

Moving a Big Class Yacht

I'm in on that one!

A staunch shipmate of times past and skipper on a number of our delivery contracts, Denis Hoolahan is now a busy yacht broker at Birdham Pool, his seagoing time strictly limited, but he could not miss this.

Ernie Barker also surprised me. Summer was with us, meaning that the Barkers of Croydon should be anywhere in the country, possibly by the seaside *but not at sea*, providing vast areas of tent space for shows and exhibitions. Rigger of 100 marquees, Ernie was going to play hookey.

Maurice Durman was thankful that the date was May and not June 1959, because a fortnight later a huge trans-world radio communications aerial was due to be lowered from its 700-ft. mast for overhaul and his presence at that operation was essential. He could just fit in this sea voyage beforehand.

Bill King mumbled something about a house to be repaired, but I was not wrong in guessing that he could not resist adding this trip to his great fund of yachting experience. Above all Bill likes to go places and he saw that if ever this were possible without help from mechanical devices, gliders or horses, it would be so aboard the first 12-Metre built in Britain for 19 yrs. We had to take *Sceptre* from Southampton to the Clyde.

If this book is your first excursion into the world of yachting and if, for some reason, you read no newspaper or heard no radio commentaries around September 1958, you may deduce that, with only one yacht of this class built over such a long period, it means the type is no good and we now have better yachts to sail.

Nothing could be further from reality. People nowadays demand such standards of comfort, self-indulgence, silver-spoon feeding and endowed welfare, which appropriates so much of their wealth, that many fail to provide themselves with a yacht of any calibre. A pathetic solace in dinghies and models has resulted, and the term "yachtsman" has been corrupted to include their operators. Blaze the truth whenever you can: *Twelves are the only yachts!*

Designed by David Boyd for a Royal Yacht Squadron syndicate, *Sceptre* was the seventeenth unsuccessful challenger for the America's Cup. Back in this country after the races, she was soon sold and her new buyers required her back at her builder's yard on the Clyde. Moving her there was my first voyage in a Twelve. Later I sailed another, older one, *Flica I*, on a winter delivery from Cork to Southampton. I have no racing experience with them.

Her designer, who was connected with the attempt from the drawing board stage, believes that the exercise has been invaluable if we are soon to lift the trophy. The lessons learned by that sporting syndicate must be accurately evaluated and applied to future contests.

Unless yachts are seen racing against each other, it is impossible properly to decide their relative merits. After completing our delivery of *Sceptre* many people wanted me to confirm their own pet ideas and tell them that she was a slow old crate and a disgrace to British yachting. Instead I would confess that she was the fastest yacht I have ever sailed and sheer delight to handle. Then I would explain that I had never seen her in contest with any other Twelve. This did little to balk the growing opinion that *Sceptre* was the worst 12-Metre of all time; but the following season put the score right. In 1960 David Boyd's yacht swept the 12-Metre board at Cowes and elsewhere. Many a critic must have been confounded; others will have plenty of food for thought.

I thought the layout of *Sceptre's* gear was of the highest order. In yacht delivery work, safety of sails and gear is the prior consideration; thus I have always viewed spinnaker work, particularly as practised by racing crews, with awe, but things were so well planned on *Sceptre* that losses in the sail wardrobe would be at a minimum. Accustomed to grappling with and cursing about makeshift lash-ups that are frequently tolerated as the means of hoisting and trimming sails, my crew and I were greatly impressed

by the wonderful array of blocks, snatch-blocks, fairlead tracks, halyards, sheets, winches, the way they were positioned for easy use, their design and efficiency. To the problem of wind propulsion of ships we were approaching the supreme answer. This was so clear that I thought an auxiliary engine aboard a Twelve would amount to vandalism. On the wind, *Sceptre* moves fast in a breeze so barely perceptible that its direction is in doubt. She will nearly always be manoeuvrable: only in a complete atmospheric standstill, when smoke goes directly upwards, when sound travels far enough to make careless talk embarrassing, will she be motionless.

Anti-cyclones had been wandering about our part of the world for some time before we joined the yacht at Camper & Nicholsons and during our preparation for sea a typical fresh north-easterly breeze covered Southern England and the North Sea. It seemed prudent to bend the trysail, borrowed from *Evaine*, her trial horse Twelve of the previous summer. Wire life-lines were rigged from the stemhead to a thigh-high level at the shrouds and down to the deck beside the big working cockpit. Being without stanchions, this provided a modicum of safety on the foredeck and enabled sail changers to hook on with safety belts while working there.

A new compass was fitted, stores loaded, the dinghy stowed in the big cockpit (still leaving room to work the ship) and each of us busied himself with his personal gear, hoping to keep it dry. The skipper commandeered the only berth with a wooden bunk board, but I brought canvas leeboards for all hands. These were fitted only with difficulty because the berths underneath the mattresses were of a hardboard composition—doubtless weight saving compared to wood.

