

stuck in the gluepot

TicTacToe build / hull number 215.

Once you are weatherbound in Ilfracombe you're stuck. It's not for nothing that the North Devon harbour gets its name, as Dag Pike discovered during a Moonraker delivery trip from Bristol to Poole

BRISTOL to Poole by road is about 70 miles and is an easy two hours' drive. By sea it is some 350 miles and it took us nearly two weeks. This was no fault of the boat concerned, a new Moonraker. Even allowing for an overnight stop the trip could normally have been done in a weekend.

Boating life is ruled by the tides in the Bristol Channel. So that we could get off to a good start on the Thursday morning, we took the boat down the River Avon from Bristol Docks a few days before and left her in Portishead Docks. There can be considerable delays at the Cumberland Basin Locks at Bristol during the morning and evening rush hours. The locks are spanned by two swing bridges and the authorities are not very keen to open these at rush hour times, particularly for a yacht.

The Avon Gorge is an unforgettable experience. The magnificent wooded cliffs form a perfect backdrop for Brunel's suspension bridge, which seems to float across the Gorge. One of our crew was a Bristol Channel Pilot so we had no difficulty in negotiating this twisting river with its tricky tides. The weather was fine and in no time at all we were in Portishead Dock.

In that state of optimism which always seems to precede a passage, we sat down in a local hostelry and planned the trip. Twelve hours to Falmouth, a night's stop and refuel, nip across to the French coast for a day or two, then back to Poole on the Sunday. Even allowing one day for bad weather, it didn't look as though we were being over ambitious. With a maximum speed of over 20 knots, a lot of ground can be covered in a short time.

Thursday morning arrived with the sort of forecast that always seems to crop up when I go to sea. I am beginning to think that they are kept specially for me. One of these days I must find the person who tells the Met. Office that I am off to sea, maybe then my luck will change.

Anyway, there it was. Force 6-8, the only redeeming feature being that the direction was southerly. No good for going round Land's End, but at least it was off the land until then so we decided to set off and see how far we could get. We all agreed that it was only likely to be a short summer gale, and that even if we had to put in for shelter somewhere, we could be off again the next day and at least be that much further on the way.

We left Portishead to the accompaniment of a certain amount of tooth-sucking from the lock officials. "Did we know it was blowing hard outside?" "Yes, we did", we said, and explained our strategy. This did not entirely satisfy them but then they are not very familiar with the ways of yachts.

Outside, the wind was blowing hard but by keeping as close into the shore as the depth of water would allow, we could make good progress and were running at maximum cruising speed. We found that it paid us to go round the inside edge of bays rather than cut across between headlands. This increased the distance but gave calmer water to make the best use of the speed.

We knew that we were not going to round Land's End under these conditions and there did not seem much prospect of the wind moderating. In fact, the wind was starting to move round to the S.W. which would start to expose us to its full force. It was time to look for shelter, particularly with the ebb tide coming away, when the wind would then be against the tide.

The south side of the Bristol Channel is a fairly inhospitable place. There are several harbours, but they are all tidal and there are very nasty bars at the entrances to some of them. For two hours either side of low water there is no harbour available, and if the wind is anything west of south west, there is virtually no shelter. If the wind is moving in this direction it will often continue round to the N.W. and this coast is no place to be in a north-westerly wind.

