. We were not quite close enough to the marina to start the engine, if it was only going to last ten minutes. That would put us under the Kessock Bridge in dangerous currents with likely damage to the boat and no idea of where we would end up. Eventually, Tom suggested that we could maybe tow the boat with the tender and outboard, as the tide was with us. The tender was taken out and inflated but when it came time to

get the outboard, the lock was rusted solid. After some more thinking time, I made another suggestion. We would prepare the anchor and then start the engine. The idea being that if the engine overheated and stopped again, we could then put the anchor out, wait until the engine cooled and carry on, doing this as many times as necessary. So away we motored again, all the way into the marina without a problem. Annoyance and frustration being felt by all at the fickle engine.

So, it had taken us six hours to cover the distance from Whitehills to the Cromarty Sutors, and another six hours to get from there into Inverness Marin. Bill and I helped Tom, in the fading light, to fold up the sails, deflate the tender and put everything away before being given a lift home by Sheila.

Altogether a most enjoyable and successful Commodore's Cruise, great sailing, good company and visiting new ports and pubs.

Gwyn Phillips
10 September 2011