

'Harmony' says her prayers!



*2008 summer cruise to
Holy Island*

On Saturday 2nd August 2008, I sailed 'Harmony' with my father and my friend Rick, in the Aberdour Regatta.

We don't race very much any more but like to support local events and particularly Aberdour where many of the boats are of a similar speed. Despite our best efforts we came a close last! We were only three seconds behind the next boat on corrected time and 6 minutes or so behind the winning boat. Over three hours it's easy to see how that time is lost. Wandering slightly off the optimum course by looking back at other boats, a slow or unnecessary tack here and there, weed on the hull, being slow to hoist the cruising chute off the wind (in our case the shackle broke on the first lap rendering the halyard useless for the second lap) or simply having that extra cup of tea when we should have been concentrating. All in all we had fun and the obligatory father son argument.



Harmony in the 2008 Aberdour Regatta

Throughout the previous few weeks the engine had developed an annoying fault resulting in a temporary loss of power for a few seconds every once in a while. It didn't stall however it simply reduced to idle speed. The problem got gradually worse with the frequency and duration of the power loss increasing. I contemplated the usual fault diagnosis things, spoke to as many experienced DIY mechanics as I could and in the absence of anything definitive, decided that I must have some contaminated fuel. I changed the fuel and the filter after the regatta and contented myself that this would be the solution. It wasn't!

Sunday 3rd August 2008 (Aberdour to North Berwick)

We left from Aberdour harbour at 1430hrs with Heloise happily helming. It was warm, sunny at times and we had a westerly F2 pushing us slowly eastwards down the Forth. By 1615hrs we had just passed Inchkeith Island, steeped in military history and covered in guano I couldn't help wondering if Sir Tom Farmer has any plans to do anything with the island, or whether he is content simply to let it return to nature.

We could see heavy showers falling on Fife, Edinburgh and East Lothian but somehow the middle of the Forth was exempt at that time and we had a slow but pleasant sail. Near to the fairway buoy we spotted an object in the water, we both had some weird and wild guesses as to what it might be until we eventually passed it and established that it was an inflatable Dalmatian, what else!

We arrived at North Berwick at 1955hrs and picked up one of the East Lothian Yacht Club buoys, which they kindly provide for the use of visitors. Just before I switched the engine off Heloise remarked, "*The engine oil light is flickering again*". This was defining moment because I hadn't heard her mentioning it before but after the inevitable questions we agreed that she had, but I hadn't listened properly. In any event it was too much of a coincidence to ignore. I checked the engine oil and found it to be about half or the required amount. The engine had undergone a strip down and rebuild at the start of this season so it was just possible that the correct amount of engine oil hadn't been put in. Surely it couldn't be that simple?



Heloise at North Berwick

Monday 4th August 2008 (North Berwick to Eyemouth)

We went ashore early on and walked a couple of miles to the nearest petrol station. I bought 2 gallons of fuel and a litre of oil. The viscosity was slightly wrong but that was far less of an issue than having no oil. On the way back I found another garage that was able to sell me the correct grade of oil and also a replacement for the 15A fuse on the battery charging circuit, which had blown at some point.

We were not able to locate the harbour master and a notice in the window alluded to there not being one at present. We found a member of the Harbour Committee and who told us to our delight that there was no charge for using the moorings.

Back on board I topped up the engine oil and replaced the fuse. The engine started flawlessly and purred like a cat with a saucer of milk. I later read that this engine has a cut out switch activated when the oil pressure is too low. The mystery was solved.

With our engine working perfectly again we slipped our mooring at 1235hrs and set sail for Eyemouth. We had originally intended on going to Berwick upon Tweed but our arrival time there was unlikely to coincide with the recommended times for safely clearing the bar at the entrance and negotiating the current of the river Tweed.

There was virtually no wind so we motored with the mainsail up and did a lap of the Bass Rock about 30 meters off in a slight swell. The thousands of resident gannets make an awesome sight and when on the lee side of the island a significant smell too.



Some of the gannets on the bass Rock

Once clear of the rock we set our auto-helm and headed for St Abbs head. As we approached the wind decided that westerly was no fun any more and a nice little force 3 appeared right on the nose! With only about 3 miles to go we continued to motor.



This is a foghorn and not an anti-gannet gun!

Throughout the day squadrons of gannets flew low over the sea in formation. Some appeared to be heading off in search of food and others returning to the Bass Rock for a rest. I marvelled at how these large birds could glide effortlessly along with only the tiniest trim adjustment to their wings. They had all the precision of the Red Arrows but considerably more grace. However, they weren't all so lucky and we did pass a dead one with it's wings outstretched that appeared as if it had misjudged it's landing.



