

Two new RNVRYC members take Volunteer across the Channel

It's funny how you meet people and become friends. For Brett and I, a chance allocation to the same yacht at the Joint Services Sailing Centre a few years ago has led to many happy sailing trips together. And so, at the start of this year, the two of us once again started discussing plans for another trip away. As ever, once we'd found a clear week in our diaries, our first priority was to secure a boat charter. I'd previously seen Volunteer listed amongst the yachts on the RNSA website, but given my current assignment to the Naval Staff in Whitehall and the link this gave me to the Naval Club in Mayfair (and with it the RNVRYC), now seemed the perfect time for me to book Volunteer and escape the office for a week. With our club membership applications accepted and our charter booking in place, Brett and I enlisted the rest of our crew – Jeremy, Richard (friends of mine from home) and Jim (one of Brett's old shipmates from his days in *HMS Grafton*). A really helpful boat familiarisation afternoon and some advance navigation planning later, and we were all set for our hotly anticipated week away.

Sunday

The five of us assembled at Volunteer's new home in Port Hamble on Sunday afternoon. Quickly completing the take-on process and crew briefing, we slipped the berth and headed out into a murky afternoon in the Solent. The purpose of that first evening was simple – shake out the sails, make sure everything worked and put in a few tacks for the benefit of our less experienced crew members. All of these objectives achieved, we headed in to Cowes just before sunset for an evening of 'crew bonding'.

Monday



The sun rises in Cowes at the start of our adventure

A gentle start and hearty breakfast provided the perfect start to Monday as we waited for the tidal stream to turn west-bound in the Solent. Having ensured everything was ready for a long passage, we sailed mid-morning; Brett, Jeremy and I proved we still knew how to recover a man overboard then we set sail towards the needles and onwards into the channel. In stark contrast to the previous evening, a gloriously sunny day awaited us and even in fairly light winds Volunteer cut easily through the calm seas on a very comfortable broad reach, easily exceeding the conservative 5-knots I had planned. As the afternoon progressed, Richard, Jeremy and I decided it was time to break out some sea shanties so Brett and Jim were subjected to our rather unrehearsed 3-part harmony renditions of 'A British Tar', 'The Mermaid' and 'Neptune's Empire' – I'm quite sure our choir master at home would have been less than impressed... A little later, with our songbooks firmly stowed back down below, Jeremy proved that Volunteer's galley was more than up to the task of creating an epic curry from scratch and then we settled in to our night watches. Sadly, what little wind had propelled us thus far died off overnight, but with the progress we'd already made, it didn't take many revs on the engine to see us around the Casquettes and pick up the southerly tide down to Little Russell just in time for a dawn arrival into St Peter Port.

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Leaving the Solent in glorious conditions

Tuesday

Having berthed at the pontoons outside Victoria marina that are not tidally constrained, we found ourselves adjacent to three RN P2000s (*HMS Biter*, *HMS Pursuer* and *HMS Charger*) conducting their Easter URNU deployments – bringing back fond memories of some 20 years ago for the skipper. The plan for Tuesday was to give the crew an opportunity to relax and explore the sights of St Peter Port, so after lunch in the same pub Brett and I had dined in almost exactly 3 years earlier, Jeremy and Richard decided the best way to see the island was in the little tourist train – much to the amusement of Brett and Jim who elected to walk to Castle Cornet instead. Back on board and a little fatigued from our watchkeeping the previous night, our original plans to head to the hotel for a fancy 3-course dinner rapidly gave way to a quick pizza and beer before we all settled in for an early night.



An alternative means of transport to see St Peter Port

Wednesday

The next leg of our trip was to take us from St Peter Port to Cherbourg – on the face of it a fairly straight forward leg and for once the tide times didn't even require too outrageously early a start. But then came the weather forecast – it's safe to say that a NE force 5-6 was not what we'd hoped for, and worse still the shipping forecast foretold of a gale force 8 in Wight, due later in the day. Nevertheless, having weighed up our options we decided it best to leave Guernsey early and make best possible speed to Cherbourg, albeit giving the Alderney Race a miss in favour of the longer route around the outside of the Casquettes. Fully wrapped up and secured, ready for a far rougher voyage than the one we had enjoyed across the channel, an early start against the tide initially allowed us to pick up the east-bound tidal stream across the top of Alderney just as it turned in our favour to make rapid progress towards the French coast.



Brett takes the helm passing Alderney

The sea state across the top of the Alderney Race as we approached Cap De La Hague absolutely vindicated our decision to go the long way around, but Volunteer took it all in her stride, expertly helmed by Brett who was clearly enjoying himself, setting the week's speed record of 12.5 knots over the ground in the process! Things quickly calmed down again as we approached the French coast but Port Chantereyne marina was nevertheless a welcome sight after a challenging (and fairly wet!) passage. Having not been able to raise anyone at the marina on VHF or by phone, we found ourselves a berth on the visitor pontoons – only to then face potential disaster as the five of us, very much looking forward to a hot shower, couldn't

access the marina facilities as the office was closed... Thankfully a friendly Dutch sailor took pity on us and gave us the all-important keycode – crisis averted!

