

A perfect storm.

16th June 2007 -

Crosshaven – Brest- Camaret Sur-Mer – St Marys (Isles of Scilly) – Tresco – Crosshaven.

Crew. Victor Shine, Sean Kelleher, Claire Kenealy, Paula Falvey and Paddy Allen.

With any offshore cruise it tends to create a tremendous flurry of activity within the South Coast Garda Sailing Club. The preparation for a voyage which will take Explorer over the horizon and into an area where there is limited support or radio coverage requires such an effort. So all the necessary work has to be undertaken in a short time, and many members, even members, who are not on the crew, helping. Some undertook tasks such as refuelling, servicing equipment, down to generally seeing that she is clean and tidy. As with any vessel of this size there are a myriad of small tasks such as replacing deck lights, charts which have to be updated and new chart discs for the chart plotter, interior bulbs, even down to having the courtesy flags for both UK and French waters. Naturally the customary Breton flag is one which we are happy to fly in recognition of our Celtic brothers. It has been known for centuries that the Welsh and Bretons are really just Irish at heart. It's just that they never learnt to swim as far.

The checking of the array of safety equipment such as lifejackets, safety harnesses, life raft, flares, eperb (ah wha), safety lines, guard rails and of course the dan buoy is carried out for a very good reason. The safety of all on board depends not alone in having the equipment up to spec but also in its application.

So early on the morning of the 16th of June, the two Galley Slaves.....op's sorry. The two budding novices paid a visit to the local supermarket and purchased the necessary provisions sufficient to feed six people for up to three days. Have you tried to cater for six adults recently! Boxes of fruit, sweets, turkey, and the best of Clonakilty was hoisted over the rails and packed away down below in every nook and cranny. Last to go on board was the turkey; all prepared by Victor's wife Terry and the large fruit cake compliments of my wife Mary Rose. By 10am all crew being accounted for, we cast off and headed out to sea to begin a 600 mile sea voyage. By Roche's point the customary check was carried out with the Irish Coastguard initially on C16. With the best regards from Irish Coastguard 'Rodger Explorer have a safe voyage and goodbye' we set our sights in the direction of the French Coast. With these pleasantries completed crew were exercised in the MOB (Man Overboard) drill. Who, what where, when and if someone is lost overboard what do we do about it. Well it depends really if it's someone really important like the cook then we go back.....otherwise.....!!

A reasonable crossing was made in good time as far as the Gas Rigs and as usual did us the courtesy of remaining on our starboard side rather than moving about. Very difficult if they keep moving.....like lighthouses.....and rocks. Evidently the owners take a dim view of WAFFI's (Wind Assisted F***** Idiots) passing between them.



By early the next morning after an uneventful overnight we passed the Bishop Lighthouse some distance on our Port Side and began crossing the first of our shipping lanes. These were finally crossed without any great difficulty by 0800 on the morning of the 17th and we came around to a course of 140°. Up to mid morning visibility was about 5 miles and then it began to deteriorate. A number of large container ships and a tanker crossed both ahead and astern of us. At one point the 'Stena Bulk' a large product carrier called us up on C16 and requested our intention as he had difficulty in determining our course (so had we). While we were well clear of the marked shipping lanes there was an abundance of traffic and so an extra watch had to be maintained. Due to the wind direction sailing was becoming increasingly difficult and at one stage we found ourselves on a course of 040° and on a collision course with Dover!

Picking up île D'Ouseant and the lighthouse at Pte de Creac'h was a welcome sight and it also indicated that we had successfully crossed one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world and dodged everything- this time at least. Staying well clear of île D'Ouseant we came onto a course of 130° and began to pick up the cardinal marks at Les Pierres Vertes (Westerly) and further on Less Pierres Noires and Baasse Royale. I understand there is a fairly spectacular wreck just north of this mark. At 0500 on the 18th, course was altered to 100° as we were on the approach channel to Brest. We were cautiously feeling our way when we were hit by two substantial waves which carried away our beam light. This was later to prove to have been a serious loss of a vital piece of equipment, which we were unable to source in Brest. Out of the dark we picked up the Cardinal marks on the shallows of L' Astrolabe and we altered course to 070° for a short while until we had positioned ourselves to the starboard side of the approach and again altered course to 060°. Many times the call went below 'White/Red Light flashing at about 2 o'clock...any idea!!!! In other words can you identify and where are we? Both radar and chart plotter proved invaluable in this intricate approach. Being able to provide an accurate picture to the helmsman/woman especially in less than familiar waters is a great help. With dawn upon us, we were able to visually identify the isolated danger mark at 04°39'W and 48° 19'N. A sigh of relief all around, as we made our finals into Brest and onto the marina. Where not surprisingly, sleep was the top of the agenda. Some of the more active members of the crew took pity on us and let the sleeping dogs alone for a while. In a short time the remainder of the crew had 'Explorer' back to looking like the luxury cruiser that we have all seen. After two days at sea it can look like as if all the gear is thrown into a tumble drier and turned upside down.

Oh Oh!!!!!! Why are those girls looking at us like that.....andwhy does she wear a uniform and why is she waving a clutter of half sheets at us like that?.....what does she want?.....Usual visit from 'French Customs' who have a look at our documents, passports but after the usual banter they declare us compliant. Oh...and they advised us where to get the best deals on wine and if we had any difficulties they could assist....I suppose they help everyone like that. The parting words were in relation to rocks.....we replied that we were not involved in any drug related activities.....at least that's what I thought she said. Any suggestion that this could in fact relate to a near miss with a moving rock many years ago is without foundation.



No Comment



Are we there yet!!