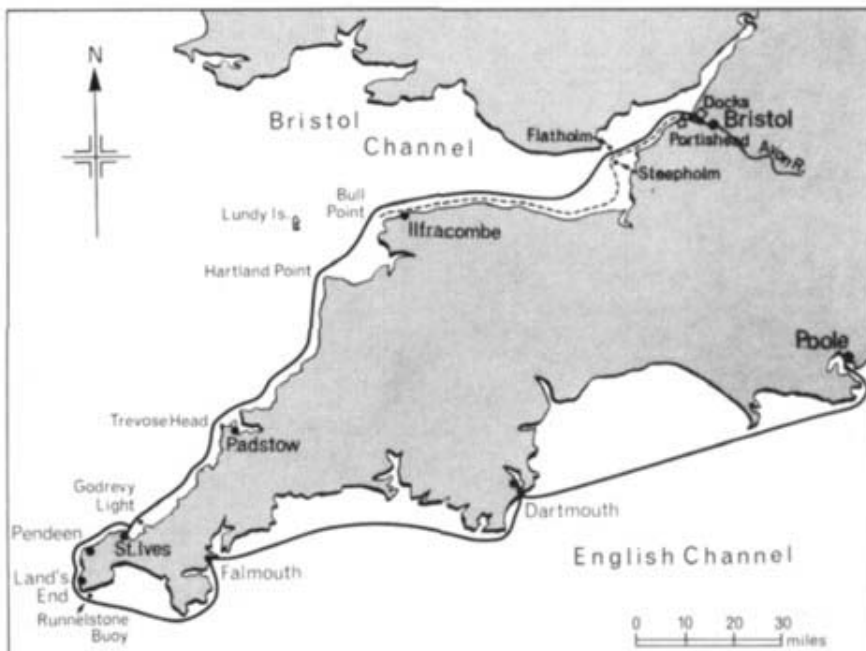
By 11.00 we were off Ilfracombe and with conditions deteriorating, we decided to call in and wait for the weather to improve. Coming into the inner harbour there was an empty berth on the end of the jetty, but trying to do the right thing, we asked a fisherman working in his boat if it was alright to moor there.

There was a grudging reply. "You'd better see the harbour master".

"Is there any problem if we just tie up there temporarily?", we asked, to be answered by a turned back.

We proceeded to tie up in the empty berth anyway. A friendly looking face on the jetty turned out to be the harbour master, who was most helpful and sorted out an overnight berth for us. We mentioned about the unfriendly attitude of the fisherman, to be informed that he was deaf, hence the somewhat uncomprehending attitude.

After feeding and watering, we set about settling the Moonraker on to the bottom as the tide was dropping. With its deep-V hull and exposed propellers and rudders, the Moonraker does not take kindly to sitting on the bottom but by securing the boat carefully to the jetty so that she wouldn't tip over, there was no real problem. Drying gave us a chance to remove a plastic bag which had become firmly wrapped around the starboard propeller.



This tide would be against the wind and the sea conditions were likely to get considerably worse when that happened. As it was, we had all the sea we wanted.

There was a sigh of relief as we turned round and retraced our steps. This way it was much easier and we could use almost full power. Within 45 minutes we were back in Ilfracombe, once more in the gluepot. We could see our pundits of the night before, smiling to themselves.

By the afternoon the wind was blowing Force 9 but was still southerly. This did not look too hopeful and indicated that the approaching depression might be slow moving. We were resigned to staying the night and the harbour master asked us to berth alongside the *Polar Bear*, a small coaster running between Ilfracombe and Lundy Island. She came in after a rough passage in the early evening and we shifted berth across the harbour.

After sampling the fleshpots of Ilfracombe we returned on board to once more settle the boat on the bottom. There was more ground swell in the harbour now and she banged on the bottom several times before finally settling.

Next day, Friday, saw the wind still very strong and a depressing forecast. I Rather than rot in harbour we took the' boat to sea to try our hand at fishing in the sheltered waters off the harbour entrance. Heavy rain. squalls took any pleasure out of this and we quickly returned to harbour. The afternoon was spent removing all the grime which had accumulated during the stay in Bristol.

Another night ashore for the now rather depressed crew. Thoughts of going to France were fast diminishing and we would happily settle to get the boat to Poole. This time our trip ashore took us to the yacht club where local yachtsmen, who seemed to be a very hardy breed, took a certain delight in our plight.

"You've only been stuck here for one day, some visiting boats spend over a week here waiting for weather. It's not for nothing that Ilfracombe is known as the gluepot. Once you're here, you're stuck".

Quickly buying a round of drinks, we hurriedly escaped from this prophet of doom and consoled ourselves with an excellent meal in a local restaurant. Confidence was further restored when the midnight forecast gave moderating winds on the morrow, but I think the alcohol also helped.

Next morning the wind was S.W. Force 5 and the forecast giving much the same. However it was enough to tempt us to sea to see for ourselves what it was really like. We knew that the conditions off Bull Point just down the coast would give us a good idea of conditions further down the coast as it was exposed to the south westerly wind.

