

# THE END OF A LONG HOT SUMMER

Michael Duddridge finds his Dunkirk veteran in danger

I woke to the dulcet tones of Catriona Young repeating perhaps the three most familiar words to the ears of British yachtsmen: 'And finally Jersey'. I groaned. I'd missed the damned shipping forecast! Yesterday's unexpected gale — the first to break the seemingly endless succession of sunlit days and balmy nights — had been a rude reminder that this golden summer of 1989 was drawing to a close; the equinoctial gales had made their first unwelcome appearance, and I had suddenly rediscovered an intense interest in shipping forecasts.

The previous day we'd been on passage from Ramsgate to Haringvliet in Holland. Leaving Ramsgate early in the morning, the forecast had been encouraging: a westerly, force five to six, promised a fast crossing. But by the time we'd sighted the West Hinder light, the sky had changed from brilliant blue to milky white, and shortly afterwards Thames Coastguard confirmed my suspicions and broadcast a gale warning.

My Dutch crew had looked disappointed when I'd come up into the cockpit to announce that we'd be diverting. Arno and Frank had both flown over specially from Holland to join me for this trip, and they'd found the morning's sailing exhilarating. Not that I had any doubts about *Wind-song's* ability to weather a gale — as a 13 ton, centre cockpit ketch, she'd been built by Hillyards in the days when yachts were made to last. But, since she's a mature lady of some sixty summers and unique in being the smallest surviving sailing yacht to have taken part in the Dunkirk evacuation, I've never seen it as part of my responsibilities to test my faith in her. As my surveyor had said when I'd bought her: 'You don't own a yacht like that; you hold it in trust for the next owner.'

After we'd altered course, and charged off to the southeast on a broad reach towards the Belgian coast and shelter, the advancing front had given a perfect demonstration of all its phases, like illustrations from a meteorological text-book. Finally, in darkness, with the rain coming down like stair-rods, we'd gratefully scuttled into Nieupoort, beating the gale by a short head.

Later that evening, in the excellent "t *Vlaemsch Galjoen*" restaurant above the VVW Clubhouse, as the rain rattled on the windows, we'd celebrated our safe landfall while enjoying an entrecôte that melted in the mouth, washed down with a memorable Chateau Haut-Canteloup '82. How much better it was, we'd agreed, to be in

here wishing we were out there; than out there wishing we were in here.

Next morning my crew stirred as I put the kettle on. To their inquiries I reluctantly admitted that I'd slept through the shipping forecast. However, outside in the marina, through the tinkling forest of masts, a little blue sky could be seen, and the wind had obviously moderated. Arno searched the wave-band of his portable radio and suddenly found a forecast for the Belgian coast being broadcast in Flemish.

## All's well!

His face beamed as he translated the miraculous news that we could look forward to an afternoon wind of no more than force 4 from the southwest and long periods of sunshine.

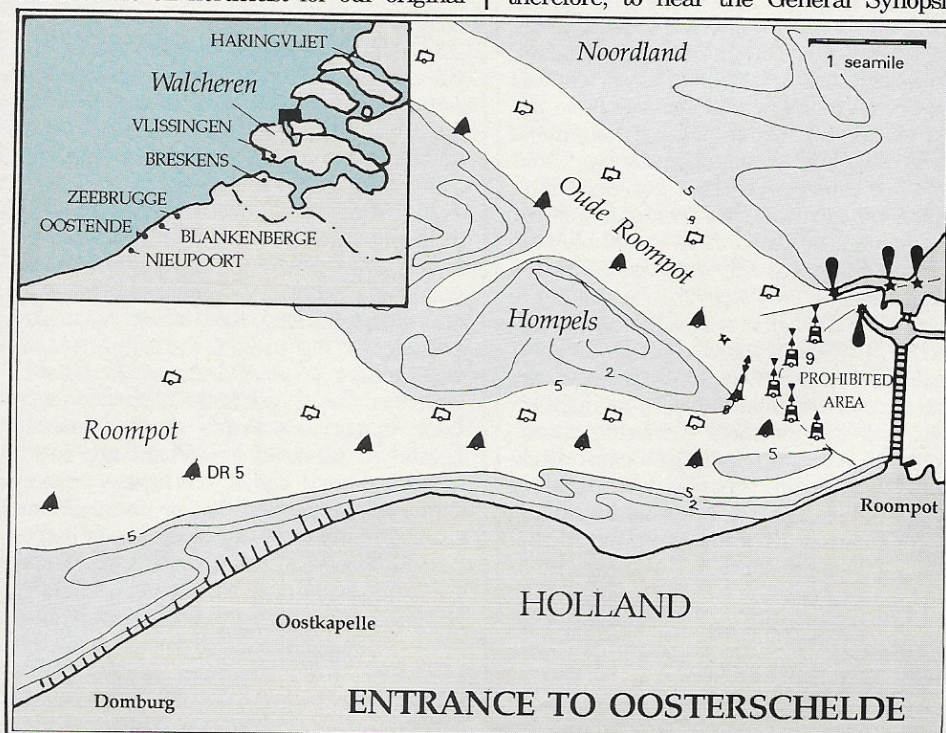
I was not convinced. Snug as we'd been in the protected marina, the wind had been strong enough to wake me during the night: blows like that don't suddenly vanish into thin air. But, confronted by the evidence of my own eyes, and in the absence of facts to support my instincts, I compromised, and devised a plan that would take us eastwards, paralleling the coast, so that if there was a deterioration in the weather we could find bolt-holes in Oostende, Blakenberge, Zeebrugge, Breskens or, ultimately, Vlissingen. Conversely, if the favourable Belgian forecast proved accurate, we could strike off northeast for our original