Two days in Brest and then onto Camaret Sur-Mer for a further two days. On the way we passed the French Naval Headquarters at Brest and had a fine view of their Fleet and the Submarine Pens which have survived the War. In fact most of the coastline still displays evidence of fortifications dating from the Napoleonic era up to World War 2. Gun emplacements, Pill Boxes, Searchlights and other interesting structure are a common feature.



Barrys Tea- French style.

After a further two days in Camaret Sur- Mer we checked the forecast and pondered over the choices of either stay put or go on for St Mary's in the Isle of Scilly. Eoghan sent a text regarding the weather and it suggested that going to the nearest pub was the best option for a week at least!. A slightly dejected crew looked up the current weather forecast at the Harbour Office in Camaret which stated that wind was from the South and force 6. Lumpy but as we would be running before it, we decided to set out. Departing

Camaret at 1600hrs we checked in with Brest Coastguard Radio and advised them of our intentions and destination.

Conditions were fine but with a swell. For safety reasons we stayed well south of the île De Beniguet and the Chaussee Des Pierres Noires. While this is a delightful area, it abounds with rocks and small islands. The chart indicates three wrecks which are visible....and we did not intend to be number 4. Traffic was light with just one small coaster and a yacht observed making their way towards Brest. The lighthouse on île D'Ouessant was easier to pick up this time as we still had daylight and we altered course to 340°. Sails were reefed back fully and the jib was furled most of the way in and we were moving along at a nice pace of 6/8 knots. Then with the D'Ouessant fading into the horizon things started to go wrong. Mick (Shark) Collins shouted down to turn on the navigation lights and then called that the compass light was not working and would I try the switch again....Peering at the electrical switch panel some confusion appeared on my face....where is the compass light? Of course one does not exist as the compass light and \nav lights are all on the one circuit. So no compass light.....and remembering the light we lost over the side.....oh no! Paula to the rescue who had to sit for several hours with a small torch pointed at the compass and did a magnificent job despite being as sick as a parrot....several times. With the wind increasing and it becoming more difficult, it had to happen and it didwe jibed twice and 'bang' went the car and we lost control of the main sail. Victor to the rescue and with some rope was able to tie down the car onto the rail, but this only lasted a few minutes and bang went the makeshift repair. This time we really secured it and as soon as we had, it was noticed that the jib sheet had severed, how we don't know, but that it was now flapping uselessly and all of this while we were in the Northbound Lane of the shipping channel. Somehow the sheet had now wrapped itself around the jib which had come adrift and we had the next best thing to a spinnaker in front of us in a f8 gale and no way to control it. Attempts were made to secure this by working on the exposed deck but as usual things did not go as planned...the deck light, all of just one month old stopped working. Without light we considered it too dangerous to work on the exposed deck. Batten down the hatches and drive on. With Victor on the helm and Paddy plotting we got hit by a tremendous wave which carried away the seat (which Victor was sitting on) and one of the horseshoe buoys. Paddy was knocked from the chart table (sleeping) into the Starboard Aft cabin which was occupied by Paula and Claire. Sean was later overheard saying that they had a slightly different version.....(I was never convicted of that offence).



Safety lines being the order of the day. Mick and Paula leaving Brest

Trying to keep the boat on course was difficult as the following sea was trying to push us onto our beam and so motoring was the tactic to prevent this. This made the going quite fast and at one point when I was on the wheel I noticed that 'Explorer' was doing all of 15Knots. Why could we never get this speed on the Blackrock race! The crew got very little sleep throughout the night and did an absolutely magnificent job. To give an indication as to the conditions, at one point during the night I looked out and saw Mick Collins on the wheel and Sean winching, while at the same time a wave had engulfed both of them.

With dawn arriving, the problem of the jib could be addressed and Victor carried out a running repair and in mountainous seas succeeded in securing it. While we were just within a few miles of the Isles of Scilly according to the plot, we were unable to see it on radar just yet. This was probably due to the fact that they are low lying and with the high waves were not seen. Eventually St Mary's and Gough were picked up and a little later visual sighting of Peninnis Head. Once the cardinal mark of the Spanish Ledge was correctly identified, we were ready to enter. On a course of 307° Explorer entered the safe anchorage of the Isles of Scilly and went to pick up a mooring buoy when the last bit of bad luck came along. Just as the buoy came up, the boat hook gave way and promptly sank from view...what else could go wrong? After much scrambling, shouting and some appropriate remarks, the vessel was secured and after checking in with Falmouth Coastguard we went to sleep.....and then some more sleep.

That day we all went ashore for showers and a look around. The usual shops were visited and later that evening we had a meal in the Mermaid. The Isles of Scilly must be one of the last remaining unspoilt areas and highly recommended for a quick visit.

Last day on the Isles of Scilly and we departed St Mary's after refuelling and taking on some provisions and we set off for Tresco and Bryher in New Grimsby Sound. This time we successfully snarled one of the mooring buoys and when secured, set off for an island hopping adventure. Final destination being the Island Hotel on Tresco, where the now ritual of clotted cream, scones and coffee finished off a relaxing day.



Paddy, Claire, Sean, Mick, Paula and Victor at the Island Hotel on Tresco

The final part of the journey from Tresco to Crosshaven was ahead of us. This time the crew broke down into watches getting as much needed sleep as possible for the night ahead. Final radio checks were made with Falmouth Coastguard, who reported difficulty in hearing our transmission clearly. The overnight passage was uneventful and we arrived in Crosshaven in the late afternoon of the 23rd of June.

The crew and vessel had come through a testing experience of seamanship, navigation and endurance. We were the crew of the sailing vessel 'Explorer' and we have come through. Would we do it again.....someone said pain has no memory.