

On the rocks

When Allan Wallers motor boat was stranded off Guernsey last year, it was splashed across the tabloids. But the facts were distorted. Here, for the first time, he tells the story in his own words.



I was intending to sell my Moonraker Super 36 Power Game II, but before I did so I wanted to cross the English Channel and visit all my favourite ports and rivers in Brittany for one last time.

It seemed straightforward enough, a cruise which I had done on many occasions over the past three decades. I would be accompanied by my friend Mike, also a Moonraker owner.

Although I have a chartplotter, autopilot, GPS and radar, I purchased a new folio of Admiralty charts so we could keep a paper check on our progress. On the night before our departure, Mike plotted our course across the Channel on the charts while I put it into the electronic plotter.

Calm before a storm

I got up at 0535 to catch the shipping forecast, which was for a northeasterly Force 3-4. The actual wind speed at Jersey and Channel Light was Force 2, so I told Mike we were going. By leaving at 0615, we would get to Alderney at high water neaps. The crossing was uneventful.

I usually go through the Alderney Race, east of Alderney itself, but this time, for a change, I decided to make only my second passage through The Swinge, west of the island. Although I had found some overfalls here on a previous cruise, this time it was very calm. There was little tide, and what little wind there was came from the north-east.

After we had left The Swinge and Alderney behind us, the tide changed and wind increased slightly. I had not had anything to eat, and felt sick! I asked Mike to take over the helm, giving him a course of 210 to the Little Russel Channel, east of Guernsey.

I heaved up three times and my stomach felt sore. I was sitting on the port side wheel-house seat with my back to the bows, and, without making it obvious, I was checking that Mike was on course by keeping Alderney in my view astern.

It was when the Platte Fougere lighttower went by on our port side, when it should have been to starboard, that I told Mike that I would like to take over.

Fateful course

I set a new course of 170, for the Brehon Tower, to get us back into the Little Russel. I also reduced speed to 12 knots, to save a wash to several fishing boats which were in the area. It was 20 minutes after high water and although we were close to neaps there was 7.6m of tide. I thought, quite wrongly, that all the rocks would be well covered.

The course I chose was alright, and if we had been just one metre to the right or left we would have missed the pinnacle of the outcrop. There were no other dangerous rocks around.

There was a huge bang, as we went from 12 knots to dead stop.

My first reaction was to go astern, but upon lifting up the engine hatch I saw diesel a foot deep in the bilge. I did not want sea water and diesel in the engines, so I turned them off. I could not hear the automatic bilge pump, so I had a look over the side to see that it was working.

I decided to make a Mayday call, and received a very prompt reply from St Peter Port Radio. A RIB owned by Chris Meinke was quickly on the scene to see whether he could help.

The rock was half a metre under the water, and the motion of the sea was causing the boat constantly to hit it. Chris suggested we both leave Power Game II in case she slid off the rock and sank.

Salvage operation

Richard Keen of the Guernsey Marine Salvage Company also arrived quickly. As we were rowing away from the boat, he emerged from under her and gave us a thumbs-up sign, so I knew she was not badly damaged.

We were taken to St Peter Port, where the harbourmaster was very helpful and allowed us to telephone our wives. He also arranged hotel accommodation, and a flight back to the UK the next day. We could not have received better treatment.

Some of Richard's friends were kind enough to take us back out to the boat at 1530, and a ladder was provided for us to go aboard and collect some gear. From the photographs, you might think that moving around would unbalance the boat, but in fact she was secure.

The harbourmaster assured us that Richard was the best person to do the salvage work, and he probably saved my insurers having to pay for a total loss. During the night, at high tide, he got the boat off the rock first, and she was craned out onto the

quayside at 0130. If she had been stranded any longer, with the tides dropping, she would have broken up.

I was insured with Navigators & General, who were very understanding and helpful. Th8V accepted the estimate from Boatworks+ Ltd of St Peter Port for the repairs.