Back on board everything was drying out nicely thanks to the little fan heater which proved more than up to the task of getting the boat nice and cosy. Fully recovered from the excitement of our day at sea we stepped ashore, giving the roller coasters at the waterfront fairground a miss and pressing on for an excellent French meal at 'La Marina' – a restaurant that had been recommended by one of Richard's friends. Well fed, we headed on for a nightcap – and where else would three matelots with a combined 83 years of service end up but the local Irish bar?! Thankfully, the drinks on offer still had a distinctly French flavour and the electronic dartboard provided the entertainment – Jim casually remarking 'it's been a while' before scoring a bull's eye with his first dart!



Enjoying local cuisine in Cherbourg

Thursday

Safe in the knowledge that Volunteer would get us back across the channel far faster than I had originally planned, we delayed our scheduled early morning departure from Cherbourg, waiting until the marina office had opened to pay for our berth – a delay that also allowed a quick visit to the boulangerie to pick up a welcome breakfast of croissants, pains chocolat and baguettes. The wind had abated a little overnight, still from the North East but now a force 4-5 – which was perfect for our passage to Poole. Our conservative sail plan, sacrificing a little speed in the name of comfort, still carried us back across the channel at an average 7 knots on a close reach. As we approached the English coast, the sun came out and the wind died off again, but as we motored our way in to Poole Harbour all of us had big smiles on our faces, looking back on what had possibly been the most enjoyable sail across the channel any of us could remember in ages. Our pre-booked berth in Poole Town Quay marina was excellent and once more we went ashore together to toast an excellent day's sailing.

Friday

Our hopes that the wind would finally shift from the North East were not to be realised and so once we'd punched through the swell outside Poole Harbour on Friday morning we headed in to wind back towards the Needles. In the fresh wind it was quite obvious to all of us that it was still only early April too – Jeremy got out some gadget that works out the 'feels like' temperature, to discover that having factored in the wind chill it was actually -15 degrees Celsius! For all the cold though, it was another beautifully clear day in the Solent and it was with no small amount of sadness that I berthed Volunteer back alongside in Port Hamble marina that afternoon as our fantastic 285-mile round trip came to an end.



A chilly morning departure from Poole

Volunteer – The Verdict

Having sailed a fair variety of yachts through the Joint Services Sailing Centre and a number of establishment boats available through the RNSA, at the start of the week I was looking forward to seeing how Volunteer stacked up. As you will have seen from the diary above, I can't speak to her virtues as a racing yacht – we didn't even venture as far as breaking out a spinnaker – so thus far at least I've only seen her in her cruising configuration. But in a week where we experienced conditions that ranged from light airs all the way up to force 6-7, and seeing how she performed at just about every point of sail for lengthy periods, she certainly didn't disappoint.

With a pleasing turn of speed even without much wind, and reassuringly stable in rough seas, she was a joy to sail – and quick too. The helm is light, rope-work is made easy in the large cockpit with all lines led aft and a good selection of electronics are well placed. Prospective skippers should be comforted to know she is easy to handle under power in confined conditions, making berthing and unberthing a pretty straight forward prospect, and when we needed to cover some ground under motor, I thought the sail-drive engine proved efficient and as unobtrusive as yacht motors can be! Furthermore, for all of her racing pedigree, the water and fuel tanks prove more than large enough to allow you to cruise for extended periods without worrying where and when you might next be able to top them up, and the classic layout of the interior proved more than adequate to accommodate the five of us – and could easily have accommodated more.

Of course, no boat is perfect – I thought the lack of grab-rails between decks was a bit of a design flaw, as (in my opinion) is the space between seats in the cockpit, which was a little wide for my legs to brace against when the boat is heeled over. I also can't help but feel that the curved bunks in the saloon slightly compromise the space they offer as sleeping berths, albeit that is more than made up for by the spacious cabins, each of which could easily accommodate a couple in comfort. It's also worth noting she has a 2.36m draught, which is deeper than other yachts I've sailed and influenced my plans for the week to some extent (for example, it's on the limit for access to St Vaast and we couldn't have got over the lip into Victoria Marina at St Peter Port had we wanted to); it certainly didn't prove too limiting a factor though.

Importantly though, it was very clear to me that Volunteer has, for some time, been meticulously maintained. The sails, lines, engine, cooker... everything is in good condition, and the location of absolutely everything on board is clearly labelled and catalogued – a real bonus when sailing a charter yacht that you might not be entirely familiar with. The boat was immaculate when I took her on (I hope the next charter after me thought the same!), and the background support behind the charter, through the initial booking/payment process, boat familiarisation, a little friendly advice when passage planning and through to the take on/hand back procedures were all made very easy thanks to the efforts of Mike Critchley and Peter Costalas, to whom my crew and I are hugely grateful.