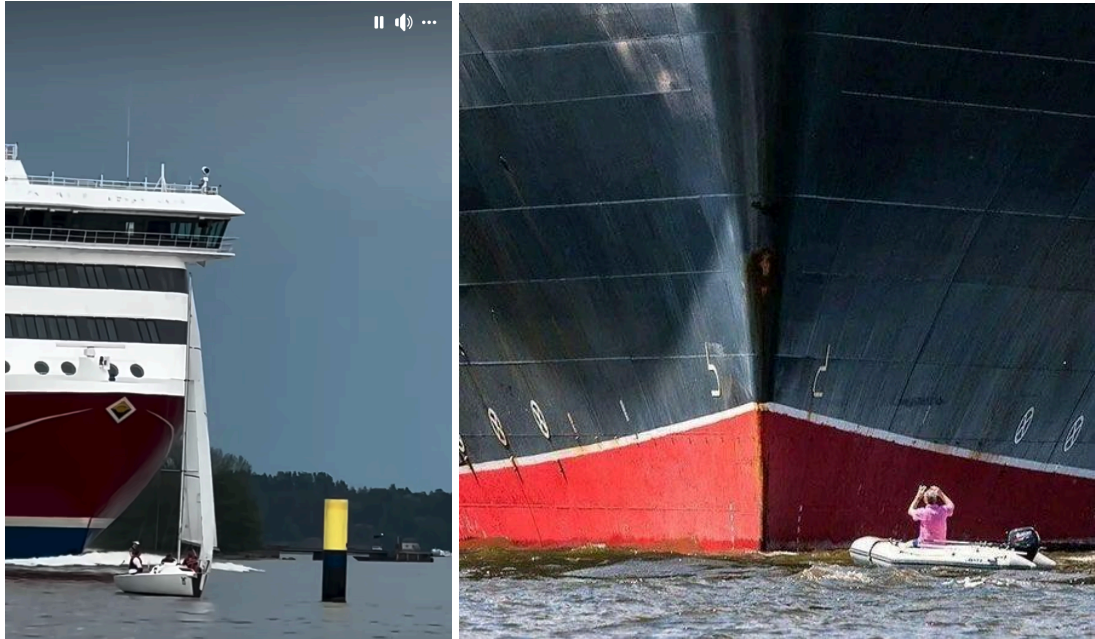


Master Mariners talk

When I was invited to do a talk, my first idea was to compare the Yacht Master's syllabus against the Master Mariners syllabus. But you know what? The only thing that we really have in common is the big blue sea, upon which we both float! Instead I thought that I would tell you about my sailing and boating life.



At the age of 16, I very much wanted to go to sea. Several of my school friends went as apprentices, with a view to obtaining their Master's ticket. That summer I visited Switzerland with the school and my friends were admiring the mountain goats. I realised that I could hardly see the mountains let alone the goats. On my return I was wheeled off to the opticians who told me that I was short sighted and would need glasses. So no chance of going to sea! I therefore had to make the sea my hobby rather than my vocation.

My journey has been from being a snotty nosed little oik, messing about on the fishing boats in the Gas House Creek, and scrounging trips on the fishing boats, to achieving a Yachtmaster Ocean Certificate.



I became friends with Harry, who was a lobster fisherman, and I often was allowed to go on his fishing trips. He taught me a great deal about "boatmanship". In those days in the '50s the fishermen had no safety equipment at all. He did have a box compass, I noticed in tiny writing on the card which said "Trinity House", but I never asked the question! On the one occasion that he had an emergency, his rudder pintle snapped and he couldn't steer, he poured petrol on a sack, set it on fire and threw it overboard, and another fisherman saw it and towed him in. By the next morning he had fitted a new pintle and was off fishing again.

In those days the Harwich Lobstermen didn't use pots, they used hoop nets as the grounds off our coast here are relatively shallow. They consisted of an iron hoop about 2'6" across with a small net underneath with a bait line across the hoop usually holding a fish head and a long cork line. They would lay about 24 hoops across the tide, and then go round to the start and haul the hoops. These boats had a quite big rudder, and as they grabbed the line they would push the tiller hard over and if there was a lobster on the bait, it would be forced into the bottom of the net. I have been out with him and seen him catch 50 lobsters, for which he was paid 2/6d a pound!

