

Whitby to Faversham

The two, sixty foot, former fast Thames Ferries had been towed down as far as Whitby before Christmas but had been forced to put into harbour due to worsening conditions at sea. There they had lain for three weeks awaiting a break in the cold and stormy January weather for their final run down to the boat yard at Faversham.

Eventually, the weather window arrived and seven of us, and all our baggage, squeezed into a small people carrier for the overnight trip from Inverness, breaking the journey at Perth and Berwick for coffee and smokes.

We arrived at seven in the morning and some went for breakfast whilst others went in search of the harbour master, who had the keys, and a supply of fuel.

Many hours later in the mid afternoon, we were at last suitably prepared and ready to leave. I was on one boat with Gordon and Mickey and on the other was Scott, Jimmy and Tina. Gordon was an experienced fisherman who was, supposedly, applying for his skipper's ticket and Mickey had experience steering these particular boats but not offshore. Scott had bought a brand new chart plotter but, because of the problems getting the boats ready to leave, I did not have time to fit it; so it was navigation by paper charts, compass and hand-held GPS.

Leaving Whitby harbour entrance, in any sort of an easterly swell, is quite unpleasant as the breakwaters funnel the waves into the small harbour mouth and you bounce up and down as on a particularly vicious roller-coaster. Once we were a half mile out, things quietened down but there was still a nasty wallowing as we turned beam on to the sea, under a leaden sky. This is where I got the first inkling that all was not well with Mickey, as he said he felt very sick and retired to his bed immediately.

Passed Robin Hood Bay, I thought we were doing well but apparently things were not quite so happy on the other boat, they thought it was too rough and changed course to enter Scarborough Harbour. We approached just as the light was fading and tied up alongside the end of the old fishing pier in the dark. We had fish and chips that evening and finished off with a few pints in a pub at the landward end of the pier before retiring to sleeping bags on the unheated cabin floor

The next day we made a reasonably early start and headed out into a slightly calmer sea than the previous day but it was still rough around Flamborough Head with wind against tide. Mickey had again retired to his bed almost as soon as we left harbour, so I mentally christened him 'Seasick'. We made good progress and I had intended to stop in Grimsby, as the weather was set to deteriorate overnight, but this time the other boat wanted to continue. I informed them that I was stopping, and as I was navigating, they did not have a choice unless they wanted to continue in the dark without a GPS or charts. They saw sense and followed us in.

We navigated up the Humber as far as the lock leading to the fish dock at Grimsby, the entrance of which is marked by quite a conspicuous tower. The tide was not quite high enough to open the gate so we sat inside the lock and waited for an hour before we could get inside. Having locked into the dock, we motored to the narrow channel at the rear right of the fish dock which led to a well kept marina with a very nice club house.

Tying up, tidying up and showering came first, then a drink and a telephone order for a Chinese take-away. This was followed by a couple more, cheap, drinks in the club house and it made for quite a pleasant evening. The next morning we had some spare time before the lock gates could

open so I took a walk around part of Grimsby, which was pretty grim. Derelict buildings, run-down neighbourhoods, graffiti, rubbish and a general air of poverty and neglect. It may have been better in other parts but the area around the docks was most depressing.

On returning to the boats, I asked Mickey to carry out the engine checks and, fully fuelled, we set off through the fish dock, out of the lock gates and heading towards the main channel. We had not gone a mile when, looking back, I noticed that the other boat had stopped; so we reversed our course and went back to find out what was happening.

Pulling alongside, I noticed that their engine hatch was open and, according to Jimmy, taking on water in that compartment. The boats were built with several watertight compartments so it was unlikely that it would sink, but the sea water was being sprayed about, inside the engine compartment, by the flywheel, with the very real possibility that the electrics would fail at some point and it would be better if this did not happen when we were further out.

So we both went back to Grimsby and tied up again in the marina where Jimmy set about repairing the gasket which had failed. We managed to beg some quick setting epoxy putty and wooden wedges with which the hole was sealed but by that time the lock gates had closed again, so we were stuck until the next rising tide. As I had time, I installed the chart plotter on my boat using mainly duct tape to hold it, and the antenna, in place. I was now a lot more relaxed about sailing through the night.

The lock gates reopened at 5.00pm and we set off in the gathering gloom, back down the Humber passing an area of ships at anchor, heading for the Wash, while Mickey retired to his bed once more.

After an hour Scott came on the radio and asked if I thought it was safe to continue because the waves were making the boats bounce around. I said that, despite being a bit uncomfortable, we should continue because the forecast was for calmer weather through the night and we would get the advantage of the Norfolk lee shore, a bit further south.

We passed our next reference point, a gate in the middle of the Wash, marked by a north cardinal buoy to the west and a starboard lateral buoy to the east, and continued until we made the Norfolk coast at Sheringham, Hugging the shore as closely as, safely, possible, we passed Cromer and reached Cockle Shoal where you can take either the inside or seaward passage down the east coast of East Anglia.

I had decided to take the inside channel which although more difficult to navigate, is very well buoyed and much less distance. At the north end is Great Yarmouth and the south end, Lowestoft, with some wind turbines along the way. The sight of the red lights reflecting off the barely visible turbine blades, turning against a black sky, was quite spooky.

It was 5.00am before we cleared the inside channel and as we were in clear water for a while, I decided to take a nap, having been up for nearly 24 hours. I handed over to Gordon, pointed out the course on the chart plotter and retired to my sleeping bag on the cabin floor. Not half an hour had passed before I was woken by Gordon shouting that he was having problems with the chart plotter. I rushed up to the wheelhouse, still in my thermals, and saw that we were well off course and going in the wrong direction. Taking control, I changed our heading and soon brought the boat back onto the correct course, heading for the next waypoint. Looking back at our course on the chart plotter, it showed we had veered dangerously close to the shore, done a complete 360 degree turn then meandered in various different directions. Scott, copying these antics in the following boat, had eventually insisted that Gordon wake me to take control. Later, Scott was of the opinion that Gordon, not being able to follow a course on the GPS, had just steered for the brightest light, which

was a light house until the sun started coming up.

As we progressed further south towards Orford Ness and the Harwich Traffic Separation Scheme, it became lighter and we were able to see a perfectly flat sea over which we witnessed a glorious winter sunrise. I was glad that we were approaching the tricky passage, through the five fingers of the Thames Estuary, in daylight as we were able to see clearly the passing ships in this very busy waterway. Mickey had at last got out of his bed and I offered him the helm but he said he still felt queasy, even though the sea was glassy smooth. We took the Kings Channel and upon reaching the end, turned south-west towards the Kentish Flats wind farm. From there it was just a matter of following the buoys to the Swale and then trying to spot the entrance to Faversham Creek which was made very difficult by the low sun directly in our eyes and a slight mist rising off the water.

Faversham Creek is a narrow waterway which dries to whitish mud and is surrounded by low salt marshes. We had phoned ahead when nearing the wind farm and were told that if we took our time on the approach, there should be enough water in the Creek to navigate and this proved the case but still touched bottom in a couple of places. Half way to Faversham, we were still winding round the tortuous bends, apparently in the middle of nowhere, so another phone call was made to the boatyard and were reassured that we were on the right track and they could see us.

We finally tied up the boats, removed our gear to the wharf and went for a hot brunch in a very nice little café in Faversham High Street. Returning later to the boat yard, the bags and bodies were again squeezed into the undersized car to make the 12 hour journey back to Inverness, of which I probably spent at least half, sleeping most uncomfortably.

Gwyn
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