

# A STIFF BREEZE AND WARM FEET



*The Beard's Nephew*

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OLD DRIP WHISKERS

January 2007

Aprox 5 Nautical Miles



This chart is not totally accurate  
and is for illustration purposes only



**F**rom the pounding in my head, I knew that we'd had a 'stinker' of an evening at the West Mersea Town Regatta. I rolled over, stretched an arm towards my dishevelled blazer, perched precariously on the loo seat, and pulled a well-creased scrap of paper from the top pocket.

'Nephew', it read 'take care tomorrow. You're due for a north-east Force 6-7 increasing 8! See you again soon. Beard.' (My Uncle John is affectionately known as 'The Beard' on Mersea. Why? Ask him). I couldn't remember receiving a weather forecast from him. In fact I couldn't remember much at all.

The cabin was an utter shambles. Simon, who the night before had been masquerading under the guise of the Earl of Dunleary, was out cold and when I

prodded Luke, only a feeble grunt emanated from his sleeping bag. It could have been an attempt at a reply, it could have been wind. I wasn't quite sure.

‘Luke,’ I mumbled, ‘are you okay in there?’

The bag moved and a nose with something that resembled a brussel sprout poking out of it came into view. I rapidly felt the need for some oxygen so scrambled up on deck and plonked myself in the cockpit. I gasped in the chilly air. It was the morning after and I felt ropery.

There I sat, head in hands at 0700 on Sunday morning, feeling as rough as a badger's arse and becoming painfully aware that I had to get *Asturias* and her inebriated cargo back to the Medway. I knew that we would have to leave as

soon as possible, take the last three hours of ebb to the Spitway and then, all being well, pick up the fair tide and wind all the way home.

Now, this seemed all well and good, but I did have one small dilemma; should I tell the crew about the probable strong winds? The alternative was to go back to the West Mersea Yacht Club, but as embarrassing recollections of the previous evening were flooding my mind, I decided that it would be prudent to set sail and not say a word.

Suddenly, Luke appeared, attired in quite possibly the dirtiest, tattiest and smelliest rugger kit to date.

At 0720 we slipped our mooring and with the reluctant co-operation of *Asturias's* Petter Mini 6, clattered past the

packing shed, through the Mersea quarters, slowing momentarily to bang on the hull of *Rose Maria*, shout appropriate abuse at her Adnams pickled skipper and then out into the Blackwater. It was beginning to spit with rain and the wind was just kicking in as we rounded the Nass Beacon. With Luke hoisting our sails, I cut the engine and pointed *Asturias* in the direction of the Bench Head.

God knows what it is about Mersea, but I always have a great time there and with Luke and Simon on board this particular voyage had been no exception.

As the Bench Head came into view, Uncle John's weather prediction came true. The sea quite literally turned into a rabid brown froth, the visibility shut

down to a few metres and poor *Asturias* was thrown onto her side. I immediately dumped the main and felt the full force of the squall. The wind made a fantastic noise as it shrieked through the rigging and the cold rain swept over us with the intensity of a pressure hose. With a cascade of water running off my nose I wiped my eyes and yelled,

‘Luke! Can we reef the main please?’

We both started laughing. There was water coming from every direction and in seconds we were soaked through.

With a mooring line around his waist, he fought his way to the mast and two reefs later wasn’t too impressed when I asked him to go back up the sharp end and change the No 2 for the working jib.

The sea state had become quite



unpleasant. Short, steep waves came crashing over the sides (Folkboats don't have a lot of freeboard!) and each time *Asturias* fell into a trough, she behaved like a demented seesaw, stabbing her bow into a wave, rearing up and dumping the water on poor old Luke.

He eventually returned from his duties on the foredeck, damp and a little bruised. It's reassuring to have a crew who, no matter how unpleasant the task, just do what is required without question. He had done a good job. The two reefs in the main with the working jib had settled her perfectly for the conditions we now found ourselves in, which was just as well, for on our starboard side we could see a dismasted yacht with a rather unhappy looking crew on board, limping

their way up the Blackwater.

