

Round The Island - Sailing Today Magazine article - July 2014 (unabridged version)

With thousands poised to descend on Cowes, Wight expert Peter Bruce sails 'round the island' the leisurely way.

Thought is needed before leaving the protected waters of the Solent and, even more so, if a night somewhere off the south side of the Isle of Wight is planned but, given favourable conditions, the decision can be amply rewarded by the diverse and sometimes striking scenery.

It is July and happily the weather looks settled, with the position of high pressure likely to produce only a light northerly easterly gradient wind, and my wife and I decide to go for a leisurely cruise around the Island aboard our well-travelled Maxi 1100, a 37ft sloop. If we are lucky enough to find flat calm we can expect a comfortable night, if there's a bit of swell running we'll have some roly-poly.

We leave Cowes four hours before high water and, after taking advantage of the eddy off Cowes Green, we head west towards the Needles. There is only a fitful south-westerly so with the contrary east-going stream, we motor, taking a course inside Gurnard Ledge, knowing where the ledge is from the transits in Solent Hazards, and that at half tide we have enough depth to pass over the western end. This way we evade much of the strength of the tide, and once in rural Thorness Bay we drop the hook for lunch. With a draught of two metres we cannot go close to the shore, so we anchor in 4m, off Whippance Farm, some half mile to the south-west of Gurnard Head, and enjoy the views of the smiling farmland to the south. There is an abrupt change from deep to shoal water all along the Island shore from Cowes to Sconce Point, and Crow Rock is not far away, so care is needed, though with a flood tide we have nothing much to worry about. After lunch we have success with the fishing line.

By 1600 the tide has slackened, so it is a good time to move on, and a nice clean anchor appears above the slightly ruffled green sea. As expected, the westerly came in lazily today with the gradient wind being north east, the direction which least encourages a sea breeze. There is enough pressure to make well to windward, and the strengthening west-going tidal stream gives us improved apparent wind. We tack short of West Lepe buoy, and find ourselves comfortably laying the black and yellow IALA entrance buoy at Newtown. We drop the sails off the buoy, pick up the leading marks, and motor up to the outer leading mark where we alter course to starboard for the entrance. Newtown is often very crowded in high summer. Indeed the famous sailor Adlard Coles, when describing Newtown as the loveliest of all the Solent anchorages, was criticised by those who already knew it, for encouraging more visitors. As one of the most hallowed of yachtsmen's mentors, how could he have done otherwise? Sometimes a visitor's buoy is available at Newtown, but not this evening, and there seems little room left for anyone, arriving as we have, late in the day, but one of our own customary anchorages is free. We go closely round the two starboard-hand buoys inside the entrance and, just short of the first Western Haven mooring, round up and drop the hook, tucked in on the western

side of the channel, well clear of other vessels. Our chart plotter reveals that there is not going to be much water under the keel at low water at 2200, but the mud is soft and we don't care if we touch here. We observe the rules and hoist our anchor buoy.

Before the drinks come out we inflate our Bombard dinghy, for which we have an unusual out-of-water stowage. A Maxi 1100 allows us to place the dinghy bow above the step in the stern and, thus positioned and lashed, we attach the topping lift to the dinghy transom and hoist, so the dinghy is well clear of the water. With it in this position we've been out in all-weather and never had a moment's anxiety except that, without the cooling effect of the sea, our well pumped tubes might burst in the hot noon time sun!

We dine on the Thorness Bay mackerel and, after putting on our LED anchor light, turn in ready for an early start. High water was at 0516 and, with the high water stand, we have up to nearly three hours left to use our dinghy to explore the lovely Western Haven, one of the prettiest stretches of water on the south coast. The sun is well up when we leave at 0630 and our 2HP Yamaha does not disturb a crèche of more than half grown mallard ducklings. The wooded banks are bustling with other bird life and we see a fox on the southern bank and a pair of red squirrels further up on the northern side. Soon the stone bridge at Ningwood is in sight and we stop to pick some samphire. Back at the boat we hoist the dinghy, weigh anchor and set off towards the Needles on the tide, making the most of the light north easterly with our 0.75oz asymmetrical spinnaker. It is quite rare to have no onshore wind or swell in white-cliffed Scratchell's Bay so, as these conditions prevail; we forgo Alum or Totland Bays and head there, arriving off the Needles just before the tide turns. We snuff the spinnaker and take the inshore passage inside the wreck of the Varvassi. Such a course is only wise if one has taken the trouble to reconnoitre the wreck at low tide in a small boat, and local boatyards have prospered for many years on those who have not. One marvels that a rock-bound lighthouse with a barely submerged adjoining wreck is used as a major turning mark for one of the biggest yacht races in the world.

