

Rough passage and dead calm



Two English Channel crossings presented skippers with very different challenges during the 10th anniversary of the Classic Channel Regatta. Dick Durham sailed with them

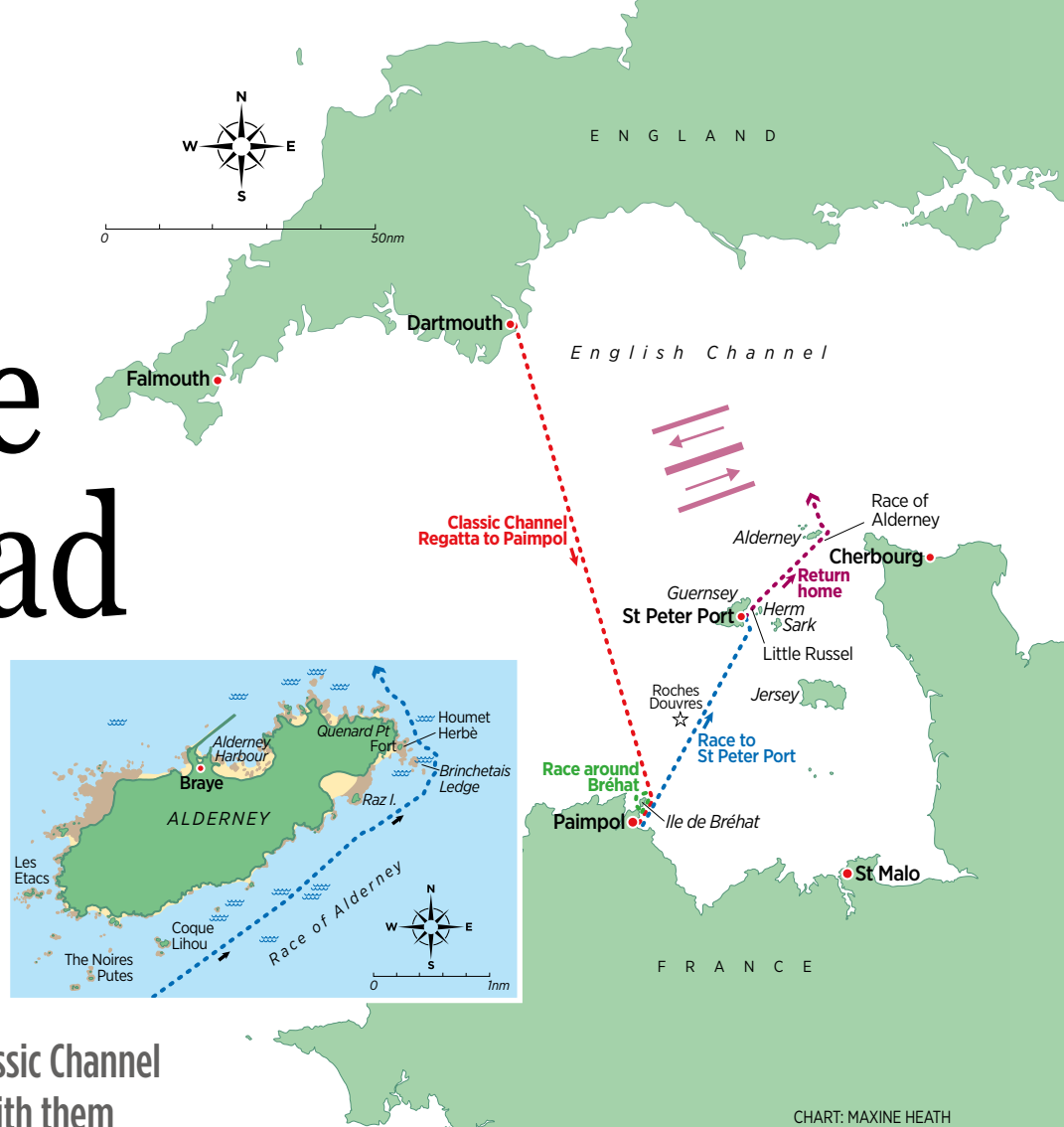


CHART: MAXINE HEATH

The first we saw of it was a yellow horseshoe buoy flying across the spume, then the pitching hull of a winged yacht, her port-side guardrail ripped clean off, her pushpit a dangling tangle of pipework and her toerail in splinters.

'That's Bruce's boat,' said our skipper, Martin Thomas, as the otherwise immaculate *Mabel*, a 42ft Kim Holman-designed wooden sloop built in 1966 by Moody's, retired before she had crossed

the start line of the Classic Channel Race from Dartmouth to Paimpol.

The Bruce in question is Bruce Thorogood, the widely respected chairman of the Classic Regatta Anglo-Breton (CRAB), whose unenviable responsibility it was to start the race in a Force 7. But a near gale was not enough to postpone an eight-day schedule of regattas, port-hopping and cruising, planned for both sides of the English Channel and, when I spoke to him later, he was philosophical

about the rough conditions that exacerbated the collision between his boat and *Orana*, a 1959 MacGruer 8 Square Metre sloop owned by Hervé du Rotois.

