

The Cromarty Ferry

It was a long time coming.

The old ferry had gone away in January, down to the Bristol Channel, taken by two men who had lashed a VW camper van aboard for their accommodation. The last being heard of them was that it had broken down twice, the last time in the Irish Sea where they had to be towed into port on the Isle of Man.

The new ferry was built in Southampton and had been promised for delivery mid-May. Following various excuses by the shipyard, she was eventually launched in August with the yard having to take down the end wall of the shed to get her out and then being lifted into the water by a massive crane. Having been tested by the yard and given sea trials by the MCA she was ready to hand over late in September.

My involvement began when I read an article in the Ross-shire Journal about the new ferry and wondered if the owners had thought about the logistics of getting their new boat from Southampton to Cromarty. So I sent an email to the Cromarty Ferry Company web site address and offered my services. I heard nothing for three months and had all but forgotten about it when I received a phone call from Tom Henderson, the MD, saying they would be interested in using my services and could we meet.

I later met Tom in the bar of the Royal Hotel, in Cromarty which was run by his sister Jenny. I gave Tom the normal forms to fill in and agreed to keep in touch until nearer the completion date.

Weeks went by and promised delivery dates were given by the yard and not met until, at last, we seemed to be getting somewhere and I started getting involved with the MCA in Southampton, who had been keeping a very close eye on the construction.

The first problem that arose was that I had a Yachtmaster ticket for sail boats with an auxiliary engine but the MCA insisted that it be for power driven vessels as the boat was work coded. I still can not see the difference between a yacht with an engine and any other boat with an engine but they insisted so I had to frantically call round all my list of contacts to find somebody with the right ticket. After many refusals, due to the short notice, I eventually got hold of Alan, who was the second cox of the Invergordon lifeboat however his commercial endorsement had lapsed but he said he could fast track a reinstatement, and so joined the crew.

The second problem with the MCA was the passage plan. I did what I normally do and plotted the course on the chart with bearings and distances to the next waypoint, then wrote all the details in my log book and finally entered all the information on my laptop chartplotter and handheld GPS, cross referencing everything to make sure there were no mistakes. Into the log went other useful information such as harbour and VTS radio channels and tidal gate notes. When asked for the passage plan, I scanned my log book and sent it to the MCA but received a very frosty reply saying this was not adequate and giving me reams of information on how to make a voyage or passage plan. I must admit that I was a little upset by the tone of this reply so, in the heat of the moment, sat down and wrote explaining, as if to a three year old, what I had done, pointing out that the rules said that small vessels do not have to have the passage plan fully in writing. I received an even more terse reply with one memorable phrase. 'Do not quote regulations to the Regulator' I was told in no uncertain terms, which reinforced my previous opinion.. So, knowing that this was a battle I was never likely to win, I sat down for a couple of days and wrote a fully detailed plan, a copy of which

is given at the end of this piece.

After submitting this to the MCA, and two reminders for a reply, I received emails saying Alan's ticket was acceptable and that they did not approve passage plans but would make no further comment. As I said to Tom, this was as close to a yes as we were ever likely to receive.

Eventually departure day arrived and Alan, Bill and myself flew down to Gatwick, on Sunday, changing to the train, which seemed to stop at every station along the way, arriving in Southampton mid-evening, to be collected by a taxi and taken to some shabby digs where the first thing we heard was a woman shouting from an upstairs window 'Go away. We don't want you here'. The rooms were basic, very basic, but reasonably clean although I did not want to think about the state of the mattress beneath the sheet. That night we went to get supper in the Fat Cat, diagonally across a big park, and then wondered about town. It was freshers week and the place was heaving with students in fancy dress laughing, shouting, dancing and zigzagging the streets. After being refused entry at a couple of late pubs, because half of us did not look remotely like students, we managed to obtain student wristbands and sneaked in the back door of one where we stayed until the early hours.

Monday we went down to the yard and took the Queen out for a couple of hours, to familiarize ourselves with the layout and handling, together with a man who swung the compass along the way. We had our wrists slapped by the Coastguard for not notifying them of our trip because we had, inadvertently, just slipped out of the river into a traffic zone. After lunch we went to a supermarket and bought the provisions needed for the trip, loaded them into a taxi and then stowed them aboard. That night I met my son, who stays nearby, and we went out for a nice dinner after an unpleasant encounter with a drunk driver. The others had gone for supper in the Fat Cat again and then on to another pub, where I joined them later. I did not have anything alcoholic that night, still recovering from the previous one, but the others were a little more hazy on such details.