Gannets squabble over nesting material



The Bass Rock from the South East

We entered Eyemouth at 1920hrs. Heloise had spoken to the Harbour master's assistant on the VHF and we had the choice of rafting up four deep on the pontoons for £15 a night or going along side one large yacht and climbing a ladder for £10. We chose the latter, this made sense, as the yacht we were alongside was unoccupied and this way we would neither disturb any one else or be disturbed.

There were lots of hopefuls fishing in the harbour but the two or three resident seals would seriously reduce the chance of catching anything there. Being a busy fishing port the water is perhaps not the cleanest and some locals were throwing themselves and each other in, swimming across the harbour and later being violently sick. It was amusing.

We noticed that most of the crews of the small trawlers were foreign workers, most likely Filipinos. The trawlers themselves always fascinate me. There are some that quite simply don't look sea-worthy. Some when viewed in dry dock, look like cartoon boats. Most have a very deep draught and all are necessarily very rugged. They seemed to come and go constantly at Eyemouth and the boat handling skill with which they come along side makes for something of a visitor attraction.



A Cartoon shaped trawler at Eyemouth

We were able to enjoy the luxury of hot showers in Eyemouth and the harbour staff provided us with weather forecasts, all of which were favourable.

Tuesday 5th August – (Eyemouth to Holy Island)

The wind was a perfect N.E force 3 for once and we motored confidently out of the harbour at 1030hrs in to the uncomfortable but anticipated North Sea swell. We went out about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile out and hoisted the sails and sat back to enjoy 20 miles of sailing.

As we approached Holy Island two RAF Tornado aircraft roared low overhead. We later found out that one such plane had crash-landed at Newcastle airport. Just like the gannet we had previously seen, only fortunately no one had been hurt.

The wind became more and more easterly until sods law of cruising dictated we were once again beating. We were very close to the shallow water that extends some way into the North Sea from the north - east corner of the Island and as Heloise squeezed every available inch to windward out of 'Harmony', I watched the chart plotter like a man possessed to ensure we would clear the shoals.

We dropped the sails and motored the last couple of miles into the well -marked entrance to Holy Island harbour. Firstly there are two cardinal buoys, we passed just to starboard of the westerly one and rounded the easterly one on our starboard side. We then picked up the leading line between the two 'Old Law' beacons until we rounded a green lateral mark. From there a beacon on shore aligned with the belfry of Holy Island Church ensures a safe passage between the various shoals.

There were a couple of much larger yachts anchored in 3 or 4 meters of water, but here the tide can flow at up to 4 knots. With our shallow draught we tucked right in to the Ouse to the east of all the moorings. At 1655hrs we anchored out of the tide with 1.9 meters below us.

It was a very warm and pleasant evening so we wasted no time in going ashore to explore. We bought some basic provisions in the local shop, which happily was offering free samples of Lindisfarne Mead. It tasted lovely but just to be doubly sure I thought it prudent to try another, this confirmed my original verdict!



Holy Island Village

We ambled through the pretty streets of the village. Young children were playing in the streets, something nice to see but not encouraged these days on most of the mainland due to the dangers of traffic or media fuelled paranoia about abductions.

There were a large number of starlings on the island and most of these seemed to frequent a particular tree in the grounds of a small hotel. Sparrows cheekily landed close to us as we walked, daring to suggest that we might have food for them.



There were lots of resident birds at Holy Island



The perfect garden shed!

We went in to one of the hotels and I sampled a local brew. If I'm honest one pint of bitter tastes rather similar to another to me and it didn't compare to the mead for any sort of distinctive flavour.

We noticed that a thick mist had formed; this chilled the air and reduced visibility to about 200 meters. We went back aboard and it was apparent that we had dragged our anchor a short distance. The holding wasn't the best in this part of the Ouse and the chart said the bottom was stony. I set our second anchor, confident that out of any significant tide and with little wind the dead weight of the two anchors and 40 meters of chain would keep us where we were for the night.

As we settled down for the evening the strains of seals calling to one another could be heard across the distance. With a little imagination it became monks chanting and singing and was a haunting sound in the mist. I heard it again later from inside the cabin and remarked on this to Heloise who with her usual composure informed me that I was in fact listening to Radio 4!