'I'm just glad everyone is safe,' he said, 'I'm always worried about sending a large number of boats out into such weather.'

Those of us aboard *Charm of Rhu*, Martin Thomas' Clyde 8 Square Metre, the last yacht to be built at the legendary Fife Yard at Fairlie, Scotland, in 1963, had no time to spare on the casualty as we were away, two reefs pulled in, a turn or two of the genoa rolled up, spray drenching us and her low, purposeful topsides sending cold Channel water sluicing aft along the laid teak deck.

Martin had the tiller to hang onto, his regular crew Chris Coles gripped the genoa sheet, and James Jermain, former editor of *YM*, held onto the mainsheet traveller lines. I just huddled behind the coachroof, feet braced against the cockpit coamings and tried to concentrate on two things: one, to keep my breakfast in my stomach and two, how to make a hundred miles not seem far on a tight sheet in an unseasonably strong sou'wester.

Closing the shipping lanes I watched two giant freighters approach us, flashing white as the relentless seas humping eastward met their bows of their relentless passage west. The only evidence of mechanical effort was a smear of urine-coloured diesel



The fleet leaves Dartmouth. More than 400 yachtsmen competed in the regatta

PHOTOS: DICK DURHAM, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED

Charm of Rhu (left) sailed direct from Guernsey to race in the Panerai Classics at Cowes



smoke across the grey sky.

In the east-going lane we luffed *Charm* to avoid a 280m container ship, *Margarita of Monrovia*, which had been on a collision course, before setting two-hour watches as dusk fell.

The wind was forecast to ease and veer. It did ease and we dropped out the reefs but it didn't veer. By the time we had the one stab of light every five seconds from the Roches Douvres lighthouse on our bow, the breeze was back up and a mizzle of fog enveloped the light with a fuzzy halo. It had been a relief to have something to steer for, but the fog bank shut out the 65m tall lighthouse, so I was back to keeping the wind at the right angle on my face as the steering compass was difficult to see from the weather rail. And we reefed again.

'It's not surprising the French are such good sailors, dealing with this crap, all these rocks and such fierce tides,' said Martin with uncharacteristic negativity.

'At least we're on the last chart,' he added, back to his normal routine of morale-building. 'I'll make tea.'



Skipper Martin Thomas and former YM editor James Jermain

We groped in at unseen speed through the dark, moonless night, towards the ever-converging plateaux of granite, the wind still strong, the tide levering us against it. We were still well offshore, that's to say habitable shore, and yet in among a riddle of channels through rock. Where there are too many rocks to name individually the French cartographers name them collectively: Plateau de la Horaine, Plateau des Echaudes, Plateau de Men-Marc'h. We tacked towards Men-Marc'h then tacked away again as we closed it: 'I don't like the look of nought

metres,' said Martin, marking our 0400 position on the chart. It was a dead reckoning calculation, as the GPS had lost its satellite fix.

I went off watch, slept well in the forepeak and came back up two hours later to find James and Chris trying to find a sailing angle in light winds in among the ever-tightening maze of rocks, some big enough to be named individually, like Raguene Meur. Martin had marked the chart at 0500, at 0506 and again at 0515.

'You've got to keep at it,' he said later, 'you can't take your eye off the ball.'

Somewhere in this water-filled quarry the Bostrom 29 sloop *St Jarna* lost her backstay, but with admirable seamanship her crew quickly rigged a jury stay with the spinnaker halyard.

At last daylight came and with it the welcome sight of a small motor-cruiser flying a red flag: our finishing line off the south side of the Ile de Brehat.

This was the moment we discovered we could not drop the mainsail. The outer layer of the eight-year-old Dyneema →

'We were away, two reefs pulled in, spray drenching us, her low, purposeful topsides sending cold Channel water sluicing along the deck'



Martin Thomas takes the bowline in Paimpol



main halyard had parted and it jammed in the mast clutch as we eased it off the winch. Chris and I tried to cut away the outer layer, but it would disintegrate before we could get more than half an inch removed. It was like trying to skin a dessicated snake. We couldn't simply cut the halyard as we were not sure if a rigger was available ashore and the inner core was better than nothing.

The only solution was to pull the skin off the core all the way back to the bitter end – a painfully slow process with James, Chris and me pulling the tight outer layer inch by inch along the coil as Martin motored *Charm* slowly into the wind – and into the shallows.

'I'm running out of water,' he said.

With blisters on our fingers we finally flayed the line, dropped the sail, hauled

Put out more flags. It was Chris Coles' job on *Charm of Rhu* and he became sick of the 'F' word!

The Classic Channel Regatta

The sixth edition of this biennial event, founded in 2005, had a record entry of 82 boats in 2015. The regatta comprised two days' racing off Dartmouth, the Cross-Channel race, the race around Bréhat and the passage race to Guernsey (a planned race around Sark was cancelled due to lack of wind).