The next morning we arrived early at the boat expecting to see a fuel truck ready to top up the tanks but despite repeated visits to the office, it did not turn up until nearly midday. In the meantime, our favourite MCA official arrived to do a final check on the Queen and came up with two small matters which he said had to be rectified before we could leave. Heaving a sigh of relief after he had left, we had a small ceremony of naming the boat. Tom did the honours and at the same time poured a quarter bottle of Scotland's finest whisky over her bows.

Not wanting to waste any more time, we set off as soon as the fuel was aboard and made our way down the River Itchen, properly notifying VTS this time, to Southampton Water, past the Hamble and into the Solent. Luckily there were hardly any other vessels in sight so we had an uneventful time until we reached the approaches to Portsmouth, where a few more ferries and other vessels were crossing. Passing between the big round sea forts and then crossing the Nab Deep Water Channel led us out into the English Channel.

Then began the watch system which we had changed to four hours with two crew on the bridge at all times, plus two dog watches of two hours each after midday, so that the night shifts were rotated. We had just rounded Selsey Bill when the Coastguard weather came on the radio and it was not good news. The forecast for the wind, from the south, had increased from Force 4 to Force 5, 6, or even possibly 7. Before we had left, the MCA had given us very strict instructions not to be at sea in anything more than a Force 4 as the boat was not suitable for making extended offshore passages. So I immediately looked for a port of refuge and telephoned the Shoreham Harbourmaster, who agreed we could take shelter there. Nearly three hours later, just as the light had faded, we entered the mouth of the river, turned to starboard and entered the lock which raised us a few feet up to the basin. Mooring up to a quay between fishing boats, we settled down to supper and an early night.

When we tried to blow up the air beds, mine had a puncture, which I repaired with the aid of some contact adhesive and tape, and Tom's was missing a stopper, which could not be repaired, so he spent the night on the steel deck.

The next morning, the forecast had the winds dying away enough to let us get back to sea but first it was decided to refuel so an estimate of fuel consumption could be made. The manufacturers literature stated this to be 60 litres per hour but at the end of the voyage I reckoned this to be actually around 25 litres per hour. Another problem was that we had been given three different numbers for the fuel capacity, 3000 litres in the summary specification, 3500 litres in the drawings and 4200 by the yard boss, and because there were no fuel gauges, the tanks had to be dipped then calculated by reference to a table of values. The safest course was to use the lowest figure for the capacity of the tanks. Finding the fuelling berth took us a while as the receptionist who we telephoned was not much help at all but, after locking out of the basin and proceeding up the river for a half mile, it became quite obvious. Whilst there, Tom and Allan took the opportunity of visiting a hardware store and purchased another air bed.

Back at sea, we started to make reasonable progress with the wind in the south west and the swell on our quarter. Passed Beachy Head and Dungeness, through the Dover Straits, where traffic was very heavy, negotiating the Goodwin Sands, around North Foreland, making a detour north eastwards to avoid the massive new Thanet Windfarm, across the Thames Estuary and carefully avoiding the Sunk Traffic Separation Scheme off Harwich, the worst of the traffic was behind us.

The wind had backed south then south east and the sea was slight as we progressed up the East Anglian coast towards our first planned fuel stop at Lowestoft. Arriving just before noon, we had to wait outside the harbour walls until the bridge to the inner harbour had been raised allowing several boats to leave. When the lights turned green we made way carefully into the narrow entrance, negotiating the strong cross currents, and turned to starboard into the Waveney Dock where the fuel dock was in the opposite corner. After taking on diesel and water, Tom, Alan and I walked into town to replenish stores.

Our meals were mostly porridge for breakfast, sandwiches for lunch and a microwaved meal in the evening, plus the normal assortment of snacks, biscuits and fruit. Our cooking facilities consisted of a kettle, a toasted sandwich maker and a microwave but this was more than adequate and none of us went hungry. Unfortunately Tom wasn't hungry at all for quite a lot of the voyage.