Prior to this cruise, my wife had asked me how we would get the boat back if I met with an accident, and for £15.75 N&G had covered this one cruise, not just for a fatal accident to myself or a crew member but for the 'result of a boating accident'. This was the best £15.75 I have ever spent, as it paid the costs of flying my crew back to the UK and back out to Guernsey to bring the boat back in the spring.

Tabloid news

The accident itself was bad enough, but a week later things were going to get far worse. Although the boat had been on the rock for only 12 hours, in this time a local photographer, Tony Rive, had taken a photo which had been syndicated to the national press.

The Sun newspaper published it across their centre pages, under an 'exclusive' tag. I told them I would not give them my account of the accident, but they said it was the 'silly season' with little news happening, and they would go ahead anyway, against my wishes.

They telephoned back later and said they had learned from Guernsey that the boat was in immaculate condition, and could I confirm this? I agreed. They also said they would pay to have the boat brought back to the UK and cover my out-of-pocket expenses if I co-operated with their report, but I still refused to help.

The photo used by the media (see MBM Oct01 p8) appears to show the Platte Fougere lighthouse 3m in front of the boat on the rock, but it is not a true picture. The lighthouse was in fact one cable away to the north-east. A telephoto lens has done the rest.

When I refused to give the Sun my age they showed it as 79, although I am in my 60s. Also, the value of the boat was quoted as £100,000 (I should be so lucky!), whereas I had been quoted a value of £85,000 last October.

The day this feature was published began, for me, with a phone call at 0650 from Breakfast TV, wanting a live telephone interview at 0750, when they put that picture on the air. As the day went on I kept getting telephone messages from the Guernsey harbourmaster asking me to contact various radio and television stations. I even had a call at my home from Meridian Television. ITN News said they understood I had a three-minute video of the boat on the rock, and could they use it?

Luckily the media pack left me alone, but I am still getting calls from the harbourmaster saying people want to talk to me.

I hear that the photograph was also used in a yachting magazine where they said motorboat owners are costing yachtsmen higher insurance premiums. But this was my first insurance claim after over 30 years of paying premiums, and the total cost of the damage is not as great as the total premiums I have paid.

I know of a large yachting charterer who'd made dozens of claims, and I wish some yachting magazines would get off the backs of motorboat owners.

Thinking back

Unfortunately, I still cannot forget the day of the accident. I keep thinking of my mistakes.

If only I had put the autopilot on and asked Mike to tell me when there were any navigation marks...

If only I had retraced my course when I took over the helm, and gone back around the lighttower instead of assuming there was enough water for my Moonraker's shallow draught...

Aftermath

Despite hitting the rocks quite hard, and subsequently having her entire weight bearing down on a small part of her hull, PowerGame II escaped relatively lightly.

The main damage was a hole right through the keel, which had punctured one of the integral fuel tanks, causing a major spill.

With a prompt go-ahead from insurers Navigators & General repair work began immediately. The underwater hull was stripped of antifouling and sanded right back, and the boat was then moved into the workshop.

The saloon sole was cut away to expose the fuel tank, and removing this gave access the damaged keel. With a mould fitted to the outside of the keel, a new section was laid-up from the inside, and built up to the original hull thickness of around 1/2 in.

New stainless steel tanks were fabricated to replace the old GRP ones, and a stiffener was fabricated to replace the strength lost by removing what had been integral parts of the hull.

Repairs to the outside could now take place, by grinding away the damaged gelcoat and then filling and faring. The final touch was to apply five coats of International's Gelshield, a tough anti-osmosis treatment, and two coats of antifouling over the top.

The twin 220hp Mercruiser diesel engines had escaped unscathed, as the water had only reached as far as their mounts. They needed no more first-aid than a freshwater flush and oil change. Similarly, the electrics were unaffected but were nevertheless protected with an anti-corrosion treatment.

As we went to press, work was still continuing. The insurer's final bill will be somewhere in excess of £20,000, and the result is a boat that is arguably better than the one that ran aground.

Despite the upset caused by the accident, and its subsequent misreporting, Alan now finds himself in two minds as to whether to sell his Moonraker.