Except for the w.c. and galley, which is a unique feature underneath her big working cockpit, *Sceptre's* accommodation is under the foredeck. She resembles a huge half-decker and some may doubt her seaworthiness on this score. However, she is equipped with an efficient hand bilge pump, very easy to work by either one or two persons, and capable of dealing with a great influx of water. I have often said that spray and slop in a cockpit is not infrequently exaggerated as "shipping heavy seas" and assumed to be the cause of the bilge filling, when in fact the influx is due to the vessel working badly.

Because of the amount of sail we carried, we met oilskin weather on *Sceptre*, but pumping was never more than an offhand doodle. However, before starting, we made sure that the pump was in good condition and we stripped and greased all screw threads to ensure that, in the event of a blockage at sea, it could be easily dismantled—despite yard assertions that it would never go wrong.

When acquired by her owners, *Sceptre* possessed twenty-two sails—quite an outfit for a sloop-rigged yacht—but fortunately we were not asked to take all these with us and a good deal of the racing gear was sent up to Scotland by road. We carried a mainsail, a low-cut genoa and another beside, two spinnakers, a trysail and a No. 3 jib. We were well equipped for passage making and the limited accommodation for five was not too badly cluttered up. We would be able to fare a little better than hard-bitten Stanley Bishop, professional skipper on the Cup races, predicted: "Sleep? You'll be doing that in a blooming great heap!"

Stan gave us plenty of very useful advice and by the evening of 21st May the shambles that had seemed to be gaining on us was under control. The three hatches over the bunks were sealed by canvas covers and battens—a most necessary precaution against slop in the sleeping bags. All the gear was properly stowed. The yacht was ready for sea.

The wind eased in the night, and next morning, when we were towed down the Itchen towards Southampton Water with a Scottish B.B.C. man shooting at us with his cine camera, the breeze came only in faint wafts from the east-north-east. To persist with my original plan to set the trysail that we had bent the day before was unambitious, but that is how *Sceptre* ghosted towards the Solent in thundery weather and poor visibility.

A thunder squall off Hamble Spit interfered with compass checking and the wind veered six points, dying soon after. Once clear of the Brambles, we pulled the trysail off and bent the main; then we continued slow progress, mostly by permission of the fair tide, and brought up to a mooring buoy off Yarmouth, thus consolidating our position before the flood turned the glassy Solent against us.

An interesting gadget, christened the Sputnik because of its projectile-like shape and claw mechanism, stands at the head of the mainsail shackled to the main halyard. This hooks to the

masthead when the main is fully hoisted. By hauling 2 in. further on the halyard prior to lowering, the hooks are automatically cast off. It enables the mainsail to be hoisted on one of the very efficient genoa sheet winches because, once up, it takes the tension normally left on the halyard, which can therefore be easily carried back to its own low-powered winch.

An excellent idea, and quite fool-proof I should think but pessimistic Haward and his cynical crew, reared in delivery jobs that make all gadgets suspect, decided to forgo the convenience and ensure that the main was never hoisted those last 4 in. that actuated the claws. The tack down-haul tackle could provide a taut luff without it. I am ashamed to say that we looked upon this delightful Sputnik as just another hazard, an unusual one because our concern was to ensure that it was not allowed to function. Our fear, entirely unjustifiable, I think, was that it might refuse to *un-function*, presenting us with a full mainsail set for ever in a rising gale.

Supper and calls by some interested inhabitants ashore; then zephyrs from the north-east seemed to steady into a 3-knot breeze. The tide was still against us when we slipped our mooring and continued our way. The genoa was not much good, being blanketed by the main, but we made excellent progress through Hurst Narrows where the spring flood was still sluicing to the north-east. At midnight we reached the Bridge, the end of the Needles Channel, and bore round on a broad reach to head down Channel. With amazing suddenness the yacht leapt into high-performance stuff. From a modest $5\frac{1}{2}$ knots, *Sceptre* broke into a hissing canter, Maurice Durman at the wheel shouting in delight.

"She's going like a bomb! What happens if there's wind?"

The great spread of Terylene grasped hungrily at the Force 3 breeze, processing it into motive power with superb efficiency. Quickly the Needles became an occulting light far astern. The ship on course, I busied myself with a few jobs until Anvil light came up on the correct bearing, confirming a rather hasty compass check; then I turned in, to be lulled into sleep by high-powered sailing noises.