Wednesday 6th August 2008 – (Holy Island to Berwick Upon Tweed)

The pilot book advised entering the River Tweed into Berwick on the 2nd half of the flood tide. I telephoned my father for a precise time and depth at low water and calculated that there was sufficient water for us to enter, even at low water. Just to allow a little margin for error I intended to enter a couple of hours after the tide began to flood. The other significant factor was that we needed to leave the Holy Island anchorage with the tide still ebbing, as it would be a hefty slog to attempt to make progress against it.

Taking into account these factors I decided as low water was at 1240hrs we would leave Holy Island at noon. It should take us almost 3 hours to reach Berwick by which time there would be plenty of water.

As the water was shallow, we needed to move out of the Ouse before we dried out and at 1000hrs we lifted our anchors and motored slowly towards the larger yachts anchored in the deeper, more tidal waters.

I had one eye on the echo sounder and the other on the yachts and motored too casually passed a moored fishing boat. Before we could react the tide swept us swiftly onto the fishing boat's mooring riser and with around 3 knots of tide pinning us against it, Harmony slewed round until she was almost parallel to the fishing vessel and dangled in the tide with the riser stuck fast in front of our rudder.

I secretly hoped no one was watching because I felt rather embarrassed at having taken my eye off the ball, allowing this to happen. I decided there were two options available, either we waited a couple of hours for the time to slacken sufficiently for us to push ourselves off sideways, or I could tie a long line to the riser and try to slip it down beneath our rudder to free us.

Just then a small creel fishing boat with two men on board and a gutsy little diesel engine appeared through the mist, they appeared to recognise our situation instinctively and without a word, (I can only assume we are not the first to have done this and will probably not be the last) handed us a line and in two minutes flat pulled us clear of the riser. I thanked them both and the younger lad then doffed his cap before they went about their business.

We carried on and anchored in about 4 meters without further incident to await the time to leave.

We left at noon with the visibility about 400meters for most of the time, however we were treated to a rather haunting view of Bamburgh Castle.



Bamburgh castle

Heloise helmed for a while as I studied the chart plotter. There was little or no wind; just a gentle swell and we motored all the way to Berwick. The visibility varied from poor to moderate and we finally sighted the breakwater at Berwick at a distance of about two miles.

We contacted the harbour pilot by telephone, as there was no reply on the VHF and then proceeded cautiously up the Tweed and in to the Tweed Dock. We were impressed by the size of the almost entirely empty Dock. It seemed an under used facility with only a few small fishing boats huddled in the eastern end of the dock. There was only one available ladder and we made fast alongside. We found the harbourmaster's office but no harbour master so we made our way in to town.



Cormorants and a heron at Berwick

The pilot book is not entirely complimentary about the area around the Tweed Dock and as soon as we left the dock we thought at first we'd found out why. There was an armoured car parked outside a house, surely the area wasn't that bad!?!



New concepts in vehicle security!

On returning to Harmony we saw a 33' Dutch yacht 'Libis 11' alongside us. The owners, Yelle and Floora, invited us aboard. They were a young friendly couple in their first season with their yacht, and intent on sailing her around the world next year.

As we were on our second bottle of wine, the roar of a powerful engine summoned us all on to deck to be met by the sight of the 75' yacht 'Faramir' approaching our corner of the dock. This was an Ocean trust yacht crewed by two professional sailors, a couple of social workers and ten young lads who had been afforded some valuable life experience aboard the yacht as an alternative to their more usual feral existence and ultimately to a life in and out of prison on a regular basis.

We found the lads to be polite and friendly but the two professional crew - members didn't share our opinion and merely took delight at making them as seasick as possible. Perhaps that had taken the sting out of them somewhat.

Rather than be crushed by the ever-increasing raft of yachts we moved to allow 'Faramir' to take the inside berth.

Later a large motor – cruiser 'Claymore' came along side us and we were once again sandwiched.



Harmony sandwiched at Berwick

Thursday 7th August 2008 – (Berwick to Granton - 56 miles)

Our intention was to hop the ten miles or so up the coast to Eyemouth and then on to Anstruther for the Cruising Muster on Friday 8th.

We woke to a grey, blustery sort of a morning and Heloise and I set off for a quick walk around the city battlements. We passed a car that had been damaged as a result of a large tree falling on it in the night. It continued to rain and it was windy, but not too bad as I could manage to hold our umbrella steady. We gazed out to sea and could see some white horses due mainly to the wind against tide.

