

## Teignmouth to Inverness

I flew to Southampton from Inverness to visit my second son for a couple of days, before taking the train to Teignmouth on the Monday. At the station, there was not a taxi in sight so I asked for directions to the lifeboat station, where Octopus was moored, and after getting helpful directions from a gentleman, started walking with my heavy kit bag and laptop over my shoulder. Arriving at the river, after a mile of staggering along, I telephoned Oliver, the owner, on the mobile to say I could see the boat and he set out to the shore in the tender. The boat was only 30 yards offshore so after a very short crossing, I climbed aboard Octopus, a 35 foot Atlantic Ketch, for my first look at her.

She was a well built boat constructed of mahogany on oak with a fibreglass sheath, a deep centre cockpit with a hard top covering most of it, twin bunks in the forepeak, centre saloon, heads and galley and an aft cabin, leading off the cockpit, with a double berth and heads. Masses of varnished wood and tiles round the sinks finished of an interior in classic style. My accommodation was in the aft cabin as I then had immediate access to the helmsman in the cockpit, if required.

There were a few tasks still to be done, such as bending on the sails, before the decision was taken to leave on the evening tide. The crew comprised of Oliver and two friends, Barry and Andrew, who would be the watchkeepers, and myself as skipper, available at any hour for help and guidance. None of the three friends had any experience of night or long passage sailing but had taken day skipper courses and were very keen to learn.

In my earlier discussions with Oliver, we had talked about which route to take to Inverness, whether via the East coast, 700 miles, or West coast, 550miles, but the weather forecast, of south westerly winds force 5/6, increasing to gale force within 36 hours, determined that we would go east. In this way we could head for Brighton and shelter from the coming strong winds for a day and also top off the fuel and water tanks.

So, after working out the tides, we left Teignmouth late afternoon but not without concerns about the engine, which was difficult to turn over before starting.

The passage to Brighton was uneventful, except for when Barry became disoriented by a lighthouse on night watch. He called me up to the cockpit in the early hours and we were soon heading in the right direction again. The wind picked up and the weather steadily worsened as we progressed although it was on our starboard quarter so not too uncomfortable. Having reached the last of our waypoints, we spotted the entrance to the marina and headed in towards the breakwater, which was earning its name as the waves were crashing into it and spraying thirty feet into the air. Although the marina entrance is quite wide, only half of it is useable as a sand bank builds up on the south side restricting the channel to approximately 150 feet, directly behind the sea wall. After surfing in, we had to turn sharply 90 degrees to port, beam on to the heavy sea, and were almost laid on our side by one wave just at the mouth of the narrow entrance. Having made it through this part, I noticed that the engine had overheated and we were in imminent danger of losing it altogether. There had previously been a problem with the raw water intake occasionally not drawing and I thought it was the same thing happening again after we had heeled right over. I asked Oliver to open the cockpit sole and pour any water we had down the inlet, meanwhile reducing engine revs right down and praying it would hold out. Our luck held and we made it to the diesel dock, tied up and took topped up the tanks. However, when we made our way from the diesel dock to the allocated berth, the same thing happened even though it was pumping sea water. We later checked the fresh water and found that most of this had disappeared.



The next morning, Oliver went off to find an engineer and returned with Gareth who, after hearing the problems, said it sounded like the head gasket had gone and would return later to remove the injectors to see if this was the case. Gareth returned in the afternoon, removed the injectors and turned the engine by hand, so that water squirted out of the aftmost cylinder. This confirmed the diagnosis of the broken head gasket and it also explained to where all the fresh cooling water had disappeared, as well as the problems starting the engine due to being hydraulic (if there is water in the cylinder, it can not be compressed and the engine will only start turning properly when it has been ejected through an exhaust valve).

The following day another, older engineer turned up and started taking off the engine head, saying it would be a few days before everything could be completed and so we made plans to return home.

Having made reservations on my laptop, I took the train from Brighton to Gatwick and the flight to Inverness, a nice easy journey.

After talking to Oliver on the phone, after the work on the engine had been completed, we planned to return to the boat, to complete the trip but, unfortunately, Barry and Andrew had other, prior engagements and would not be available. Luckily, Bill, who was retired but had been an engineer in the Merchant Navy for 27 years and a sound sailor, was available and agreed to join us.

Bill and I travelled to Brighton the same way as I had returned, went out with Oliver for an evening meal before setting off at midnight for the first leg of the journey. The exit from Brighton Marina was in marked contrast to our arrival with a calm sea and light breezes. The forecast was for the wind to increase to F6/7 the next evening, so we planned to stop in Dover the next night, to shelter

from the weather, and set off the following morning when the wind and sea would be decreasing.

The passage to Dover was quite easy but the entrance to Dover harbour, a different matter altogether. A quite large swell was running across the entrance from the East and slightly angling inwards towards the Western mouth of the harbour. Keeping well to the starboard side, we went through the entrance but, what could not be seen from outside was that the swell hit the western pier and bounced off at right angles directly into the harbour. To get through this, we had to take it on the beam again and experience another near horizontal position.

A quiet night in Dover was followed by more hair-raising experiences getting out. I was at the helm and asked Oliver to radio Dover Port Control, asking them for permission to leave the harbour and head north. They granted permission and said to leave by the western entrance. I thought this a bit odd as we would have to cross the ferry lanes using the eastern entrance but planned to go a couple of miles out to sea, as recommended in the Almanac, to be safe. When we cleared the harbour walls, the swell was much worse than the previous day and it was breaking, putting the boat in imminent danger of capsizing if we continued straight out to sea or turned west. I took the decision to turn into the swell and cross the eastern entrance, angling as best we could to cross astern of an incoming ferry. Our progress was painfully slow but we did clear eventually and after rounding the next headland, the sea started to quieten.

The journey from then on became progressively easier, passing through the notorious Goodwin sands via a well marked channel, then heading north east to clear the sand banks of the Thames Estuary. Night fell as we crossed the shipping lanes into Harwich and Felixstowe and Oliver was on the helm for the tricky passage through the wind-farms off Lowestoft. The Wash was smooth and flat as the sun rose and the weather continued fair for another day, until Rattray Head, north of Aberdeen.

We had just passed Fraserburgh, when the engine started coughing and I rushed to change over the fuel stopcock to the opposite tank. This made no difference as the engine then stopped so I started sailing her back towards the harbour entrance. Bill got into the engine compartment and tried to bleed the fuel system, but without any luck. Oliver dipped the fuel tanks, to find that they were almost empty, broke out the jerry can of spare fuel and poured the diesel into the tank. When Oliver had bought Octopus, he was told that the fuel capacity was 120 gallons and on a calculated usage of a gallon per hour, we thought we had plenty of fuel. We later calculated that the tanks only held 80 gallons and that the bottom quarter was not usable.

After the diesel system was bled again, the motor started and we made our way quickly into Fraserburgh harbour. Another piece of good fortune was that this being a fishing port, fuel was readily available all day and every day.

Having fuelled and oiled, we set off again into a freshening south westerly wind which whipped up the sea in some of the open bays along the Moray Coast, into quite a nasty swell. After motoring through the night, we arrived at Chanonry Ness as the dawn was breaking and tied up in Inverness Marina at eight-o'clock in the morning.

Bill went off to have a shower and we packed up our things to await being picked up by my patient and very understanding wife.

Gwyn  
19/11/09