My Father had sailed at Walton before the war. His first boat was a sprit rigged carvel sailing boat, her centerboard case leaked and they had to pour pitch into the crack before they could go out. It cost him £7 10s! In his first season he told me that he spent more time in the water pushing her off the mud than sailing!



He later graduated to a converted ship's lifeboat, yawl rigged with an Austin seven car engine. He owned it jointly with his best friend Ken, who was later to be my Godfather. They were both courting their future wives at the time, great fun took place no doubt. When WW2 was imminent, they were instructed to lay their boat up at Manningtree, for the duration. When the war ended, I had arrived, things were very tight and they reluctantly sold her.



Around 1950, I was 7 years old and dad needed to get afloat again, particularly for angling, and he bought a 13' 6" clinker built yacht's tender with a tiny Stuart Turner two stroke 1.5 horsepower engine.



She was moored in Gas House creek. Why that place? Well first it was regularly dredged, for Mr Everard's "Itty boats" to deliver coal to the Gas works, second the water was so polluted, the water being either black or occasionally red, that we never had to antifoul, and last of all it was free.



The Gas works was demolished in the 60s, due to the arrival of natural gas.



This forced us to move later, as the creek was no longer dredged.

The fishing was really good in those days, one of our favourite places to fish was opposite Parkeston Quay, where there was still at that time part of the Reserve Fleet. The submarine repair ship 'Mull of Galloway', a floating dock and several sections of Mulberry harbour. We often caught plaice dabs and skate in Summer, and cod and whiting in Winter. When we opened them up, they were full of peas and carrots! It wasn't long before we realised 13 ft was not big enough, as Harwich harbour can be rough when wind is against tide.



We then graduated to a retired lobster boat, clinker built, copper fastened with a 7 horsepower Kelvin petrol/paraffin engine. Built by Cann of Harwich. Many had been built just after the war, as fishermen were offered a government grant to build new fishing boats. Sandra was 18 ft long and was very unkempt, but we soon licked her into shape. We found she had rot in the elm garboards, of course in the most awkward place, below the engine beds. Dad knew a shipwright, who scarf jointed the planks and I was detailed to be the dolly boy, underneath holding the copper nails hard up, while Lou clenched the rivets inside, and was often sworn at when the dolly slipped off the nail head. We also had made a little cover over the engine, where we could sit when it was raining, and was lockable, because you couldn't leave anything lying about because the Harwich sharks would spirit it away in no time.



This started a fashion, and many of the fishing boats sprouted little sheds after that. The shed was made by one of Dad's friends who was the local undertaker, and there were jokes going round that when she was launched the shed was going to be coffin shaped! As things started to improve, Dad had the opportunity in the early 60s to buy a newer boat, she was only just over a year old again built by Cann, and the owner, a tug skipper, had a heart attack and couldn't start the engine.



We had her improved, Alan who was apprenticed at Canns and had helped build her, and he built side decks and a cabin. The downside was that the engine was a Lister air cooled diesel, similar to dumper trucks and concrete mixers, and it was terribly loud. It may have been one of the causes of me now being as deaf as a plank!



We had moved from the creek by that time to a mooring between Parkeston Quay and the Train ferry terminal, just in the deep water off, what Harwich men called the cant, which incidentally is Dutch for “Bank”

By 1971, I had learned to sail, having been taught by my friend Tony, who built a Mirror dinghy in his backyard. Dad and I together bought a Westerly Cirrus sailing cruiser, and we had a couple of years sailing her.