Past the line of the Needles, we head towards St Anthony's Rock, and drop our anchor south of Irex Rock in 3m, having been careful to observe on the way past the transits shown in Wight Hazards which mark its position. There is an abundance of kelp in Scratchell's Bay which our blunt-pointed old Bruce anchor might not have penetrated, but our new Rocna was more than adequate for these conditions. With no access from above we have the pebble beach to ourselves when we take the dinghy ashore. Here the sun reflects from the chalk cliffs and the heat is Mediterranean.

After lunch we take the tide along the Island coast and pass the three caves just west of the Tennyson memorial, supposedly used by Lord Holmes for the entertainment of his guests. We also remember the unfinished statue of Louis IV that, together with the sculptor, either through shipwreck or piracy came into the possession of the spirited Lord Holmes, who had the statue finished in his own likeness and which still can be seen in Yarmouth Church.

With the current good visibility we keep outside Brook Ledges using the clearing bearings listed in Wight Hazards. It is eleven miles to St Catherine's Point, and we'll have no difficulty in getting there before the tide turns against us at 1700. The cliffs become ever bolder as we pursue our course to the south east. As we approach Atherfield we spot a fishing boat and buy three crabs and a fine 2Kg sea bass. Atherfield ledge is said to continue along the sea bed some miles out to sea, and provides a good home for crustaceans and a good living for potters.

We keep close to the shore, but not too close because of the rocks, and look into Watershoot Bay, trying to imagine what it must have been like to operate a fishing boat from such an exposed position, as happened in days of yore. We round St Catherine's Point at 1630, planning to anchor for supper and the night. Having no harbour nearby does not worry us in the present settled weather, so we drop our hook, clear of the inshore rocks, in 6m off Puckaster Cove where Phoenicians are said to have landed to trade tin with the Cornish in pre-Roman times.

Puckaster was, for fifteen years, the wild romantic home of the legendary Uffa Fox, an exuberant man with extraordinary vitality and range of interests, who put tremendous fun into the lives of everyone he encountered, this including Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. Uffa's boat designs were way ahead of the day and his sweetly elegant Flying Fifteen is still popular. We have a good supper on deck, dutifully lowering our ensign at 2100, and later enjoy the sunset behind the heights of the Island's southern limb, and have a comfortable night with the only movement coming from occasional wash from passing vessels.

Next morning we weigh anchor as the tide turns east-going at 1100. The northerly wind does not reach us in the lee of the Island, so we motor parallel to the cliffs, making comfortable allowance for the hefty outcrops that lie offshore in Binnel Bay. We pass Sugar Loaf, Woody Bay, Sir Richard's Cove, then Pelham and Orchard Cove, all looking most attractive in the morning sun. The harbour at Ventnor silts up and is only suitable for fishing boats, so we pick up one of the eight visitors' buoys. There is a service to take visitors ashore if one calls on Channel 17 but we use our own dinghy and learn that the beach huts at Ventnor are old bathing huts cut in two. After an exploratory walk and visit to the museum, which reflects Ventnor as a one-time most exclusive resort and has some splendid yacht models, we have a good lunch at The Spinnaker on The Esplanade. The locals are most welcoming.

Our next anchorage is off Luccombe Chine so, after hoisting the dinghy into its inflated sea position, we drop the mooring and head to Dunnose on the last hours of the favourable tide. At one time Luccombe was a village with a number of stone cottages and two churches, though there is no sign of them now. The double-levelled sandstone cliffs are surmounted by woodland, and one can climb the public concrete steps through the chine when landslides allow. By the time we arrive the beach is in shadow, so we best enjoy the sunshine by staying on board, and have another quiet night.

The morning sun lights up the cliffs and we take the dinghy ashore to explore and swim. This takes all morning. After lunch we weigh anchor and take the tide past Culver Cliff, noting the broken water over Whitecliff Ledge. The wind is northerly F2 so we make slow progress under sail, though helped by the north east going tidal stream. Then on to Bembridge Ledge, leaving the buoy well to starboard, but not forgetting knife-like remnants of the wreck of the Empress Queen, fully described in Wight Hazards, which brought two fine racing yachts to grief in 1985. We plan to enter Bembridge Harbour and go alongside at the Duver marina. Our chart plotter shows we have 3.2m above chart datum at 1700, and that was half an hour ago, which we confirm by consulting the tide gauge north of St Helen's Fort.

After berthing at the Duver Marina, we elect to take the water taxi over to Bembridge, and relish its charm and the easy pace of Island life, though we could have just as easily gone to St Helens where Dan's Kitchen sounds most appetising. We start an agreeable evening at the Village Inn and go onto Locks Lane Restaurant. We return on the water taxi at 2230 which we booked on the way out.

We sail at 0900, just after high water, and take the tide through the forts and up to Cowes with a F4 westerly to speed us along, feeling that we've been lucky with the weather for our Island cruise, and it had been a good adventure.