The relieving watch rigged the main boom guy as Anvil approached the beam. The wind had veered a little, but the genoa still pulled to leeward. Then it was Ernie Barker's turn to steer, and with his accustomed ease and minimum wheel he

instilled more discipline into our thoroughbred. The short little seas on the quarter, that set her on a surf-board surge as they passed, were now quite unable to affect that straight white line of spume astern. At first others of us controlled her less well, allowing her to yaw—then saying "She yaws!"—overlooking that old, old error, too much wheel winding.

Around 0215 I awakened to hear Bill's casual voice beside the companionway giving a detached commentary to Ernie on the stresses exerted by the fastest progress to date. I turned out for a look-see. The full main was billowing, the canvas thrust into the cross-trees. The Shambles Lightvessel was nearly abeam already and, though several miles away, was doing its best to emulate a telegraph pole passing the Royal Scot. We hardened the boom guy, which we had led through a block near the stem-head to the spinnaker halyard winch. Then we hauled on the mainsheet to clinch matters. *Sceptre* has a kicking strap with a heavy shock cord attachment, but I avoid using these, belonging to the S.P.C.M. (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Main-booms). In fact, the boom was broken on the last of the Cup races, with a subsequent display of brilliant seamanship rectifying the accident by securing a splint to it. A well-set-up boom guy in some respects fulfils the role of a kicking strap.

Just before 0300 the bright four flashes of Portland Bill were abeam—35 miles in 3 hrs. Though the tide had been with us, we had cleared the Needles Channel at the slack. My guess is that we averaged nearly 10 knots through the water and at times *Sceptre* must have been thundering along at more than 11 knots.

The watches went wonderfully quickly because our ship was such a delight. I have sometimes described a helmsman's job as a chore, but really it has its moments. *Sceptre* gave plenty. Equally she would thrill the artist, the mathematician or the plain romantic. At 0500 I went to bed thoroughly satisfied. Everything was under control and the progress was stupendous—exactly as armchair theories had predicted.

Hot porridge off Start Point and glorious sunshine; turbulence was pushing the breeze to the limits of Force 4 as it blew slantwise off the coast. The yacht was making nonsense of the contrary spring flood now sluicing strongly against her round the bold Devon promontory. We passed Prawle, its coastguard hut lit

brilliantly by the sunshine; then creamed on to clear Bolt Head, with the enticing Salcombe entrance tucked snugly under its rugged wing. As we cleared the land, however, the breeze began to die and it also veered until it was almost dead aft.

The genoa slumped into a sullen heap. It was time to play spinnaker poles. The rig included topping-lift, outhaul gear, and fore and after guys. With the genoa set a-weather on this, it began to pull again. Later in the day, when the wind cunningly settled on a point favourable neither for orthodox nor goose-winged genoa work, we changed to the flat reaching spinnaker that could be trimmed for all quartering breezes—and even for a close reach with the spinnaker pole acting as a short bowsprit.

Progress across West Bay did not equal the night's run, but the sunshine was most pleasant and all hands enjoyed the sail drill. We passed the Lizard just after 1900, again finding a foul tide off a headland. After this our average was further knocked about. Pole in—pole out again. Spinnaker down—genoa up, first to leeward then a-weather again. Then repeat the drill in a different sequence. I wanted to reach the Longships at 2345 to make it a 24 hrs. run from the Needles and we had to make use of every fickle draught.

The day's run ended 2 miles short of the corner—166 miles, much of it in light airs and therefore a most satisfactory average. Now we came on the wind. Clearing the rocky outpost stretching from Land's End, we found a breeze from the north-east. At first we thought *Sceptre* could just lie full-and-by for the Tuskar, 130 miles across the sea to Ireland. However, a check with the Pole Star revealed 5 degrees W. deviation on the compass, so the course was not as good as we hoped.

The yacht's splendid windward ability was now to be revealed—and also the stamina of the crew, snatching their beauty sleep in the eyes of the sleek vessel. A short sea speedily developed and the occupants forward found the 25-degree heel disagreeable and the 45-degree heel, not infrequently shown on the clinometer, a hazard to health in a windward berth. The canvas leeboards, tacked to the hardboard under the mattresses, came adrift and two sleepers, luckily without injury, suddenly became nonplussed non-sleepers. Warm in a leeward bunk, careful not to admit being a witness lest I receive an appeal for help, I watched first Ernie, then Bill, scrape together bits and pieces and bed down on the bucking cabin floor.

Towards dawn I went on deck to see the yacht in action and check how the genoa and full main fared. *Sceptre* was crashing through the Force 4 slop, eating up the miles to Ireland. In fingertip control at the big sensitive wheel, a key to the whole exhilarating scene, the helmsman guided her tightly to windward—a genuine four points off the true wind.

