

A Close Encounter of the Fishy Kind

“Shark! Shark” was my urgent cry. “What, where?” “No, Don’t be stupid. It’s a lost water ski” Just some of the responses by the rest of Barbarella’s crew, Jeff Greenwell and Richard Mountford.

We had just cleared the passage through Calf Sound, at the southern tip of the Isle of Man, between it and the Calf of Man, and were now running before a light SW wind under goose winged headsails. The promised excitements of the pilot books with respect “the tide rips through the sound” had not materialised. We had got the timing right on our passage south from Castletown that morning, and arrived in the sound near slack low water. The weather was fine, another hot and sunny summers day, which had marked out Barbarella’s 1994 summer cruise as different to those of previous years and in particular, our last visit to the I.O.M. 3 years previously, when we had lain ‘stormbound’ in Barrow for 3 days before a somewhat wet and lumpy crossing to Ramsey and a dash back via Douglas only two days later when the window in the weather threatened to close again.

This years cruise had started from Glasson Dock at 1700hrs on Saturday 16th July with the usual slow beat out of the Lune. It was not until we had cleared the Barrow channel and Walney that the wind began to veer from the N.E. and by 23-05 the log records us well offshore and reaching at 4.5 knots under full main and genoa with a S.E. force 3 wind. It was a fine night but a very confused sea in places, as we stood single man steering watches of 2 hrs on, 2hrs on standby in the saloon, and 2hrs. fully off watch in the forecabin. By dawn, Maughold Head and a cloud covered Snaefell were in sight and at 09-50 Sunday morning we were taking down the sails and motoring into Douglas harbour across the wake of the new Seacat which was just leaving.

After tying up alongside other yachts on the visitors pontoon, we celebrated our uneventful passage in traditional Lancastrian fashion (for a Midlander, Geordie and Lancastrian) with bacon and blackpudding sandwiches.

Sunday and Monday we spent on “shore leave” in and about Douglas, only taking Barbarella out on Monday afternoon in a very light breeze to set up and experiment with our new lightweight reacher sail.

On Tuesday, we set off from Douglas at 12-50 and in the absence of wind, motored south towards Castletown, picking up a visitors buoy in the bay at 13-55. I went ashore in the dinghy for a stroll around the harbour and to check out an alongside berth, and at 18-40 we brought Barbarella into the outer harbour, That evening we drank in the pub overlooking the harbour and slept soundly as a result, rising later than intended.

Before leaving Castletown, we visited the Maritime Museum and were fascinated by the sight of the “Peggy”, the open cutter built towards the end of the 18th century for Jack Quayle, Castletown’s gentleman smuggler who decreed that his boat should be laid up in it’s boathouse on his death and sealed in. There it lay for 100 years until 1930 when the boathouse was finally unsealed and the “Peggy” was found again. Unfortunately we couldn’t stay to complete the full

guided tour but any visitor to Castletown with an interest in boats should really visit the “Peggy” and marvel at it’s condition and the exploits of her master.

Leaving Castletown in poor visibility and no wind, we motored southwards again towards Calf Sound and an unexpected rendezvous with the basking shark as we ran northwards towards Peel. Approaching Peel, weird and piercing screams echoed out from the sea caves in the cliff. What unearthly beings produced the screams we didn’t discover, but just a few minutes later we were anchored off the beach at Peel listening to the babble of the holidaymakers and watching the seals watching us as the late afternoon sun continued shining. Once the tide had risen a metre or so, we motored into the harbour and moored alongside the South Quay.

Our visit to Peel Yacht Club that evening produced a clutch of Northumbrian pipes wailing away but otherwise the beer was good, and the company too, when a Norwegian family came in, real Vikings, one complete with beard, who had sold their house, and were now in their first month of an extended cruise, we were a little envious of our Viking’s companions’ apparent freedom and courage in throwing up house and careers to follow their dreams.

The following day we set off for Ramsey, around the northern tip of the island, at midday, again to make a tidal gate at Point of Ayre, low water plus or minus 1 hour, so as to slip around close inshore inside the Whitehouse banks before the tide race and overfalls built up. Leaving Peel in a mist and drizzle, the first “bad day”, we motor sailed northwards to keep up to schedule for the eighteen miles or so to Point of Ayre, failed to get shot at by the MOD, rounded Point of Ayre uneventfully and then caught a favourable wind change which brought us close to reaching at 5 to 6 knots into Ramsey bay. Again we anchored off for a few hours to await the tide and eat, before finally motoring into Ramsey harbour and rafting up along the town quay with half a dozen larger yachts, among them two “Snapdragons” who share our patch of the River Wyre at Knott End.

Our two evenings in Ramsey saw us revisiting the sailing club for rest, recuperation and ablutions, where we again found friendly hospitality. Unfortunately, the arrival of the lifeboat crew at the club for their R & R after a training night, was accompanied almost simultaneously with the sound of maroons from the lifeboat station and the bleeping of their pagers, and before a pint was pulled, or sipped, they were running back down the quay to launch on a real “Shout” to a local catamaran, lost in fog, with no wind and a U/S engine over the Whitestone Banks. The lifeboat found the cat and towed it back into Ramsey in the early hours. Another boat towed the catamaran beyond the swing bridge later in the day, under the amused and critical gaze of the local sailors.

On Friday night, after dining ashore at a fish and chip chop, we took Barbarella back out into Ramsey Bay and anchored up, with a hurricane lamp on the forestay, so as to be able to leave for Ravenglass at dawn.

After a dark, quiet and short night at anchor, we left for Ravenglass at 03-40, first with no wind but later with the wind on the nose, so that we had to tack and tack and tack again. quite soon Sellafield was in full view, but the combination of wind and tide effectively stopped our progress and by mid afternoon, having missed our tidal gate for entry into Ravenglass, we started

motoring in the flat calm down the Cumbrian coast.

The wind filled in again, from the east at first, but gradually veered south easterly and as we turned into the Barrow channel and made for Piel Island, rose to force 5 or 6 and we ran or broadreached flat out, noting a yacht aground on shore at Walney, amongst the breakers, but with no sign of life on board. Later we were told that this yacht had gone aground and been neaped days earlier and her crew had not been aboard when she floated again that night.

Running fast past Piel Island in the dark, with a rising wind, we decided not to stop, indeed there was some doubt if we could stop the boat, so we ran on up the channel and dropped the hook at Vickerstown for a quiet night on the mud and a well earned sleep after a 20 hour passage, inclusive of the abortive diversion to Ravneglass. Before turning in, we were listening on the VHF to the Ship Inn at Piel Island, call sign Piel Bravo, checking with yachts anchored off that their crews had got safely back on board after imbibing at the Ship. In fact at one point, three people from one dinghy were in the water and were lucky to be picked up quickly by another dinghy on that dark and wild night.

The following morning before dawn, we lifted off again and motored back up the Barrow channel to drop anchor off the Ship Inn at Piel Island. A few more hours of sleep, lunch at the Ship (famous meat and potato pie and peas), then a run over to Roa island in the rubber dinghy to phone home and watch the lifeboat day launch of the Barrow lifeboat, to put out a mock fire in a cabin cruiser.

Finally it was time to make for home and a fast passage from Piel Island to Knott End brought Barbarella's summer cruise to an end at 19-30 Sunday night, when we again picked up our own mooring.

Paul Mountford Summer 1994