destination of Haringvliet via the lock, north of Stellendam.

After a leisurely breakfast we departed. Outside, the seas were still choppy but the wind was dying. We shook out the two reefs in the main — left in from the previous evening — and soon afterwards changed the working jib for the genoa. Even so, our speed petered away to less than three knots. The forecast had predicted the wind strength correctly, however, there was no sign of the 'long periods of sunshine', in fact Oostende had disappeared very quickly over our starboard quarter in the poor visibility which was making features along the flat Belgian coast difficult to identify. By the time Zeebrugge was on the beam we were rolling on an oily swell, the sails slatting in the fitful gusts of wind.

There were still two hours before the 1355 shipping forecast. Should I continue along the coast and hear the forecast before deciding whether to head out to sea for Haringvliet? Or should I turn northeast now so as to give the shoals of Westkapelle a good wide berth? Except for the visibility, which was now poor, the weather appeared to be following the Belgian forecast. We turned northeast.

Insidiously the wind freshened. By the time the midday forecast was due the jib was back on, and I was thinking about a reef in the main. It came as no surprise, therefore, to hear the General Synopsis



## Learning from Experience

start off with depressing talk of a rapidly deepening Atlantic low moving quickly, etc, etc. There would be no chance of reaching Stellendam before this next gale. We were then on the seaward side of the Raan. I could either turn southeast down one of the channels for Vlissingen, or head for the northern coast of Walcheren and enter the Oosterschelde by the Roompot lock.

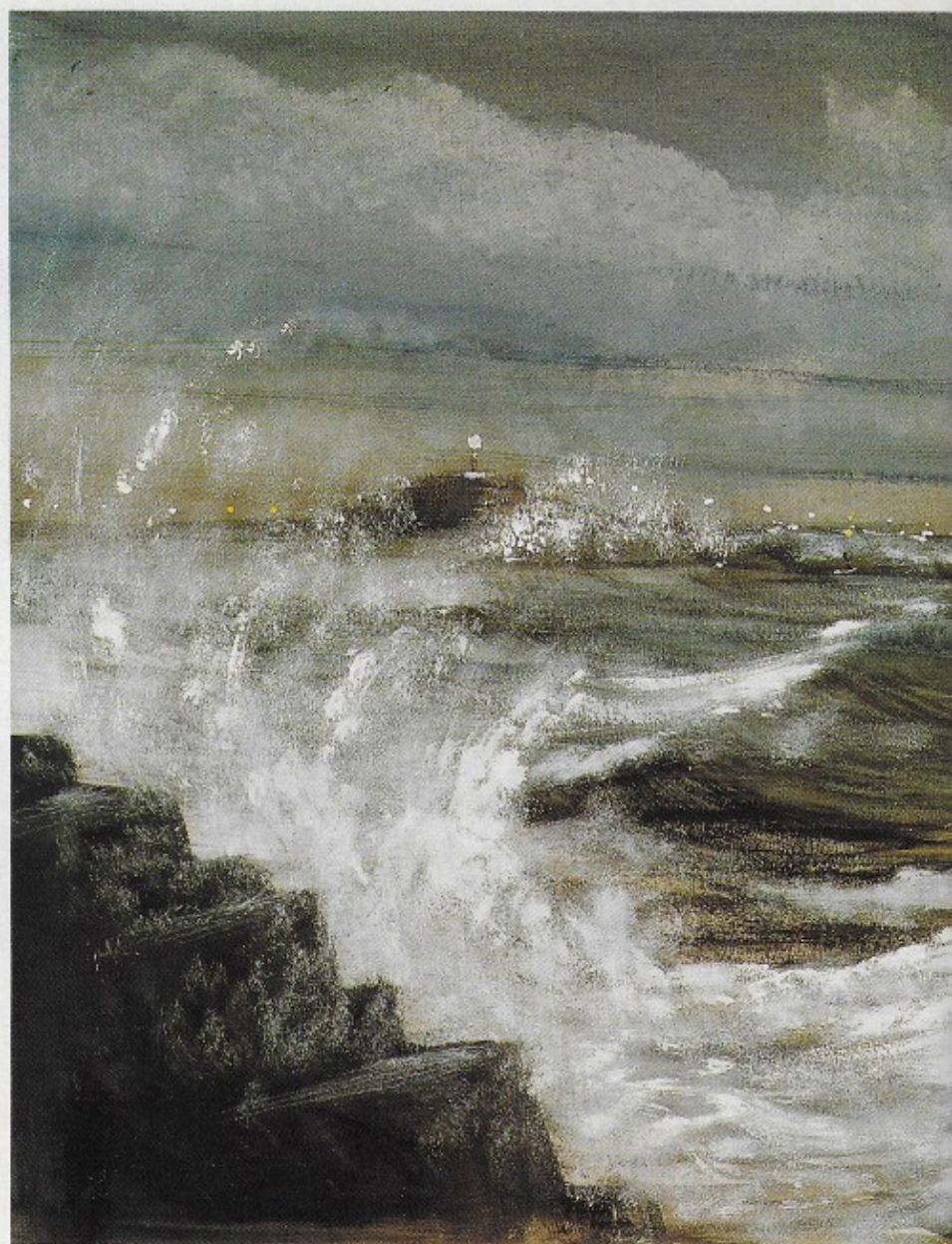
It seemed to me that in the strengthening southwesterly wind, if I elected to make for Vlissingen, it would be a very rough reach down the Oostgat, off a dead lee shore; whereas the Roompot channel might gain a little shelter in the lee of Walcheren. I didn't have a large scale chart of the Roompot approach but I had twice before negotiated that channel and knew it to be well buoyed. Though I'd made both approaches in daylight, I was confident that in such a well used channel the buoys would be lit. I decided to stand on.

