

## Sailing in a Gale

Everyone who attended the last AGM will remember Tom Cunliffe's superb after lunch speech on the 'progress' from traditional to electronic navigation. A few weeks ago I had the chance to discover more about his approach to sailing.

It was a day out from Poole, organised by MOA member Alan King. The boat was 'Morwenna', as traditional a gaff Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter as you could wish to find, but completed in 2009 by RB Boatbuilding of Bristol. She is 46 feet on deck, and 62 feet LOA with the huge bowsprit; she is constructed of larch planking on sawn oak frames, with bronze and copper fastenings, galvanised rigging, and tiller steering; draught 8 ft, displacement 22 tonnes. Not a winch in sight, all manpower, belaying pins, cleats and handybillsies.

The forecast was for strong winds, around Force 6-7. We started with a good breakfast, then rigged the jib in stops to the end of the bowsprit. Stops are cotton threads tied to stop the sail flying until a sheet is hauled taut. They looked rather flimsy, but there were plenty of them. Organic cotton is used; it seems a previous crew had complained about the more common use of rubber bands as being non ecological, so the cotton is guaranteed biodegradable. The bowsprit was hauled out bar taut with a handybilly, which needed 3 or 4 applications to get the right tension on the stays. Too loose, and it can vibrate itself to destruction, and can even dismast the boat.

Tom roared up on his motor bike at 0900, and gave a safety briefing, which in essence was



*Will she or won't she?*

1. Stay on the boat
2. Stay on the boat
3. Stay on the boat

Stuart Jenkins, the skipper/owner, started the engine, and steeled himself for the first major test of the day. We had to reverse out alongside the boats moored on Poole Town quay, and he observed, 'If I look worried, it is because I am....Morwenna chooses which way to go, not me'.

Once out, I was surprised, apprehensive and pleased to be handed the tiller and told to keep Morwenna in the fairway while Stuart went forward and organised the foredeck to

hoist the sails. We motored downwind, the length of the fairway to Aunt Betty ECM, and turned up wind to hoist sails, positioning to use the full width of the channel. They rose smoothly enough, but the strength of the wind was already apparent, so just the staysail and half the main went up. The crew learned how to apply tension to halliards by swigging - leaning back with straight arms to haul taut. By this time we were nearly back at the quay, nothing happens quickly in these conditions. We then turned downwind again, turned off the engine and sailed to leave the harbour. Even on a reach, the weather helm was noticeable with the huge reefed main and small staysail. Flying the jib to get



*Jib in stops*



*Morwenna was steady as a rock*

more balance was impossible, it is so far for'd it would have been unmanageable.

As we turned further upwind towards Sandbanks, the weather helm became even stronger and it was a real struggle to stay on course as the entrance loomed. There were no other boats on the water; but as always happens, the Brittany Ferry arrived to cross the chain ferry track simultaneously with us. Tom watched carefully as I concentrated on keeping our port side to the ship, and we passed through with plenty to spare. We could then relax a little up the fairway, but the wind was now a good Force 7 and the spray began to fly.

You could see how a man and an apprentice could sail a hundred miles into the Atlantic from Bristol to take a pilot to a ship. Out past the shelter of Anvil Point and the wind was now 35 knots, I was getting tired, and Tom rigged a rope purchase from the tiller round a stanchion, and looped back round the tiller. Hauling on this made life a lot easier, and I handed over to another helm.

After a sail towards Swanage, we headed back to the shelter of Studland Bay to pick up a mooring and lunch. Julie the cook was a real hero, sending up a steady stream of food and drink all day, but never appearing on deck. After lunch we slipped the mooring and sailed well out to sea. At this point the stops on the jib decided to give way, and all hell broke loose as the sail flogged violently. Tom took the helm and Stuart organised the foredeck to get the sail in; we turned downwind so the main sheltered the jib, and it came in without much fuss under the staysail, an expert piece of seamanship. Tom suggested heaving to, giving us a rest, and the boat lay comfortably stopped and drifting slowly to leeward. Try



*Tiller purchase*

that in a modern yacht...

After five minutes relative quiet, we eased the staysail halfway across the boat, and Morwenna fore-reached slowly down to the line of the fairway and we sailed comfortably towards the chain ferry. But there was no way we could stop or turn, even though the ferry light started flashing as we approached, and she set off just as we passed; the rush was explained by the sole vehicle on board, an ambulance on call.



*Hove to*

And so home, lowering the sails and motoring back to the marina pontoon. An absolutely super day, it would have been great in any conditions, but the gale made it very special. Morwenna was the ideal boat for the conditions. A Moody would have handled it, but not with the stability of the gaffer. Once her shoulder was over, she stopped heeling

and took it all in her stride. Never an anxious moment, despite the soaked oilskins and salt caked faces of the crew.

Days on Morwenna are provided by [www.traditional-sailing.com](http://www.traditional-sailing.com) (no connection just a very happy customer).

*Trapper*

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