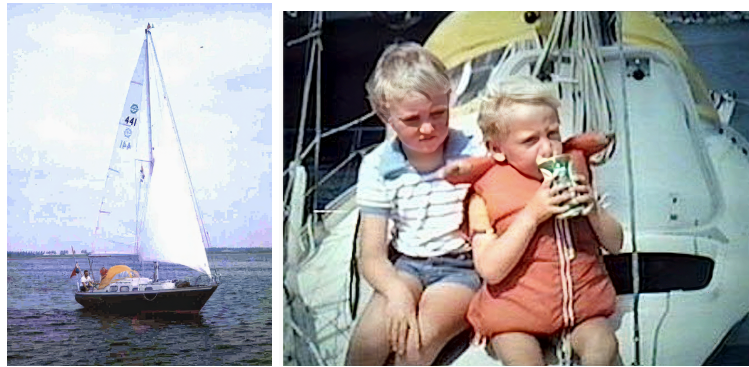


It was obvious that although she was well built and safe, she was rather slow, and it wasn't long before we upgraded to a 29ft Shipman sailing cruiser, she was just over a year old, she was called 'Muscadet of Beaulieu' but we thought that was a bit pretentious for Harwich, so we renamed her 'Straggler' because we always came last in the racing! It was in her that I made my first trip across to the Continent.



I and 2 friends sailed to Ostend, we had just basic navigation equipment, and a partially inflated dinghy as a liferaft. All went well and we had a great time in Belgium, but fell into the trap many yachtsmen have fallen into, of having to be back in the office on Monday. We sailed out of Ostend and fell down a hole! We had a real drubbing, being inexperienced we reefed down too much and made a lot more leeway than we imagined. We picked up the loom of a lightship, believing it to be the Sunk, only to learn when we saw the light it was the Kentish Knock! So ready about boys Lee Oh! We put about and sailed North and eventually came up to the Sunk and eventually made it back to Harwich, many lessons were learned!

We had several holidays in that boat in Holland, but our 2 boys were growing fast, and we needed more space, and in 1977 we bought Big Hilda, a Moody 33, in which again we went to Holland several times in the 10 years that we owned her.





It was about that time that I realised that even though I was by then fairly experienced, there were gaps in my knowledge. The Continental countries had introduced compulsory certification for leisure craft users, and I wanted to pre-empt that so I spoke to a friend who was in further education, and asked if it was possible to set up a Yachtmaster course in Harwich. He came back to me a few days later and said that at enrolment if I could get 10 people they would organise a teacher. On the night 20 people turned up, so they organised classes twice a week. That was handy, so if you couldn't manage Monday you could go on Thursday. The teacher Bernie was excellent and very patient with us. The course was over 2 Winters and in '83 I passed the written exam. There remained the practical test, which my friend Fred and I took on a wet and windy weekend. On arrival the instructor told us to get under way, when we reached Stone Point it was so rough I said to the Examiner, "You can fail me on the spot, but I'm not taking us out in that!" He said that's OK do what you would do, so we anchored overnight in Kirby creek, where we were given a fairly rigorous viva voce test. He said to me "I don't much care if you mess up on heaving to or man overboard, you can do it again but if you make one mistake on the collision regulations you will be failed! However we did pass and became Yachtmasters Offshore. There then remained the Ocean certificate. There were no classes for that in Harwich, so we went to the Nottage Institute in Wivenhoe, and were taught the mysteries of celestial navigation by a chap who used to drive an aircraft carrier.

The Nottage have a website, it is an amazing place!

Nottage.org.uk



We passed the written exam, and then had to take the practical test, which involved a 600 mile non stop trip, during which we had to produce logs and chart workings, of fixes by sextant, and compass correction by sun. 100 miles of the trip had to be at least 100 miles offshore. We therefore decided to sail towards Denmark, round the Skaw. The Skaw is a sandy spit that stretches NE from the Northern tip of Denmark and has a bad reputation for

shipwrecks. Ironically we passed it in dead calm conditions. We had a very rough night at the entrance to the Skagerak, and the next morning dried out in the sun, looking like a Chinese laundry, and we arrived after 4 days. Then round the island of Laeso, and arrived in Hals at the entrance of the Limfjord, where we picked up my Danish friend Ole and then on to Aalborg for the night.



The speed limit sign caused great mirth among the crew!

We then cruised through the Limfjord, and stayed for a few days on the Island of Fur, before heading for home. On our return we submitted our logs and charts to Bill Anderson the cruising secretary of the RYA, and in due course received our certificates.



Big relief when we arrived back at our home port!

"The sea, once it casts its spell, holds you in its web of wonder forever."
Jacques Cousteau.