The boats included a class of 11 Twisters and a wide variety of mostly wooden classics. The smallest to complete the whole event was *Celtic Lass*, a Maurice Griffiths-designed 8m Eventide sailed by Bob Wheeler from Poole. The largest was *White Dolphin*, a 20m ketch designed by Vincenzo Beltrami and sailed by Jean-Pierre Vernier from

RIGHT: Sheevra, a Swan 36, sailed the furthest of all yachts to get to the regatta. She is based in Blyth, Northumberland and sailed by Jonathan Wallis and family



L'Aber Wrac'h. Arguably the most eye-catching yacht was *Kelpie*, the stunning 20m Alfred Mylne gaff cutter built in 1903 and sailed by Pelham Olive from Southampton. The strangest was the reverse sheer *Gulvain*,

an aluminium 16.7m sloop designed by Laurent Giles, built in 1949 and sailed by Chris Mannion of Levington.

Notable cruising entries included *Lady Larissa*, a 12.8m gaff cutter designed and at

one time owned by the famed former Royal Marine commando Ewen Southby-Tailyour, and *Jomada*, a Laurent Giles Wanderer 30 – a sister ship of Eric and Susan Hiscock's famous world-girdling yacht.

The sail past – a contest to find the most beautiful boat



**A calm start to the
Ile de Bréhat race**



the 45 lb CQR out through the forehatch and dropped it in ten metres to wait for the tide.

The lock at Paimpol is open two and a half hours either side of High Water and we motored through it that evening to be greeted by a pipe band and a town brimming with 25,000 visitors. They were celebrating Bastille Day and our regatta's visit was part of the jamboree. We were overwhelmed by the number of people sitting on the lock sides, legs dangling, dogs yapping and children waving as we passed through during free flow. It was like finishing the Vendée Globe without having gone round the world first.

After a lay-day and a day's racing around Bréhat we set off for Guernsey on a cracking spinnaker run in a south-westerly 3 to 4. *Charm of Rhu* clocked up a new all time record of 9.1 knots while *Gaspard De La Nuit*, an 11m steel Frans Maas sloop, dropped behind with a blown-out kite.

The wind fell light with 20 of the 45 miles to St Peter Port left to cover. 'It's so bloody frustrating!' Chris yelled at the sky as the swell threw *Charm* every which way.

'Nurse'll be along in a minute,' replied Martin, a retired consultant vascular surgeon, breaking the tension. 'We'll get you off the helm, you've been on it a long time – I think you're going mad.'

Thanks to a queue for fuel the following morning, we left St Peter Port 45 minutes later than suited Martin's timetable to get through the Alderney Race. We motored steadily up the Little Russel but met



Martin, Chris and James enjoy a sleigh ride at 9.1 knots

ominous overfalls in the narrows between Herm and the north end of Guernsey. The tide was in our favour, but running so fast that heavy seas were thrown aboard. Even James, who knows these waters extremely well, was taken aback. If the tide was this strong we could not afford to delay our arrival in the Alderney Race.

To make full use of the tide we kept it on our stern and steered for the north-eastern end of Alderney. The island took a long time to grow high, but eventually we had the guano-covered Noires Putes abeam as she rolled through the oily swell.

'We've got an hour left,' said Martin, 'we're making 6 knots, so we should do it.'

Suddenly the engine alarm went off.

'Damn,' said Martin as he shut the engine down while James and I got the sails set as quickly as possible and Chris helmed. There was no wind still but it made us feel better.

The water intake was checked, then the fan belt, then the impeller. 'It must be

the heat exchanger,' said Martin. 'Dealing with atherosclerosis has been my life's work and now the bloody engine's got it.'

A gentle breeze filled in from the south and we sailed out clear of Brinchetais Ledge, which was already white with overfalls, while Martin got the engine started again, but on lower revs and *Charm of Rhu* began the unequal struggle against the streaming tide. I watched the fort on Houmet Herbe nibble slowly at the cottages behind it. Then it stopped eating. Now the

cottages began to re-emerge.

'We're going backwards,' I said unnecessarily.

Astern of us the race was now boiling over Brinchetais Ledge, which awaited our failure to beat the spring ebb. Cool as a cucumber Martin sat at the nav table.

'Take her in nearer,' he commanded.

Chris steered closer to the rocks.

'Too far, you're steering north-west, Steer north.'

Chris adjusted the tiller.

'That's marvellous. Keep her at that.'

Charm started moving ahead again with rocks a biscuit toss to port. No-one mentioned the engine. If the alarm went off again we would have to ignore it. I spied a huge lobster pot buoy submerged by the tide, which streamed past like a horizontal waterfall.

'Lobster pot off the port bow,' I said.

'Got it, thanks.'

Agonisingly slowly we opened up the north side of Alderney. We were through. ▲