Now, I am well aware that there are certain sailors who believe that a Folkboat never needs to be reefed no matter what the conditions. I would beg to differ with this opinion as if we hadn't reduced sail, the Earl of Dunleary could have been awoken from his slumber!

With visibility improving, the scene became quite fantastic as *Asturias* and her lager frenzied crew steamed past the Knoll in a good Force 7. Handing the helm to Luke I ventured down below to check on Simon. To my horror, the cabin floor was completely awash from rain and spray which had forced its way through the main hatch during the squall.

‘Luke? Would you mind pumping the bilge please?’

Ten minutes later and the floor began to slowly reappear and I continued on my mission. In the forepeak lay the Earl. Oddly enough, he wasn't looking too sharp and indicated with two fingers that he wished to be left alone.

Grabbing a box of red wine, two six packs and some digestives from under his bunk I made my way back on deck.

Luke grinned as I appeared. The time was 1000 and right on schedule was the red and white Wallet Spitway buoy fine on our starboard bow. While Luke got stuck into the vino, I cracked open a can, took the helm, eased off the sails, lined up the the Wallet with the Swin and at speed we made our way towards the channel.

Worryingly, the depth sounder was giving a reading of of 1.4m and we

weren't even in the channel yet. Had we arrived too late? To take my mind off matters a very ruddy faced Earl of Dunleary appeared and offered to take the helm while I went down below to update the log.

It was with more than a little relief that I heard the two of them shouting with elation a few minutes later. With his seamanship duly praised, the Earl relieved himself and without further ado retreated back to his bunk.

The rain eased slightly and the wind decreased to a steady Force 6. We were by now on a very comfortable broad reach, surfing down the waves, homeward bound. First the Whitaker then the West Hook Middle. I couldn't remember *Asturias* ever sailing this fast before.

The sound of the water gushing past the hull, the surging waves pushing us from behind, great gusts of wind droning through the rigging and fluttering the burgees; I was loving every minute of it and so was Luke. The sheer amount of energy around us was really quite daunting.

It was at this point that Luke decided to relieve himself. Hardly surprising having drunk several cans of lager and the lion's share of the bumper wine box. The conditions, although more comfortable, were still of concern and so I suggested that rather than pee over the side, he relieve himself into the cockpit and over my feet which were a looking a little blue and feeling slightly numb by this time. Even though it was technically summer

the north east wind was cold and as I hadn't any boots on I was feeling chilly. Well I have to admit, it was a superb sensation and the warmth felt from Luke's hot golden waters was utterly blissful. Half an hour later I had to go myself and I think Luke thought that I might return the favour and warm his feet, so appeared quite put out when I lashed over my own feet instead! He even called me something that rhymes with hunt!

There was little conversation between us now, just utter concentration and a savouring of the moment.

In what seemed like no time at all, we had shot past the Maplin Sands and were at the Blacktail Spit buoy. The wind decreased further, enough for us to shake out a reef and swap the working jib for

the No 2 genoa.

In the distance we could just make out the Isle of Grain power station chimney. I usually consider this to be strangely reassuring, marking the start of the homeward leg and more familiar waters of the Medway, but today I wasn't so sure if I was glad to see it or not. I didn't really want this adventure to stop.

At the Sea Reach buoy, we had the full might of the Thames under us, so powered our way round the wreck of the *Montgomery*, past Garrison Point and into the Medway. Once within her protection, we shook out the final reef in the main and swapped the No2 genoa for the No 1.

Then, as if by magic, up popped the Earl again and despite his woeful

condition offered to take the helm the rest of the way to Upnor. I've no idea how he managed to survive down below in those conditions. It must have been awful.

*Asturias* was in a bit of a state, but it didn't take too long to get her sorted out. A dib here and a dab there, within the hour we were tied up alongside the Royal Engineers' pontoon at Upnor and at the top of the tide to boot.

Incredibly, the passage had taken just seven hours! Not bad at all for a small 25 foot craft with a half-cut crew and a weather forecast from Uncle John.

I finally logged our arrival time at 1430. The wind abated, the last of the cloud dispersed, the hangovers cleared and the rest of the afternoon was spent in glorious sunshine with a beer...or two!



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