

SAILING

I am not sure why, but at the age of 40 I became interested in learning how to handle a yacht. Maybe something brought back the magnificent adventure I had with some friends from Rugby when I was in my mid-teens and four of us had chartered a yacht on the Norfolk Broads. None of us had any experience of how to handle a sail and although we had a couple of very hairy moments, we managed to stay afloat and not run into anything.

Whatever the cause, the urge suddenly descended upon me so I bought a yachting magazine and looked for someone who could teach me how to sail. I found an advertisement offering lessons on a 36-foot long sloop on the Solent waters between Southampton and the Isle of Wight.

I rang the number and asked a nice sounding man if I could arrange for some lessons. He suggested that I should take a one-day course to start with, so one afternoon I packed a bag and drove down to meet Captain Tony, a gentle man about ten years older than myself. There were four other students and none of us had been on a yacht before. A young lad aged 20 named Mark acted as Tony's Mate. They behaved like father and son and obviously had a very close relationship. Mark turned out to be extremely competent and ran the boat while Tony gave the lessons.

When the introductions were over we climbed into a rubber dinghy and rowed out to the *Fair Endeavour*, that was moored midstream on the river Hamble. Tony cooked us a simple meal, showed us our bunks, and left us to sleep onboard with Mark, while he went back to his warm bed. The boat was a single mast sloop, had very pretty lines and had been built before the swing to resin fibreglass hulls, so had a lot of traditional character.

It was an interesting night as I had never stayed with strangers in such cramped quarters before in my life. The loo on the *Fair Endeavour* was the standard pump-action type and housed in a tiny cupboard, so incredibly awkward to use. It was a good introduction to the confines inflicted on the crew of a yacht. The night finally passed and we were all up at first light and had finished our breakfast by the time Tony arrived.

We started right from scratch, which meant that the first hour or so was spent learning the names of ropes, sails, and of course which sides were Port and Starboard. By the time we cast off from the mooring my mind was reeling with names and I had begun to wonder if I was doing the right thing; however, it was too late to change my mind. When we cleared the river and headed out into the grey choppy waters of the Solent we were put to work hauling up sails. There was a brisk wind and soon we were buzzing along at a fair lick, heeled over, with spray coming over us and I was delighted to be there.

It was a great day and I learnt an enormous amount and being at sea all day meant each student had several turns at the helm. We moored for a sandwich lunch in a small harbour on the Isle of Wight. In the afternoon we sailed back to port using the Genoa sail, which was fun. The whole day had been a breathtaking experience and I was hooked. Before leaving to drive home I signed up for another four days over the summer.

This is all boring but necessary information to introduce the next Robinson Family adventure. I was so hooked by the sailing experience I decided that it would be educational for the boys also to learn to sail a yacht. Margie was in favour of the plan as she had spent all her youth by the sea, sailing with her brothers and boyfriends.

I decided that I should put all my newly gained knowledge to the test. I looked through the yachting magazines and found a small 30-foot long sloop named *Shedo* for charter. It was moored just up the river from Falmouth in Devon so was easy to reach from Agecroft. We would take it for a week and sail in the bay at the mouth of the Fal River. There was a first-class hotel in the area so perhaps my mother would agree to stay there and give us the occasional meal and allow us to use her bathroom now and then! This sounded like a good idea to Margie, especially the bath bit, so I chartered the yacht. We had an amazing holiday, and the weather was very kind to us. The hotel idea worked out well as my mother had the boys to dinner one at a time and Margie and I got to have the occasional wash. When we were out sailing I tried to teach the boys all that I had learned from Tony. Sailing is certainly a marvellous way to share time as a family.

We would hold *Man Over Board* practice while tacking back and forth across the bay. I had a large four-gallon plastic container that we blew up, and, when everyone was relaxed, I would throw it into the sea and yell “Man Over Board”, causing the crew to spring into action.

The exercise taught us all to handle the boat very efficiently. One day, when it was Peter’s turn on the boat hook we used to recover the container, he fell in! I shall never forget the look on his face as he held his arm high out of the water being more concerned about keeping his watch dry than getting wet. We always wore life jackets and thank goodness there are no man-eating sharks in English waters. The holiday was a great success and we were getting pretty good at handling a yacht as a family, so I decided that the following year we would have to try and do something a little more adventurous.