We returned to Harmony and I checked to the engine oil level and found it to be just below the maximum. I topped up our little fuel tank, as I knew that we may have to use lots of power and this would drink more fuel. We obtained a forecast from 'Claymore', which was for northerly 4–5 with heavy rain. This promised not to be idyllic but there was nothing to suggest the short hop to Eyemouth would be anything other than a little wet and bumpy.

We watched as 'Faramis' powered out to sea and hoisting her massive sails was soon lost to view in the rain. 'Claymore' then departed and we watched as her mast swayed in the swell off the breakwater.

At 0945hrs we said cheerio to Yelle and Floora and left the security of the Tweed dock. Once committed to the Tweed accompanied by an ebb tide there is very little opportunity to turn round as it flows at a considerable rate. As approached the landward end of the breakwater I pointed Harmony seaward and increased the power, it was a little like a pilot positioning his plane on the end of a runway and opening up the throttle for take off! Heloise sat in the companion way with the washboards in place and I stood harnessed in to the cockpit.

I could see a man videoing us from the breakwater and just as I wondered what the fascination was we tackled a series of steep waves over the bar. 'Harmony' rose up the first and on descending it the second wave crashed across her decks and a good deal of it went down my neck. I knew there would be swell at this point because of the bar and the idea was to blast out seaward clear of the dangerous stuff near to the shore. Blast we did but the steep waves got bigger with no sign of any let up. I then had the awful feeling that it had been a bad decision to put to sea today but returning to the Tweed Dock was not an option and to try may have been suicidal.

When we were about 100meters from the end of the breakwater and still struggling with enormous waves the engine faltered again, cutting power to idle speed. As before it picked up again after a few heart stopping seconds and gave another burst of power before cutting out again. This procedure continued with the idling periods becoming more frequent and longer.

'Harmony' rose to most of the waves without a problem but a great many of them were breaking over the deck and my worst fear was taking one of these beam on. I struggled to keep 'Harmony' facing the waves whenever the power and the speed dropped.

I knew that theoretically a braking sea of about 8 feet would be enough to roll 'Harmony' and being so close to shore I didn't fancy our chances if that happened. Most of these waves were a great deal bigger than that in any case. As we rose up one and thundered down it's back the next appeared at spreader height. I had never been in seas this large and so close to the shore and I was ready to unfurl the jib if the engine cut out completely. The wind was now about 30 knots and I wasn't sure

we could beat our way successfully out of this situation but if the need arose to try, it would be our only option.

Other than warning Heloise when a particularly large wave was about to smash over us, we didn't talk much. I was considering how we might try to board the dinghy if the worst happened and more importantly I was kicking myself for placing Heloise in such a potentially dangerous situation. We were in a predicament, over which I had virtually no control because of the situation with the engine, and for the first time in my 30 years of sailing the adrenaline had gone and was replaced by fear. Heloise meanwhile, was busy in the cabin examining the contents of our grab bag!

As the minutes ticked by we gained more and more sea room. After about two hours the massive waves were still coming, but less of them seemed to be breaking now. I kept reminding myself of the saying that '*a boat rarely fails the crew*' and this encouraged me, all I had to do was keep Harmony moving in the right direction and above all taking the waves bow on.

Heloise contacted Eyemouth harbour on the VHF and the fuse immediately blew. Fortunately she was able to speak to them on the hand-held radio and they advised us not to attempt to enter Eyemouth as conditions were simply too bad.

Plan B was simply to head back to the Forth as there were no nearer places of refuge along this coast. I asked Heloise to check the chart plotter to ensure our course would take us about 3 miles to seaward of St Abbs Head as we were sailing blind due to the rain and spray and could no longer see the shore, she regularly called out to me if I needed to go further to sea. I tried to keep a course of 330 degrees but it wasn't possible to be accurate about it and adjustments had to be made from time to time.

About 1330hrs the characteristics of the sea changed as we drew north of St Abbs head and although the waves were still large they became far less threatening. I was able to bear off slightly and we unfurled a scrap of jib and even with our mostly idling engine we were making about 6.5knots and regularly surfing at over 9!

Heloise had been handing me mars bars and digestives from time to time throughout the worst of our ordeal and despite the rolling and pitching she miraculously now produced half a mug of hot soup and a filled roll. How she could even contemplate this during such an uncomfortable time is beyond me but I was very glad she did. Not only that, she managed to top up our fuel tank from a spare container without spilling a drop! My half mug of soup was also topped up as another wave broke over the deck. Down below, water forcing its way through the air vent was showering Heloise.

