

SUNBEAM IN THE CHANNEL

IN THESE EXTRACTS TWO SAILORS RECOUNT WINDY CROSS-CHANNEL PASSAGES IN A SUNBEAM ONE-DESIGN

The Sunbeam day racer is perhaps the prettiest of all the designs produced in the 1920s and 1930s by Westmacott for building originally at Woodnutts on the Isle of Wight. I have always admired these sweet-sailing craft when passing their moorings in Itchenor Reach in Chichester Harbour, but it was on a recent visit to Cornwall that my eye was caught by a supreme example in the shed at Mylor Yacht Harbour. It turns out that three new ones have been built there by their own in-house craftsmen in recent years.

The office kindly lent me the beautiful book about the class, *The Brilliance of Sunbeams* by Peter Nicholson (available via info@solentsunbeam.co.uk). Browsing its pages I was surprised to come across an unusual cruising yarn and its sequel concerning the Sunbeam *Danny* on a two-up cross-Channel passage in 1948.

The first part of the story, originally published by *Yachting Monthly* in 1949, was written by Frank Breakwell. His brother and shipmate John was sound in wind and limb, but Frank was a long-term tuberculosis sufferer who was missing several ribs and a lung after recent surgery. He still had an open wound drained by tubes in his side. When hove-to in heavy weather off Jersey these became so painful that he ripped them out and tossed them overboard. As one might expect in the aftermath of the Second World War, none of these heroics appears in the brothers' remarkable story.

The second part of the narrative is a classic working seaman's commentary on a yachting scene. The redoubtable Jimmy Morrison, a well-known figure on the Falmouth waterfront, was hired to bring the boat from Jersey to Falmouth several years later with her new owner. Not to be missed, the story comes to us in Jimmy's own inimitable style.



“ On our estimated time of crossing the Channel, the tides cancelled out and the wind was set fair. To a motion swift and free she flew through the breaking seas on a south-south-westerly course from the Nab with the grace and speed of a swallow. As the light faded from the sky the glowing night drew round us, with the stars shining in brilliant points and the moon touching the sails with delicate light. Far ahead, low on the horizon over the French coast, was a thunderstorm pierced by flashes of lightning, but above



**Period racing:
Sunbeams
competing in a
St Mawes Regatta**



INTRODUCED BY
TOM CUNLIFFE



**The Brilliance
of Sunbeams**
by Peter
Nicholson.
John Wiley
& Sons

and around the night shone clear. Hour after hour she sailed in the lambent night, lifting, surging and swooping to the rush of the powerful waves.

As day drew near, the wind eased and fog drifted round us. Silently she sailed, alone in a lost world. In the grey light we estimated our position, and reckoned at 4.30am that we were some seven miles north-north-east of Cap Barfleu. 'Estimated' is a polite term, for we had seen no lights on the French coast during the night, nor in the daylight could the coast itself be seen, for fog shrouded all.

Looking for landfall

We altered course to south-west, hoping to make landfall at Cherbourg. The wind fell light and at 6am we heard the wheeze and moan of a whistle buoy, but could not see it. We hoped it was the buoy off the Basses du Renier. When, an hour later, we passed close to a buoy without a beacon – which according to the chart should have had one – our doubts revived. *Danny* continued on her course, silently through the fog and at 8 o'clock, looming large over our bows and fantastically lit with shafts of sunlight, was Cherbourg.

We sailed into the innermost harbour and lay the whole of that day, basking in the sun and in the memory of *Danny's* speed. From the Nab Tower to Cap Barfleu she had averaged six knots, and as towards dawn she was sailing at only four knots her earlier speed must have exceeded six knots – an unusual speed for a 17ft 6in designed waterline length.

It was an early night and an earlier rise the next day, >

Tuesday. After a hurried breakfast, we slipped our moorings at 3am and in the gentlest of breezes tacked out. The entrance to the inner basin lies through a narrow cut between jetty walls, and Danny was tacking silently in the blackness when a fishing boat entered from the outside. Having no running lights, we hopefully shone a torch on our sails. Immediately there was a violent and vociferous excitement on the fishing boat, reaching a crescendo as she bore down on us. Our sympathy was with them, but our concern was for ourselves. Fortunately, they were able at the last moment to determine our course and passed under our stern.

Vanity, sail No. V30, leads the Sunbeam fleet in the Solent

We ghosted out of Cherbourg, and some two miles out the wind died completely. This not only wasted our Spartan efforts at early rising, but destroyed our hopes of entering the Alderney Race at slack HW. After an hour of slatting sails, a breeze whispered from the east-north-east and we made for the race, entering it some one-and-a-half hours after slack HW.