Leaving Lowestoft just over an hour after we arrived, we set off up the Lowestoft and Corton Roads, passing Great Yarmouth and around the north Norfolk coast. In the early evening hours we started across the Wash, passing the North Race, after which the wind picked up and conditions gradually began to deteriorate so that Alan, on his watch, took the decision to head into the Humber to shelter for a while. He had decided to anchor behind Spurn Head but Humber VTS pointed him towards a spot between two shipping channels, in front of an oil rig, and in the main current. Bill and I were awoken in the early hours, just before we arrived, and went on deck to prepare the anchor. After Alan had positioned the boat we dropped the anchor slowly, as we were not certain that the end of the chain was secure. Once the anchor felt like it had dug in, we carefully watched our position relative to the rig but realised that we were very slowly being taken towards it by a combination of strong winds and tide. I pointed out to Allan that we really only had two choices left, either to continue on our way or go further up the Humber into more sheltered waters. Humber VTS were contacted, told we had problems anchoring and had decided to continue north. They, helpfully, advised that the wind was forecast to abate so we set off again at five in the morning. Getting the anchor up was a problem as the chain kept slipping off the windlass, it was ten feet in and two feet out all the way up, but three of us managed it eventually.

The wind and sea did begin to die away as we headed north and normal watches resumed. Bill and I had again taken to our beds, after our watch, and so missed the drama of Flamborough Head. When you have a constant engine noise, any variation wakes you up immediately thinking “What's gone wrong”. So when the engines were throttled back, both Bill and I woke up and lay in our beds for a couple of minutes, each thinking, are we going to be called on deck? But the engines throttled up again and we went back to sleep. Alan later told us that he had spotted a couple of unusually big waves coming broadside and so had reduced revs and turned to meet them. After they had passed, he had resumed course and speed.

From that point, things settled down and we plodded on to Eyemouth for our next fuel stop. Somewhere around the Farne Islands, we picked up a stowaway. A small bird, obviously exhausted, came aboard and eventually ended up in the wheel house where it tucked its head beneath a wing and went to sleep. It survived the night and flew off when we were approaching Eyemouth.



The entrance to Eyemouth is very narrow, only 17.5 metres between waves crashing on the sharp teeth of rocks, and then you get into an even narrower channel between high harbour walls. For the diesel berth we turned smartly to port and tied up just before 8.00am.

A bacon sandwich and full fuel tanks later, we set off again past St Abbs Head and across the Firth of Forth, passing just west of the Bell Rock. Our passage plan had called for a route via Fife Ness, the mouth of the Tay and then north east along the coast. With the sea conditions still reasonably favourable, Alan decided to head straight for Arbroath.

Just past the Bell Rock, we turned to head north, straight for Aberdeen, but with the swell and wind

in the north east, we were now crashing into the waves. The boat was very difficult to handle on this heading, what with a flat bottom and the high superstructure aft acting as a big mainsail. But we pushed on and, with a favourable tide, made good progress. There was some trepidation about the conditions off Rattray Head but our fears were unfounded as we kept well off and things quietened down as we gradually turned west.

The worst was now behind and, with a following wind, tide and swell, the miles passed quickly until, with a sense of relief, the Sutors could be seen.

A great reception awaited us in Cromarty, with a big banner on the shore welcoming the Queen home and she was taken, very ably, into the narrow harbour entrance, by Tom. There were many people who had come to see the new ferry and a press photographer took pictures of a reasonably clean crew.

I had packed my bag and we had thoroughly cleaned the boat before we arrived, so the only thing left to do was get a couple of pints in the Royal.

Gwyn Phillips
4 November 2010



Passage Plan

Port of Departure Southampton

Port of Arrival: Cromarty

Date from: 5/10/10

To: 12/10/10

Main charts to be used (sequentially):-

Imray C15, C9, C8, C1, C28, C29, C24 and C23

Additional charts available:-

Admiralty 1183, 2052, 1504, 1190, 1191, 1407, 1409, 115

Imray : C12, C25, C30, C31

Reference data:-

Reeds Almanac UK 2010

Navigation Equipment:-

Raymarine RD218 radar

Raymarine C120 with UK charts (fixed)