I am not sure when I read *The Riddle of the Sands*. Without doubt it is one of the best adventure books ever written, and as exciting to non-sailors as it is to sailors. It was one of Churchill’s favourite books and the story goes that when he was Lord of the Admiralty he made all his staff read it. The reason for this was that it is about the planned invasion of England by German troops being pulled across the Channel in barges during the Great War.

I started to think that it would be wonderful to have an adventure like *The Riddle* and then suddenly thought of Captain Tony and *Fair Endeavour*. Would he take us on such a trip? I rang him up and asked if we could charter his boat for a fortnight during the school holidays with him as Captain. He said that we could and suggested crossing over to France and back. “No, I want to sail across to Holland, up through the Kiel Canal, across to Sweden, back round Denmark and down the North Sea to London.”

There was complete silence at the other end of the telephone. “I shall have to think about that and work out a price.” Several days later Tony rang up and agreed to do the trip. We set a date to meet at the Tower of London marina and I went off to buy five bright-red waterproof suits.

The best laid plans of mice and men sometimes go astray. One day Tony rang me and said that he had been offered a job in Nigeria to teach navigation and the pay was so good that he could not refuse it. But he had a suggestion: “Would I be happy if young Mark was Captain instead?”

I immediately agreed, knowing Mark as I did from my courses with him as Mate, and in fact was very pleased, as I thought that he would be much more fun for the boys, besides making me the oldest person on the boat and therefore theoretically in charge!

Roy and Olive gave us a hand to get all our gear to the marina and my mother came down to wave us off although I am sure she thought that I was quite mad to take the whole family to sea with an 18-year-old captain. It was pouring with rain when we motored through the marina lock out into the Thames. Suddenly the 36-foot long *Fair Endeavour* felt very small indeed beside Tower Bridge!

It was cold and wet but we were warm in our bright red suits, and I thought we looked rather smart. The wind was against us so we had to motor down the Thames but when we reached the English Channel we were able to hoist the sails. After a superb hot dinner prepared by Margie from packets of ready-cooked food, Mark split us into Watches. Margie and Tim were to have First Watch and Peter and I the Second. Captain Mark would be on standby all the time and we were to call him immediately if we saw another ship or there was a change of wind. Our Mark was designated to be a standby pair of hands when needed. I guess Tim was 16, Peter 14 and our Mark 12, the youngest member of the crew.

The sky darkened and we sailed on across the Channel through the night. I was thrilled to be out in the swell of the sea ploughing along on the first night of our family adventure. We changed watches every four hours so the time sped by. The wind was constant and no sail changes were needed and no shipping interfered with our crossing. Dawn came and then breakfast and before we could believe it we had arrived off the coast of Holland and were sailing into The Hague marina. We had arrived in Europe and I was ecstatic as I think was everyone else. Our adventure had really begun!

The next leg of the trip took us through the canals of Holland past stately windmills, up to Amsterdam, and then across the Zuider Zee, under sail most of the way, although we had to motor through more canals before passing out into the North Sea again. We sailed between the islands and the coast of Holland during the night. The phosphorescence that bubbled along in our wake was an astounding sight. We pulled a bucket of seawater onboard and stirred it up with our hands, making the water glow with light. We were sailing in the waters of *The Riddle of the Sands*.

The following day we reached the entrance to the Kiel Canal. We motored through and out into the Baltic Sea. Once more under sail we headed north up the Kattegat and arrived at the Danish port of Frederikshavn, where we had arranged to meet Margie's cousin who lived in Sweden but could cross over on the ferry. Before the meeting we decided that we all needed a bath so booked into the local hotel for a few hours. What a luxurious feeling it is to put on clean clothes after a hot bath, especially if you have been at sea and become salt-encrusted!

We were extremely fortunate with the weather. Since leaving London in the rain we had had sunny days and clear nights. The wind had been kind to us and we had made good headway but were behind schedule. We decided to cut our trip short. Originally I had hoped to sail across to Sweden and then around the top of Denmark. Instead we decided to cut across Denmark through the Limfiord Canal, a series of lakes that link the Baltic to the North Sea, thereby cutting miles off our return journey. It was a lucky decision as halfway through the canal our engine packed up! An excellent mechanic from a nearby town soon had it fixed, but we were fortunate the engine misbehaved when it did and not in the North Sea. Hopefully we wouldn't need the engine on our trip south, but as we would be travelling through one of the world's busiest

waterways, an engine would be needed if we had to get out of the way of a super tanker.

