

A CROSSING TO REMEMBER

We cast off the jetty at Glasson sailing club on the 21st Aug 96 at 0430hr, there was no wind and the sea was calm! Altair, a 3 lft steel cutter, was loaded to the gunwales with bicycles, extra fuel, water and supplies to last ourselves for the next 30 days. As we motored down the fairway I noticed the handling response on the tiller was quite heavy due to the extra payload, (this was to have significance later in the voyage).

From mid morning we picked up some favorable northerly winds which were going to be virtually dominant throughout the voyage. From Glasson we day sailed calling at the following Ports; CAERNARFON; PORTH DINLLAEN; FISHGUARD; MILFORD HAVEN; PADSTOW; ST.IVES; SCILLY ISLES;

We rested for a couple of days on the Isle of St Mary and prepared ourselves for the 500 mile crossing of the Bay of Biscay. On the 29th Aug we set off with a NE 4 -5 pushing us nicely along we traveled some 130nm in the first 24hr. A watch rota was soon established, at night time Richard and myself took 3hr turns as Jack my son who was only 12 years old was having difficulty staying awake. Sailing on the whole across the Bay of Biscay was as predicted from various books I had read on the subject, but just after midnight 31st aug a fateful string of events was about to happen.

After listening to the music of "Sailing By" the late shipping forecasted gales in sea areas Finisterre and Trafalgar, this was the last weather forecast we were to receive for the rest of the journey. Richard came out on deck and together we reefed the mainsail to the first batten the wind was blowing NE 6 and there was already quite a swell running. With C.Finiserre only some 150nm south we prepared ourselves for the possibility of some heavy weather then I retired to my bunk.

It was after 0600hr well past my time to go on watch, Richard remarked, "you should have seen the sunrise, the whole sky became blood red", although the anemometer was only reading 30nts of wind the swell now running with us had increased immensely. I clipped on my harness and Richard went below for a well earned rest, over the next few hours the wind speed steadily increased, we were now surfing down some huge swells at speeds upto 10nt, at first this seemed to be quite fun, like going down the log plume at Morecambe pleasure beach I thought! The wind increased and suddenly I was now wrestling with the tiller to prevent Altair from broaching (Oh for wheel steering) I shouted for some help to reduce the working jib. Richard putting on his oilies and harness came into the cockpit to assist in furling the overstressed headsail, Bang! the jibsheet parted company with the headsail leaving it flogging away wildly.

Full marks must go to Richard who volunteered to go forward and try to

salvage the headsail, the deck was well awash and in each of the breaking waves he kept disappearing from view. Richard managed to bind the headsail to the forestay and worked his way back to the cockpit, now soaked through he suggested taking over the helm whilst I go below for a rest. Down below I checked our position, we were about to enter some shipping lanes also I noted the seabed was rising from 4km to 200m probably accounting for the now steep and breaking seas. As one wave hit us water started squirting through the washboards and companion hatch the boat surged forward then veered to port then as if in slow motion we rolled right onto our starboard beam. The lockers started emptying their contents I feared for the windows as they were in the direct line of fire, we were laid on the beam ends for what seemed several minutes before coming back upright again. I slid back the hatch Richard had been knocked about in the cockpit and was now suffering from back pain, without removing the washboards I took over the helm whilst Richard managed to get down below. Whilst on the helm for the next 8 hours, we were being constantly pooped from the port quarter by 10 m + breaking seas, we were in the middle of shipping lanes in poor visibility, the G.P. S. arial had been knocked from its mounting warning "Position Suspect".

Now darkness was falling and we were rapidly approaching the north Iberian Peninsula, I studied the situation, I was now starting to tire from being pounded by the seas, the crew below was in no fit state to take the helm, Altair was quite happy surfing down the waves at 8~12nts but it was becoming apparent that shortly I would have to attempt a jibe and head for open sea a maneuver very dangerous in these seas with winds 40+nts behind us. At 2300hr the seastate started to level out slightly and visibility also increased then as if to answer our prayers I sighted a Lighthouse, the crew down below soon identified the light we were just off Cape Finisterre our hearts lifted. By 0300hr we were safely anchored in a bay behind C.Finisterre, then bedtime at last. As I awoke around mid day mixed feelings entered my mind, a Se Vende sign for Altair! does the crew want to go home! No we have done it we have crossed the Bay of Biscay. At Finisterre in the hot sunshine we rested and carried out repairs, after several days we were ready to continue our voyage. The rest of the trip was relatively plain sailing down the coast of Portugal in the mild climate where we finally moored Altair in Villamuora for the winter. A return Voyage back to Glasson has already been planned for early spring, an experienced crew will be sailing Altair; Glasson S.C. members; Alan Fleetwood, John Meak. Richard Breakwell,

John Broadhead.