Depth Sounder

Laptop PC with GPS receiver and plotting programme

2 handheld GPS

Fixed compass

Hand-held compass

Appraisal

A Channel/North Sea passage with consideration to be given to the difficult navigational areas of Southampton Water, The Solent (avoiding precautionary area), Dover TSS, Goodwin Sands, Harwich TSS, Great Yarmouth, Humber TSS, Flamborough Head and Ratray Head. Route to remain within 20 nautical miles of coastline at all times. Passage approximately 629 nautical miles. Estimated average vessel speed 6 knots. Vessel has nearly flat bottom and should not attempt passage in anything other than smooth, slight or moderate sea states and winds of no more than F4. Tidal gates at Beachy Head, Dungeness, Dover Strait, Great Yarmouth, Flamborough Head and Ratray Head.

Vessel has a fuel capacity of approximately 3,000 litres with a stated consumption of 60 litres per hour. At a cruising speed of 6 knots this gives a cruising range of 300 nautical miles. Allowing a 25% margin, this equates to a safe cruising range of 225 miles between fuel stops. In the absence of weather considerations, refuelling stops would be undertaken at Lowestoft and North Shields but fuel is available at all ports of refuge if an alternative strategy is required.

Planning

Navigation

Review passage notes in Almanac.

Charts to be marked with route and waypoints.

Waypoint lat/long, bearing and distance to be taken from chart.

Waypoints lat/long to be written into log book with bearing and distance to next.

Waypoints to be programmed into:-

- Fixed chartplotter
- Mobile chartplotter
- Handheld GPS

Routes to be created on:-

- Fixed chartplotter
- Mobile chartplotter
- Handheld GPS.

Bearing and distance to be checked for each waypoint as written into log book to those generated by chartplotters and GPS.

Bearing and distance to be noted on chart for all course changes.

Chart number of next and previous charts at each end of route to be noted on current chart.

All relevant radar conspicuous objects and Racons to be marked on chart.

Sunrise and sunset times to be obtained from Almanac.

Tide timetables and tidal stream data to be obtained from Almanac and charts.

Dangers and Hazards to Navigation

Report of bundles of floating logs deposited in North Sea approximately 55 nautical miles east of Lowestoft, moving south slowly on tidal drift.

Coastguard broadcasts for navigation warnings on VHF Ch16 to be monitored and entered into log.

Tidal streams in Southampton Water and Solent, No streams greater than 2.4 knots, leave berth no earlier than HW Portsmouth+0200 to arrive Black Jack Buoy at HW Portsmouth+0300 for favourable tides. But by transiting the Looe at slack water, HW Portsmouth+0430, tide can be carried to Dover at a SOG of 7 knots, thus leaving berth at HW Portsmouth+0030 and having 1 hour of foul tide.

Monitor VHF Ch12 for Southampton VTS and VHF Ch11 for QHM Portsmouth. Maintain two crew for lookout on bridge, especially astern, until clear of Solent. Consider routing outside main channel if large vessels present. Give a wide berth to any large vessels manoeuvring in Pilot Boarding Area or Nab Channel. Keep clear of Nab DW Channel to north if possible otherwise cross on 90 deg heading.

Monitor sea state for passage around Beachy Head, Dungerness, through Dover Strait, the Wash and around Flamborough and Ratray Heads, allowing for tidal streams and wind direction/strength.

Remain in Inshore Traffic Zone from Brighton so as not to enter Dover TSS. Clearing bearing for TSS from Royal Sovereign to Dungerness 068degT. Clearing bearing for TSS from Dungerness to Dover 057degT.

Heavy traffic crossing at Port of Dover, recommended minimum distance offshore 2 miles. Monitor VHF Ch74 for Dover Port Control.

Remain inshore of Sunk TSS, monitor Harwich VTS on Ch71. Heavy traffic crossing in DW channels.

Stay offshore of Humber TSS monitor Humber VTS on Ch14. Heavy traffic.

Stay at least 2 nautical miles off Flamborough Head if wind against tides.

Stay at least 3 nautical miles off St Abb's Head if wind against tides.

Stay at least 3 nautical miles off Ratray Head if wind against spring tides.

Other clearing bearings or ranges to be calculated as circumstances require.