Choppy in Alderney Race

In spite of the fine sun, the weather was foggy, with a visibility of some three miles. In order to keep our landmarks in sight as long as possible, we sailed on the French side of the Race some two miles offshore. Without warning, we found ourselves in a curiously choppy sea, with the wind dropping. Danny was headed west towards the middle of the Race, but in spite of this she drifted into even more disturbed water and towards the rocks of the French coast. The seas were extraordinary. Each mass of water, as though it were imbued with a life of its own quite independent of the others would leap towards the heavens and then fall vertically back on itself. It was obvious that the sweeps would be of little use in this, and we were relieved when the wind sprang up and we were enabled to sail to the middle of the Race and head for Jersey once more.

With the wind fair, *Danny* sailed on to Jersey. She was passing down its western side when, at 1.15pm, suddenly and without warning, a violent wind hit her. Hurriedly we took in all sail, and under bare poles before this furious easterly wind we prepared the sea anchor.

With the sea anchor ready, we came up into the wind, or as near into the wind as the boat would come, and eased it out over the bows, but her head payed off so that the sea anchor lay astern. Even when the rode was taking its full strain, she still would not lie head to wind. No matter how we lashed the helm, she lay with her stern or her quarter



to the wind. Having no trysail, which would have kept her head up, we transferred the sea-anchor to the stern. She lay reasonably with it in this position and with her stern to wind, except when an occasional wave, smashing under the counter, made the whole boat shiver.

Cake rations

As the spray was driving into the boat, the temporary cover was rigged. Sheltering under this, we had our tea and then coiled ourselves down to get what rest we could, while the boat tossed violently on the waves and the wind maintained its high, piercing note in the rigging. When, towards dusk, the wind eased a little we hauled in the sea-anchor. Hoisting the mainsail with nine rolls, we hove-to on the starboard tack with the bows pointing towards Guernsey. After a meal of soup and cake (the bread by this time was finished) we settled down to take anchor watches in turn.

Our speed hove-to, under the nine-rolled mainsail and with the helm lashed, was about one-and-a-half knots, so that by dawn *Danny* was within three miles of Guernsey. With the wind moderating further, we decided to try once more for Jersey. Hoisting the jib and warily retaining the nine rolls in the mainsail, we set our course. About this time the effects of fatigue became apparent: we were



Itchenor Sailing Club's McMeekin Challenge Cup is presented annually to the most successful Solent Sunbeam. In 2017 it went to Roger Wickens sailing *Danny* – the subject of this article

surprised to find ourselves sailing towards two horizons, one above the other. While smoking a cigarette, the two horizons would merge in a pleasing unity, but as the effect wore off they would again diverge. We took turns at resting and later had breakfast — fried bacon and tea (alas, not even cake!). Fortified, we found the single horizon restored.



Interview with Jimmy Morrison, 21 March, 2000

I remember *Danny* very well. It must have been around 1970. Registered as a Falmouth boat in 1963 she was in a poor state in a corner of St. Helier harbour. She had a wooden mast, cotton mainsail and rough gear. The late Francis Balkwell was the new owner. He was a schoolteacher and his wife was a member of Mabe Women's Choir.



Sunbeam designer Alfred Westmacott

I thought, well, it's a job, you've got to get her home, Jimmy. I scrubbed her off, had a good meal in the St Helier Yacht Club, and got under way in a strong easterly, 6-7 with full mainsail. The weather didn't deteriorate until we crossed from Corbière to Hanois, then I had to make my mind up, we were on our own, there was no way back! Dismasting was my main fear.

I'd done a few passages, and wanted a run, especially if under jury rig, with boom up, towards the Start [Point], being handy for Dartmouth or Salcombe. Once the sail was down to what I wanted I was on a one-way ticket.

We made Corbière Light, 8 miles or so from St Helier, when the wind made up east-south-east, on the starboard quarter.

By the time we were off Hanois Light, Guernsey, 30 miles on, there was no question of turning back to windward. We hove to, for about an hour, while we reduced the mainsail.

Francis wouldn't pull the foot of the mainsail tight. He had his brand new RCYC hat on.

"Pull the heel in," said I.

"Jim, I've just lost my hat, it cost me £6. 10s."

"Forget that!" I couldn't pick his hat up, I was then out of control! I took her to 8-10ft of main and no foresail. In a wind, once reefed in to the maximum, you could steer a Sunbeam so good if you only had your hand up in the air.

I decided to head for Start Point, arriving one and a half to two miles off the Start early morning, turned to port, sea foaming all the way. "A handsome sight!" from Force 7-8, making St Anthony in about four hours, where we found Joe Feather's cutter working under the Light.

Twenty three and a half hours from St Helier to St Anthony.

It was blowing in the harbour, I told Francis to give her plenty of way, but falling short of the buoy she fell away and we filled up! The RCYC boat was handy by and we pumped her out, which was lucky as a half-decked dayboat sinks like a stone. We made the mooring afterwards on another run up.

A bugger really, after all that effort. I was expecting a pint in the club!



Sunbeam *Dainty* heads an early race fleet in 1923