That was my second mistake. My third came minutes later when we put two reefs in the main and handed the jib: with a steadily freshening wind right on the stern I should have taken down the main and mizzen and coasted along on the jib and stays' alone.

Soon afterwards I relieved Frank at the wheel. Though he'd served in mine-sweepers in the Dutch Navy he'd no experience of small boats, and in the rapidly building following sea *Windsong* was becoming a bit of a handful for him. Arno was a boat owner, though his was a steel motor cruiser used mostly on the inland waterways in Holland, however, as an ex oil rig diver he was no stranger to the North Sea, and now he seemed to be revelling in the conditions.

The light faded fast that afternoon as the dim outline of Walcheren appeared one moment and disappeared the next in the gloom and overcast. Straining our eyes for the first flash of light from a buoy, we suddenly found ourselves with a green unlit buoy close on the starboard beam. Without knowing it at the time it was DR 3, two miles NNW of Domburg. Arno put the glasses on it and said he thought he could see a lamp housing on the top. I sent up a private prayer that he was right, which would mean that this light was not functioning; but the others would be. I set an easterly course and we all concentrated on finding the next buoy.

It was Arno again who was first to sight it (DR 5) — but it too was unlit. My heart sank. The prospect of fumbling my way down a narrow unlit channel, at night, in poor visibility, between menacing shoals, would be daunting enough in calm conditions — but with this sea running? My theory of being in the lee of the island had been confounded by the wind, which had sneakily veered a couple of points and was now roaring straight out of the west. The waves, compressed between the shoal and shore were being driven straight down the channel. The big ones hoisted up our stern so I was looking down the bowsprit into the bottom of the trough, then, with the water



boiling along her sides, *Windsong* would start to surf: seven, eight, nine knots! The old lady was nudging at her own personal sound barrier. It was Frank who later described those waves as being like gigantic lions, leaping out of the night on to our stern.

Although we were rushing through the darkness our destination seemed as though it would never come into view. I concentrated all my attention on steering: one eye on the compass, the other over my shoulder trying to spot the bigger waves that might cause *Windsong* to broach. Arno had the glasses and searched for each buoy in turn — Frank avoided looking behind at the wild life. There are seven starboard-hand buoys, strung out over as many miles, marking the southern Roompot channel, none were lit, and each had to be searched for in the dark, wild water. Our progress down the channel couldn't have taken long, but it felt like a life-time.

At last Arno said he could see the massive storm barrage that seals the Oosterschelde, and gradually I began to distinguish the necklace of lights illuminating

the road which tops the dam. But arriving was one thing, finding, and safely negotiating the narrow entrance to the small haven guarding the lock, would be quite another. I knew there was an east cardinal buoy guarding the landward end of the Hompels shoal. Fortunately, this buoy was showing a light, and at last I picked out its quick flashing three against the confusion of car headlamps and static lights on the dam.