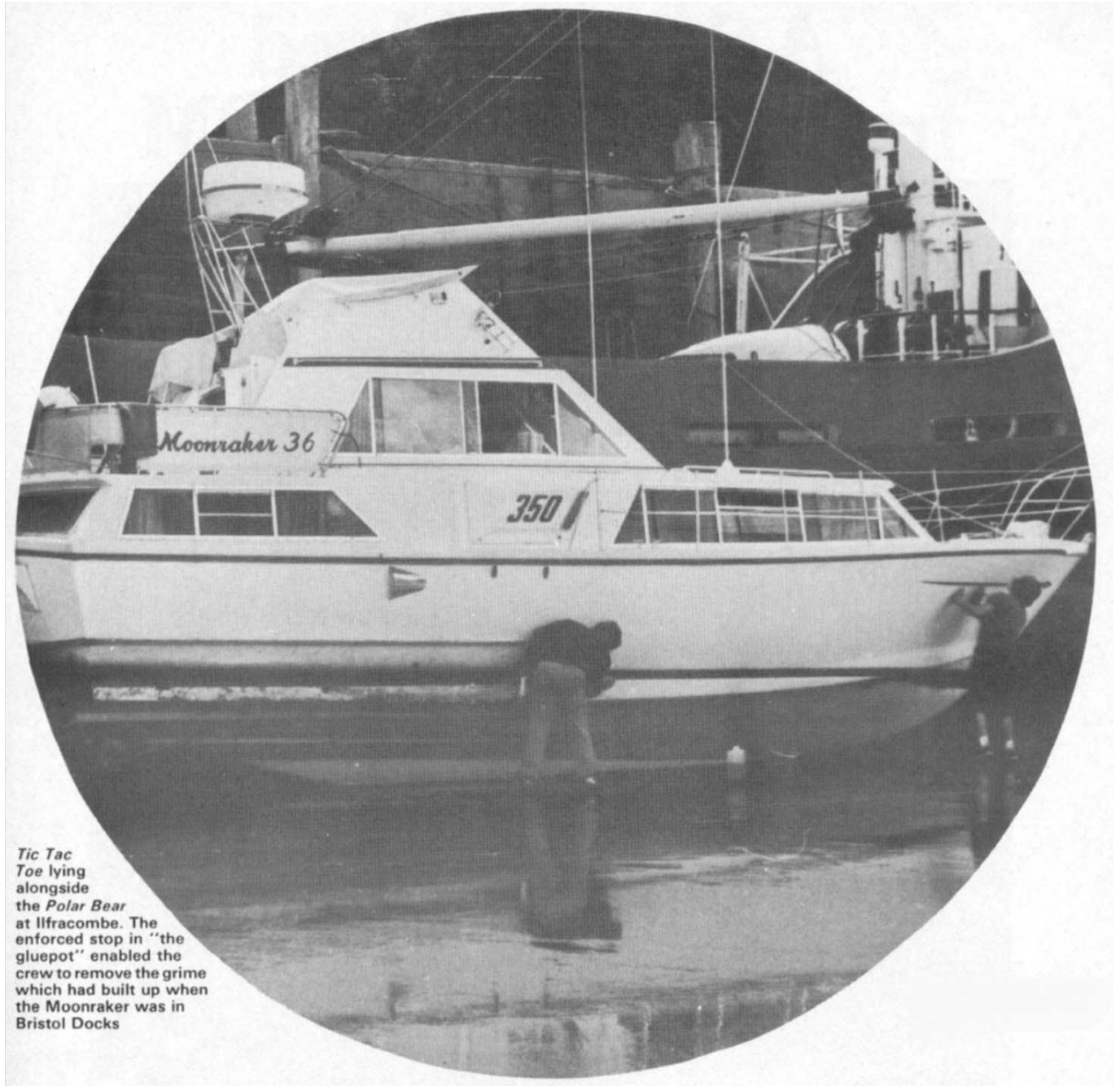
We could feel the sea building up as we approached Bull Point, but we weathered the point safely and set course for Hartland Point. It looked possible that we might at least make Padstow and escape from the gluepot. The movement of the boat was very lively and she had to be nursed over the larger waves. This was made difficult by the bad positioning of the throttle controls but we were making progress even though it was slow and uncomfortable.