The further north we got the more the conditions moderated. The wind seemed to vary between F5 and F7 but the sea, though still large was back to being exciting and no longer troubled us.

There was a further rough patch as we passed by Dunbar and a cheeky wave caught us beam on and for the second time today threw Harmony onto her side momentarily submerging the cabin windows. We could almost laugh about this by this time though.

As we neared the Bass Rock we decided against attempting trying to go to Anstruther. The tide was now flooding down the Forth, the wind was also from the northeast, we didn't have a great deal of fuel left and the reliability of the engine for a windward approach in any sort of sea was questionable.

At 1630hrs we passed inside the bass Rock and into its lee with our genoa fully out. Immediately the sea flattened off to waves or about 3 or 4 feet, the wind was still a F5 but was astern and we were able to relax and enjoy a cup of tea and I was able to unclip my safety harness and move position for the first time in nearly 7 hours.

We ran westwards along the Forth eventually arriving at Granton Harbour at 2115hrs. Heloise gently brought Harmony alongside and we settled down for a well-deserved nights sleep.

Friday 8th August 2008 (Granton)

We woke about 0900hrs. My back felt stiff from having stood, braced for so many long hours the previous day but the world couldn't have seemed more different. It was warm and sunny with virtually no breeze and we both wondered if we had imagined the previous day. I rigged a washing line to dry out our saturated waterproofs and then checked the damage.

I replaced the radio fuse, there was no obvious reason why this blew but the fuse was loose in the holder and I set about securing this before replacing the fuse.

The engine oil level was down to about a quarter of the necessary amount. I topped this up. I also noticed that the engine had been swamped at some point, as there were significant salt deposits under the cover.

Heloise had noticed the engine rocking from side to side the previous day and I found the cause of this to be one of the bracket pivot bolts which had worked loose and almost fallen out. I managed to insert another bolt as a temporary replacement but I was unable to insert the metal sleeve due to the weight of the engine on the bracket.

The towing eyelet had almost been ripped clean off the dinghy. I rigged a bridle from both rings on the side tubes to replace this. This probably would have been a better idea in the first place but we've never had reason to suppose it was necessary as we've towed the dinghy for five years without so much as a loose stitch until now.

Finally I checked our trip computer. We'd covered 56 nautical miles the previous day in 11.5 hours and our maximum speed had been 10.07 knots. Why couldn't we do this when we were racing!

The main frustration at this point was not being able to attend the Sailing Muster at Anstruther. We had been for the last five years and consider it an annual pilgrimage, however we were glad to be on land for now and in need of a rest. We caught a bus in to Edinburgh City Centre and watched a show and some street performers in the festival before returning home on the morning of Saturday 9th.

We did attend the Muster, albeit by car and I duly indulged in one or two of Mick's now legendary gin and tonics aboard 'Maragay' in the time honoured fashion.

Conclusion

We achieved our intended goal of sailing to Holy Island and back but I don't think there are many truer sayings than '*The most dangerous thing at sea is a timetable*'.

The horrendous conditions we experienced off Berwick were in the main due to the easterly wind, swell and wind against tide. They were then exasperated by the condition of the engine on which we were so reliant at the time in order to gain vital sea room. I hope I would not make the same mistake again but all things considered I might for the following reasons: -

- We had no reason at the time to suspect the engine would falter when it did as it had been behaving normally for several days after I topped up the oil and so this wouldn't have impacted in any decision about leaving.
- We could see white horses out to sea but the wind wasn't especially strong, nor was it forecast to be when we made the decision to leave. There was no harbour master to ask for local advice and from the dock it didn't appear wild enough to consider calling Eyemouth for a report from there.
- A walk along the break - water may have helped but the conditions appeared to deteriorate very rapidly and having left the Tweed Dock, we were committed due to the lack of room to manoeuvre in the river and the current, therefore we couldn't have aborted the trip. We'd also just seen two other yachts leave, albeit they were both much larger than us.

Lessons learned

In unfamiliar waters and in the absence of anyone to ask for local knowledge it would have been wise to physically check things out by walking along the breakwater.

We had time on our side and there was no special reason to need to go that day. The fact that it was raining, blustery and the visibility was poor should have been enough to convince us to stay another day.

The boat will take these seas so long as we keep her water tight and pointed in the right direction. It would be difficult to estimate the wave height but they certainly were at spreader height as we were roaring down into the troughs, coupled with swell I'd say around 4 – 5 meters. The main problem was that they were breaking and very close together, as we got further out to sea they became more manageable.