Weather

Advance weather planning from reports supplied by Met Office, Grib.us, XCWeather, and Magic Seaweed websites. Information to be obtained and written in log book details to include any gale or severe weather warnings, wind strength, weather, visibility and sea state.

Crew

Minimum of 3 experienced crew with appropriate qualifications:-

Skipper: minimum Yachtmaster Coastal PDV with commercial endorsement.

Mate : Experience in watch keeping and navigation

Engineer: Experience with mechanical/electrical systems and watch keeping.

Vessel coded Class 3

Ports of Refuge

Vessel to be within 30 nautical miles of a port of refuge at all times. See Appendix 1 for list of ports.

Execution

Crew

Skipper: Alan Lipp Yachtmaster Offshore PDV with commercial endorsement.

Mate: Gwyn Phillips Yachtmaster Offshore SV with commercial endorsement.

Engineer William Paterson over 30 years at sea, highest rank obtained 2nd Engineer.

Deck Crew Tom Henderson Yachtmaster Offshore/Coastal Theory.

Vessel Preparation

Inventory check to be carried out prior to departure.

Fuel consumption to be checked.

Program MMSI number into VHF.

Safety briefing for crew.

Navigation

Copy of passage plan and log/note book to be carried on bridge at all times for reference.

Briefing for crew on passage plan.

Plot an EP on chart each time there is a position fix based on the time interval until next fix.

Calculate CTS on chart at each change of direction and/or speed.

Departure from Southampton to be carried out during daylight hours.

Watch System

One member of crew with watch experience to be on bridge at all times. Watch is 3 hours on followed by six hours off. In severely reduced visibility, two crew to be on bridge at all times, watch changed to 4 hours on and 4 hours off.

Position Fixing

For passage from Southampton to the Humber, position to be fixed by primary method at 1 hourly intervals. From the Humber north to be done at the end of each watch.

In severely reduced visibility, to be fixed at maximum 30 minute intervals and continuously monitored.

Position also to be fixed at all changes of course and/or speed.

Lat/Long, SOG, course, wind and barometric pressure to be written into log book.

Position to be entered on chart as soon as practicable.

Confirm position with secondary method.

Primary

By taking three bearings with hand-held compass on conspicuous lights, marks or shore features.

By radar for bearing and distance on Racon Buoys (see Appendix 2 for list).

By radar for bearings on three conspicuous objects.

By transits.

Secondary

By GPS

By single point fix on marks passed (for guidance only).

Weather

Weather reports to be obtained from HM Coastguard (see Almanac for times) and written into log book. Secondary source of weather from Grib.us when within mobile reception range.

Monitoring

Position

Confirm correct working of instruments at least once every 24 hours and note in log book.

Course

Use parallel indexing where conspicuous marks available to monitor course.

Chartplotter also to be used to monitor course.

Fuel

Monitor fuel reserves every 3 hours.

Appendix 1

Ports of Refuge

Brighton Difficult in SE gales (alternative Shoreham).

Dover West entrance difficult in W gales.

Ramsgate - Difficult in E gales.

Harwich

Lowestoft - Difficult in E gales.

Grimsby - Entry HW \pm 2

Whitby - Difficult in N gales (alternative Scarborough)

Hartlepool

River Tyne/North Shields

Eyemouth - Difficult in strong N to E winds.

Montrose - Overfalls develop in wind over ebb tide

Aberdeen - Difficult in strong NE to ESE winds.

Peterhead

Fraserburgh - Difficult in NE to SE gales.

Appendix 2

Racons

Nab Tower (T)
Owers (O)
Greenwich Met Station (M)
Varne (T)
MPC (O)
E Goodwin (T)
NE Goodwin (M)
Inter Bank (M)
NE Split (T)
Sunk Inner (T)
N Shipwash (M)
Orford Ness (T)
Croma Sand (T)
Newarp (Q)
N Halsboro (T)
Cromer (O)
N Well (T)
Dudgeon (O)
Outer Sand (O)
Humber (T)
Tees Fairway (B)
St Abbs Head (T)
Bell Rock (M)
Abertay N (T)
Scurdie Ness (T)
Girdle Ness (G)
Buchan Ness (O)
Rattray Head (M)
Tarbet Ness (T)
Fairway Buoy Cromarty (M)

Note:

Lack of suitable Racons between Humber and St Abbs Head