Back in harbour we had lunch and thought out our situation. We could still make Poole

during the weekend if the weather moderated. The forecast gave no hope, and the wind had now freshened to gale force. We could stay in Ilfracombe but that meant someone staying with the boat to see her take the bottom safely on each tide.

The third alternative, which we opted for, was to go all the way back to Bristol. No-one likes to retreat, but it made sense on this occasion. If we set off after lunch we could make the tide at Bristol in the late afternoon, and this we did.



Tic Tac Toe lying alongside the Polar Bear at Ilfracombe. The enforced stop in "the gluepot" enabled the crew to remove the grime which had built up when the Moonraker was in Bristol Docks

Under any other circumstances the passage up Channel would have been exhilarating. There was now a big sea running but with this and the wind behind us we made good time. The low overcast cloud gave a threatening looking appearance to this forbidding coastline but we were soon up Channel and passing between Flatholm and Steepholm. We had escaped from the gluepot, even though it was back the way we had come, and to celebrate the fact, the sun started to shine.

Back in Bristol, we still had to consider how to get the boat to Poole. Road transport seemed tempting and if one looked at the costs realistically, it was not too expensive. However, we were not beaten as easily as that and decided to have a go the next weekend. Af-

ter all, it doesn't blow a gale every weekend.

The following Friday morning found us in Bristol Docks at 2 am preparing to sail. The depression of the early sailing time was relieved by the flat calm that prevailed, and we were soon out in the

Channel and on our way. Dawn found us well down channel and with our hearts in our mouths we approached Ilfracombe. Still a light breeze from the south, and the promise of a fine day. The weather forecast held no horrors and it looked as though we might even round Land's End.

As we slipped past Ilfracombe, not wishing to arouse the fates which might lure us in, we celebrated with a good breakfast. Bull Point, Hartland Point and Trevoze Head were rounded in good order, making good a speed of 18 knots over the ground. Spirits were high and we discussed the possibility of going into St. Ives for lunch. Why not do things in comfort?

St. Ives Bay appeared as we rounded Godrevy Light at midday and the tide was just right for entering this picturesque harbour. As fuel was readily obtainable on the quay it seemed a good idea to top up whilst lunch was cooking. Within an hour we had refuelled, eaten and made phone calls, which was good going. By the time we came to leave, the wind had freshened considerably from the south and it looked as though the passage round Land's End might be a bit lively. .

As we rounded Pendeen, the sea became rougher, with the wind now at Force 5, stirring things up. The speed had to come right down as we hit the head seas but by using the throttles carefully we could make progress. At the slower speed, the bow was dropping and the throttles had to be opened as each were approached to lift the bow and prevent the wave coming on board.

All things come to an end and after two hours of discomfort, we had rounded the Runnelstone Buoy and were heading up Channel. There is always a sense of achievement in rounding Land's End and to celebrate we could now open the throttles and make good speed with the sea on the beam.

Falmouth was our objective for the night, and with every assistance from the harbour authorities, we were moored up in time for a meal and a few drinks which we felt well deserved. The rest of the passage to Poole was almost an anti-climax. A pleasant run to Dartmouth where we lunched and refuelled, then on to Poole by opening time in the evening.

350 miles at an average speed of just over 15 knots is no mean achievement, considering some of the conditions experienced. And what of the Moonraker? Well, the figures speak for themselves. The machinery ran faultlessly for the whole passage with the minimum of attention but there were a few annoying little points.

In the rough part of the passage we had to wear oilskins in the wheelhouse because of drips coming through from the upper bridge. We found afterwards that the spray deflector had been removed during road transport of the boat, and when refastened, the joint had not been sealed. The lack of handholds in the wheelhouse made movement difficult and to have only two seats with a crew of four meant discomfort for some on passage.

We were concerned about the large areas of glass in the rough stuff, and there was a lack of storage space for all the odds and ends which seem to collect on a boat. However, we had escaped from the gluepot and we had achieved our aim to get the boat to Poole. These small points of criticism are soon forgotten when the boat lets you succeed like this.