The Limfiord is shallow and full of mud banks, which we continually got stuck on. The only way to get free was to row out in the dingy with the anchor and then pull ourselves off on the sail winches. We nearly pulled them off their mountings by doing this, but fortunately we didn't as it would have made our trip home very difficult!

The two days we spent in the Limfiord were our last days of sunshine. By the time we headed out into the North Sea the weather had changed and a gale was forecast. Should we go, or should we stay? If we were to arrive back in London on time we had to leave immediately. If we stayed we could be trapped in an awful industrial harbour for a week! We decided to leave as the wind was from the north-east and would be in our favour for some hours. We prayed that the gale would not arrive for 24 hours, the time it would take us to reach London.

We sailed out into the North Sea in the evening light with a brisk wind pushing us south. Skipping along we were pleased that we had decided to leave. *Faint heart never won fair lady.* Peter and I took the First Watch. We sailed until midnight and made wonderful progress. The wind had increased and we had reefed the mainsail twice and changed to a storm jib. We had passed by several of the massive gas rigs that dot the North Sea, but had no need to take any avoiding action from shipping. The rigs were an extraordinary sight as they were lit up like Christmas trees and you could see them for miles.

When Margie and Tim took over, the trouble began. Peter and I were pretty tired so were soon strapped into our bunks and fast asleep. Captain Mark was about and helping Margie and Tim with their Night Watch. They had been sailing for an hour when the storm hit and the wind steadily increased until it was blowing Gale Force 8. Tim was at the helm when a rogue wave crashed into the cockpit. Margie looked up to see Tim standing up to his chest in water, luckily well strapped in and hanging on to the helm, laughing! Then the mainsail split, top to bottom. Margie took the helm while Mark and Tim got the sail down with some difficulty and stored it away. We sailed on with only a storm jib, but even so we were still creaming through the water as we headed south before the storm surfing on the wave tops.

At four in the morning Peter and I took over the watch. By then the storm had passed and the weather had settled. The sea remained extremely angry but we were able to get the spare main up, well reefed, and a larger jib as well. Tim and Margie retired to their bunks exhausted. Captain Mark said he reckoned that we were somewhere off the coast of East Anglia, or at least that is where the 'dead reckoning' should have us, so we still had quite a long sail to reach the mouth of the Thames and London.

With Peter at the helm we continued to sail for an hour, not sighting anything, neither gas rig nor ship. We felt completely alone, running with the giant swell that was left after the gale had passed. The wind held in our favour and we seemed to be making astonishing progress. Suddenly I spotted a buoy bobbing away on the port side. "Sail over to it, Peter, so we can get a fix from the name on its side." We certainly did get a fix as we sped past! In large red letters we clearly read one word, *Calais*.

We were off the harbour of Calais for God's sake, nowhere near East Anglia! In fact we had passed London and were heading towards Cherbourg!

I woke Captain Mark to report the discovery. As there was no way that we could return to London against the wind the only thing we could do was turn sharp right and head for Brighton on the south coast of England.

Before long we saw the White Cliffs of Dover and then the wind died. The sea turned to a glassy soup and if we had not been able to fix the engine in Denmark we would have been becalmed. As we chugged west along the coast, Mark was able to make contact with the Brighton marina on his antiquated ship-to-shore telephone. We had arrived back in England on schedule, but in the wrong port!

I then had a brilliant idea. When we had left 14 days earlier my mother had told me that she was going to stay at her favourite hotel near Brighton for a few days. I knew the name of the hotel and wondered if she was still there. I called Enquiries, got a number, and rang the hotel. "Yes, Mrs Bowring is staying. Hold the line, please." My mother came on the line and I told her where we were and explained that we needed a hotel to clean up in, as we were pretty smelly. I asked her to make the arrangements, which she said she would do, but added there was no way that she was going to meet us. She would return to London and wait until we were respectable!

We docked, said goodbye to Mark, giddily walked ashore looking like a mob of gypsies and climbed into a taxi, deserting our poor captain like rats scampering off a sinking ship! However, I think he was delighted to have a moment to himself and be able to get *Fair Endeavour* shipshape again. Fourteen days of confinement with the Robinson family is asking a lot of anyone! Captain Mark was a really nice young man and we all often wonder what happened to him.