### Head for shelter!

The seas had not diminished at all, so my plan was to get into the little haven, and, using the engine to bring *Windsong* into wind, get the sails down in whatever shelter could be found behind the shallow mole. I briefed the others on exactly what they had to do.

We rounded the east cardinal buoy, and I concentrated on aligning the occulting leading lights on the haven entrance. Suddenly an unlit west cardinal buoy loomed under our starboard bow. It was close enough for me to distinguish a welding seam in its tower as it swept past and



under our stern. It must have been number 9 in the string of west cardinals marking the shallows in front of the dam.

Though I'd let the stays fly as we swept into the haven we were still going too fast for comfort in such a confined area. I rounded up, and, with the elation that comes when success seems just within one's grasp, I pressed the self-starter to bring the trusty two cylinder Petter into action. Nothing! I jabbed the button like it was a morse key. Not as much as a grunt from the starter. My crew, straining like greyhounds in the slips, waiting for the word to hurl themselves on to the sails, looked at me uncomprehendingly. I shouted to them to hand-start the engine.

My safety briefing, back in Ramsgate, had covered every eventuality I could foresee, and included — in my man-overboard drill — how to start the engine . . . but electrically, not with the handle! As I wrestled with the wheel and the main-sheet trying to persuade *Windsong* into something vaguely like a hove-to mode, Arno and Frank tumbled down into the main saloon in obedience to my shouted instruc-

tions on how to hand-swing the engine. First they had to find the handle. And here another gremlin in this catalogue of woes added to our troubles: the saloon lights were dead — though our masthead tricolour still blazed into the night! Frank, fumbling in the dark, found the locker where the handles were stowed and passed Arno the first that came to hand, which proved to be the one for the Vortex bilge-pump. This handle is a spindly brass affair, closer in design to that which might have wound-up the famous gramophone that Messrs HMV's dog gazes at. Arno's subsequent description of his frantic efforts to connect this to the starting spigot of the engine will become a party-piece of his for years to come.

When the correct handle had been found and fitted, there then came the really tricky bit. The exhaust-valve lifter is a small lever on the top of number one cylinder, which can only be reached by lifting the cockpit deck — on which I was standing. By now *Windsong* had been driven back by the force of the wind until she was close to going aground on the huge

concrete blocks from which the haven is constructed. Gingerly I sheeted-in the main, got her sailing and then dived for the cockpit deck. Hanging upside down in the blackness of the engine-room, feeling for the exhaust-valve lifter, while at the same time trying to steer the boat, will remain one of my more vivid sailing memories. Twice Arno threw all his considerable weight into the task of swinging the engine; and twice it refused to respond. On the third attempt I managed to coincide my movement of the exhaust-valve lifter precisely in time with Arno's agonised shout as he cranked the flywheel to maximum revs. The blessed motor wheezed into life.

With the sails down, I was anxious only to find something against which we might secure for the night. But the disembodied voice of the lock-keeper grating out of the loudspeaker system, informed us that he'd stayed on past his normal closing time specially to let us through the lock. I like to think of this gesture as another example of the unfailing helpfulness of the Dutch; I fear though, that it may have been prompted by a self-interested desire on his part not to find his lock gates jammed with our wreckage in the morning.

Opening the seaward gates allowed the full force of the gale to funnel into the cavernous lock. It was the first time I've ever gone forwards through a lock, entirely in reverse gear!

Through the lock and safely secured alongside a pontoon, our reactions were mixed: Arno was on a 'high', Frank slightly more circumspect, I experienced disbelief at being capable of so many blunders in such quick succession.

Why, when I'd made a perfectly sensible plan in Nieupoort, hadn't I stuck to it? None of the factors had changed. If I'd waited for the midday forecast before altering course we could have comfortably entered the Middelburg canal at Vlissingen long before dark. Why hadn't I further reduced sail when I had the chance? The old saying: '*if you think it's time to reef, it's usually past the time*', is never wrong. All the anguish experienced while trying to follow a channel marked by unlit buoys could have been avoided if I hadn't attempted the approach with only a small scale chart and a little previous experience. Better, perhaps, to have made some sea room and ridden-out the gale?

As for the fiasco with the engine: having an engine refuse to start may precipitate an emergency, ergo, hand-starting must form part of one's emergency briefing. In any case, a well organised skipper, one who thinks ahead of events, would have wanted to have his engine ticking over before he entered the haven. So he would have had time and sea-room in which to hand-start the engine once he'd discovered the starter's failure. As to why the engine refused to start and why the saloon lights failed? They remain to this day mysteries of the sea. Perhaps these things are arranged to coincide in the hope that we will then be more likely to learn from the experience? ●