I watched the gear and worried for that great flat spread of Terylene, the low-cut genoa. With the yacht heeling hard, its foot was at sea-level and waves regularly broke into it with such force that the water rebounded back into the working cockpit. I have seen ordinary canvas burst under lesser treatment and the problem was to decide how much this stronger material could be expected to stand. We were going great guns and I was loath to let up, but safety of the gear was of primary importance. As early light broke over the sea, all hands were turned out and, with the yacht paid off to afford greater safety on the foredeck, we stowed the genoa and set the No. 3 staysail.

The sun rose and brought warmth. Some of the crew found comfortable billets under the windward deck around the working cockpit. Clear of the spray flying over their heads, they reclined in a suntrap. Despite the sail reduction, progress appeared about the same. At 0745 my log observed: "Wind north-east by east, Force 4, and occasional fresh puffs. Good visibility. Vessel heeling to 45 degrees at times and doing about 10 knots close-hauled."

It was an exhilarating day, the sort Maurice calls an F. 16, but going below for my camera I encountered typical obstructionism from the expert.

"Too much spray flying. Mustn't get my camera wet."

"But spray's what we want," I said. "It'll give a tang of salt to the scene."

He would not budge.

"I'm not as bad as some. A true gen-man does no actual photography at all. Even in perfect conditions he only carries out tests."

I left him in his bunk and tried to capture the seascape. Spray is no excuse for time off for my camera, but on this occasion I aimed it from such fancy angles that judder and shudder spoilt results.

Towards noon the breeze eased and after a scratch lunch we set the genoa again. At 1630, as if sprinting for the check-point,

we were up to the Barrels Buoy, a little to the west of the Tuskar, and this made an average speed of 7.8 knots from the Longships. Not bad going, tightly to windward with a crew completely new to Twelves.

Except for one short burst after we put about to tack up the St. George's Channel, and a brief spell 2 days later, that was the end to real sailing. By nightfall, north of the Blackwater Light-vessel but on a board that headed us at the middle of Wales, the breeze had fallen away. Progress became dignified, though compared to the average yacht's performance in light airs, it was phenomenal. However, on the following afternoon *Sceptre* lay absolutely motionless, the sea like a mirror, a heat haze hiding the Rockabill a few miles to the south-west. We bathed, lazed, cooked supper; then ghosting a few miles through the night we saw the massive mountains of Mourne at dawn.

A light breeze came and *Sceptre* continued at a most agreeable pace, still having to tack. We lay a board to the east, opening the North Channel while the last of the flood tide filled the Irish Sea; then putting about with the timing just right we sailed past the South Rock Lightvessel at the start of the northgoing ebb. In the evening a sudden brisk breeze came from the north-west and with sheets slightly free *Sceptre* leaped joyfully forward to give us one last glimpse of her high performance. Corsewell Point to Sanda Isle in 4 hrs.

After that the wind vanished as quickly as it came, leaving us astride the shipping lane without steerage way. Using a white flare-up light to reveal our presence to a tanker with more impact than our side lights seemed to give, we enjoyed the electrifying effect. When the blinding brilliance subsided we saw that the huge approaching vessel had executed a 90-degree turn. These fireworks are the yachtsman's trump card in the collision game. From stark helplessness you suddenly find despotic power over every maritime nation. Remember, they must be white: red (distress) flares will have an opposite effect.

Needles to Sanda Isle in 4 days dead, but the last miles up the Clyde took a further 12 hrs. Around noon we ghosted round Hunter's Quay and lay becalmed until plucked to our mooring by Robertson's launch.

CHAPTER 19

A Good Weather Year

TRUE cruising yarns of our coasts depend on real British weather to make them spicy. A good yachting story requires some or all of the following:

1. A difficult yacht, not necessarily conforming to particular opinions on seaworthiness.
2. A crew of limited experience up against a new experience, preferably staggering.
3. Really nasty weather.

Except for one or two short poofs, 1959 abolished factor number three, thereby robbing the story-teller of 33 per cent of his thunder. There was a desperate shortage of rain, gales, floods, tidal waves and ice-floes. Yacht clubs threatened never to be the same again. Stories at the bar lost their punch or relied on imagination. The magazines that publish true yachting yarns struggled bravely. As a yacht delivery man I was provided mostly with work as is envisaged by land-lubbers who have had the activity explained to them for the first time—"Simply lovely!"

"No wrecks, nor nobody drowned—'fact nought to laff at at a'!"

As one who eggs his customers on with "nothing extra is charged for delays due to bad weather", I began to feel ashamed to take the money. However, my pessimism prevailed, sure in the knowledge that the law of averages would take its toll of prosperous times, but I wondered whether the time-table accuracy I was achieving would lull many people into a complete disbelief in bad weather. A number of jobs come my way because yacht owners cannot afford to run out of time at a half-way port of