The hotel greeted us warmly and seemed to be not in the least fazed by our appearance. They showed us to a couple of rooms where we luxuriated in hot baths and scraped off the salt. An hour later we were having a gourmet lunch of fresh food, none of us missing the packaged food that Margie had heated on a tiny swinging gas stove for two weeks.

After our superb meal we took the train to London, thanked my mother for making the arrangements that had saved us, and headed home. We were glad to be back after our exciting family adventure. It had all worked really well and everyone had so enjoyed it that I decided we would do something similar the next year, and began to look for another adventure.

As a little aside I must tell you that the packet food Margie had cooked so impressed us we gave a whole box of it to a bachelor friend who has a house on a tiny island off the west coast of Scotland. We thought it would be handy for him to have ready-made food in such an out-of-the-way part of the world! He was very grateful and enjoyed the few packets he tried before storing the remainder in his larder in a box for his next visit. The only trouble was the rats also found the food very enjoyable and dug a hole from one end of the box to the other, right through the middle of every packet. They had then proceeded to run all over the larder wiping the food off their fur! Our friend was not pleased and asked us never to give him any more ready-to-eat food unless it was in tins!

This same man usually found some form of trouble when he returned to his lonely island farm home. On one occasion he had not shut the back door properly, allowing a number of lambs to take shelter in the house. The lambs became thirsty but eventually discovered a source of drinking water in the

lavatory. Of course they managed to push the door shut as they milled around inside the bathroom. They were in there for a whole day before they were discovered, so you can imagine the state of the room.



'Hoshi' sailing off the coast of Ireland

One day I came across an article in a yachting magazine about the Salcombe based Island Cruising Club in Devon and read that they owned a 65-foot long wooden schooner named *Hoshi*.

In the photograph she looked absolutely stunning when under full sail. The Club used it to train nine students at a time, sailing over to Ireland via the Isles of Scilly, round the Fastnet Lighthouse near Cork, and then home. The trip took ten days and sounded a very exciting experience for young people.

I thought, *would they charter the whole schooner to me if we could fill all the berths?* It would certainly be a wonderful adventure if they would. If each boy took a friend, we would add up to eight people with Margie and myself. I rang the Club and made an appointment to come and inspect the schooner. The Club was having some financial trouble and finding it hard to fill *Hoshi's* berths, so they were delighted for me to charter the schooner, as long as I paid them in advance. Everyone seemed to be happy so I told the boys to find a friend they would like to take sailing. Tim asked Bella, his first girlfriend. Peter asked his skiing friend, Jean Pierre, from Chamonix, the son of our postmaster ski instructor, and Mark asked his best friend at school, Piers Le Marchant.

Margie told her great friend, Sue, about our coming adventure, and asked if her son Simon would like to fill the free berth. Simon said, "Yes please." We now had our crew of nine so I went out and bought more red suits.

The day for embarking arrived and we climbed on board *Hoshi*. The Captain was a short nuggety 40-year-old Cornishman. He was unsmiling and didn't appear to be very happy about taking on the Robinson crew. The Mate was a tall lanky Viking type with long blond hair tied in a pigtail. The cook was a really nice girl who loved sailing and was much friendlier.

We sailed at first light and soon the Captain and Mate had the young gang working. It was a big job handling all the ropes, so there was always something to do. The Mate turned out to be just a big kid so was friendly with

the gang as he was. The Captain remained aloof, but I guess all captains cut themselves off so they can keep things in order.

Jean Pierre had never been to sea before and unfortunately was prone to seasickness as soon as we hit the Atlantic swell so it took the poor boy a couple of days to find his sea legs. *Hoshi* sailed like a dream and we spun along with fair winds reaching the Scilly Islands in two days, by which time our gang were a pretty efficient crew.

We anchored off the main island of St Mary's, which I knew well from my school holidays after the end of WWII. We looked for a hotel that would allow us to bath, but they were not nearly as friendly as the Danes had been the previous year and directed us to some awful showers down by the jetty. Beggars can't be choosers, so we made do and then retired to the local café for a big English fry-up.

We reached Ireland by sailing through a moonlit night. Again we were lucky with the wind and the weather. Sunny days and moonlit nights with fair winds, what more can you ask for? We passed the Fastnet Lighthouse, dropped anchor in a beautiful little harbour and rowed ashore to the local pub.

Piers Le Marchant may have had a little too much Murphy's but the Captain certainly did! We had all been asleep for hours when he arrived back, *all sails to the wind*. He did not appear next day so we happily lay at anchor and took walks ashore, which was probably a good thing anyway, especially for Jean Pierre, who was still looking a little green about the gills. Next morning the Captain was on deck behaving as though nothing had happened, and we prepared to set sail.



Margie with Peter at the helm of 'Hoshi'

It was such a beautiful day when we left the harbour that I asked the Captain to set me adrift in the tender so I could film the *Hoshi* under sail. It did cross my mind that he might not return to pick me up as I had asked him what all the noise was about when he came back on board the night before. He had

ignored the question and me ever since! Watching *Hosbi* sail past me, go about and return was sheer joy, in more senses than one!

The trip home was again by moonlight. Sailing at night is a glorious experience. We arrived safely at Salcombe and said our goodbyes, especially thanking the fun girl who had been such a good cook. I think Jean Pierre was particularly glad to be back on terra firma, although his parents later told us he said that he had loved every moment of the trip. He went on to become a top snowboard champion.

Hosbi was the last sailing holiday we had as a family. I hankered for a boat of my own and toyed with the idea of buying a large catamaran so we could sail to Australia, but common sense prevailed and I settled for a 14-foot long dinghy with a Thames barge rig! She was so unusual and beautiful to look at under sail that people used to cheer us as we sailed by. She had tan sails, a white hull, and could spin along when broadside to the wind or when we were goose winging, Margie's favourite run.



The Brigantine 'Surry'

Margie's great, great, great-grandfather, Thomas Raine, was the Captain of a brigantine. He carried both free settlers and convicts out to Australia and once brought the Governor of New South Wales back to England. His ship was the *Surry*, so we named our little beauty after her.

Margie and I used to drive up to the Lake District with *Surry* on a trailer and sail her on Coniston Water. We found a little hotel on the water's edge and used to spend all day out on the lake sailing down to Rat Island, made famous in *Swallows and Amazons*. The island is tiny and remains as it is described in the

adventure and just as romantic. We would tie up in the little harbour that we recognised from the illustration in the book and have our picnic on the rocks while our dog, Lassie, explored the island.



'Surry' moored in the Rat Island harbour

If you are ever lucky enough to sail Coniston Water one of the things you have to do is visit Ruskin's house where he wrote *The Stones of Venice*. Behind the house there is a wood full of bluebells, so it is best to be there in early May. In the woods there is a ravine carrying a stream that tumbles down in little waterfalls from pool to pool. A truly romantic and beautiful spot.

Ruskin must have liked the ravine as he chose it as the background for his portrait by Millais. The painting clearly shows the stream and cascades behind Ruskin as he contemplates the beauty of nature. Or might he have been contemplating the problem he was having with his new wife? He had recently married, but the wedding had not been consummated because, so the story goes, he was horrified when he saw his bride undressed only having seen naked women as marble statues!

While Millais was painting Ruskin he fell in love with the poor rejected girl and she, not surprisingly, with Millais. Ruskin divorced her and she married the painter. Perhaps the young couple met secretly in the wood and enjoyed the beauty of the ravine while prudish Ruskin was back at the house writing his book about 'Venetian stones'!

We rented a mooring at Wareham in Dorset and sailed *Surry* on Poole Harbour. We could drive down in an hour and sail all day, but we decided to sell the boat when we found we had no time for sailing on a regular basis. There was no way I could give up wind and water so instead I bought an inflatable yacht and christened it *The Rubber Duck*. When collapsed the whole thing could fit in the back of the station wagon so we could drive up to the

Lake District and pop it in the water at the drop of a hat. It was not elegant but it allowed us to retain the freedom of setting sail for a picnic to explore hidden and untrodden shores and trespass in secluded private bays.



'The Rubber Duck' and the 'First Mate' on Ullswater

The Lake District is without doubt one of the most beautiful places we have ever been in the world, when it isn't raining, which it often is. One of our favourite views is from the shore of Crummock Water at Buttermere. To stand on the shore of the lake is like being in a private paradise. You can touch the silence, absorb the colour and scent of the bracken that covers the hills which are reflected in the mirror-still crystal clear waters, while watching the mist rise.



Crummock Water