



Passing the Needles after the start, we admired the kneeling elephant hidden in the cliffs

THE FASTNET IN A PILOT CUTTER

Calm reasoning

A legendary race in *Morwenna*, a brand-new pilot cutter: the aim was to beat the original winner *Jolie Brise*'s 1925 time, though that was not exactly what happened. *Steffan Meyric Hughes* shipped aboard



BEKEN OF COWES



MICHAEL GARLICK

It was just after I'd finished reading *Left for Dead*, Nick Ward's raw account of desertion and terror in the 1979 Fastnet aboard the 30ft (9m) Nicholson yacht *Grimalkin*, that the phone rang this June with the offer to race the Fastnet on a pilot cutter yacht – the recently-launched *Morwenna*. It came from Stuart Jenkins, one of the boat's three owners, with the suggestion I might like to take an ISAF sea survival weekend course in preparation.

Since 1979, entering a yacht in a Fastnet has become something of a performance, with at least half the crew needing to have sailed together on 500 miles of racing in the same season, not to mention a hundred other caveats and expenses. It is, as one veteran put it to me, "like organising a military campaign". So the chance to more or less walk on and do it is a rare thing.



We've written a lot about pilot cutters over the last few years as the resurgence in these seaworthy yachts has been extraordinary. They are not cheap, ranging from £275,000 to £450,000 for a newly-built example, yet their popularity is unwaning. Nonetheless, it got to the point where I was ready to stab myself with a set of dividers if I heard their provenance explained once more: *man and a boy, Western approaches, waiting ships, fast, seaworthy...* But to sail one of these little ships on one of the most legendary ocean races of them all? I was in, and with no time to do a survival course, resigned myself, in the words of Blondie Hasler, to die like a gentleman.

Morwenna was tied up at her usual berth in Shamrock Quay two days before the race, and during the long, hot summer's evening her crew, 12 including cameraman Digby

Fox, filming for the race's title sponsor Rolex, trickled on board. Most of us knew each other from some of the shorter qualifying races earlier in the season, and we went to the pub to enjoy our last few pints of beer in a long time.

Racing pedigree

Morwenna really does race (she recently beat her fellow pilot cutters *Amelie Rose* and *Polly Agatha* in the Round the Island Race) and that means all five sails in anything below a Force 5: that's jib topsail, jib, staysail, main and main topsail. That's a lot of halyards and jiggers (hardeners on purchases for the halyards). And tacking, there's a lot going on. Two sets of runners (one for the main mast, one for the top mast), and three pairs of headsail sheets, as well as the heavy single-ended mainsheet.

After crossing to Cowes on Saturday, practice-tacking all the way, we were beginning to move around the boat more easily, and we knew we were going to have to be sharp for the race start the next morning.

Nothing I'd ever seen is quite like a Fastnet start. The next morning, we were manoeuvring off Cowes, then away, 300 yachts swapping tacks all the way down the Solent to the Needles. High-speed press boats and spectator boats, as well as *Grimalkin* from 1979, carved through the crowd, helicopter rotors thumped overhead, and the whole mad soundscape was punctuated by the deep boom of the cannons of the Royal Yacht Squadron.

We got off to a good start, flying everything we had, including the bright orange storm jib as a jury watersail and later took the scalp of an ageing Hallberg Rassy as we

A brief history of the Fastnet Race

It's the most famous yacht race in Britain, if not the world, due partly to the infamy generated by the 1979 race, in which 15 sailors lost their lives after the 300-strong fleet was slammed by a Force-10 storm. Now it's named after its sponsor, Rolex. The course is 608 miles from Cowes to the Fastnet Rock, off the southern tip of Ireland, and back to Plymouth. It was first run in 1925, instigated by a yachtsman called Weston Martyr.

Weston had sailed in the Bermuda Race the previous two years and wanted to start a similar race in Britain. He modelled the Fastnet on the Bermuda, with a similar distance – the Bermuda Race is 635 miles, just 27 miles longer.

However, the Fastnet, with its largely upwind nature, challenging tides, unpredictable weather and busy shipping, proved to be a greater challenge. The Fastnet is not, as is sometimes thought, the world's second oldest regularly-run ocean race. The Transpac, at 2,225 miles, was run for the first time in 1906, the same year as the first Bermuda Race. The first



BEKEN OF COWES

Fastnet Race quickly led to the founding of the Royal Ocean Racing Club, which now has its Georgian clubhouse near St James's Park in London.

Jolie Brise (left), the 48ft (14.6m) Le Havre pilot cutter which won the first Fastnet in 1925, has a history inextricably bound to the race. She went on to win two more, in 1929 and 1930, a feat never equalled since. Her time in 1925 was six days, 14 hours and 45 minutes. The next year (the Fastnet did not become a biennial event until 1933), the race was won by the Fife sloop *Hallowe'en*, in the

astonishing time of 3d, 19h, 5m, a quick time even by today's standards. These days, the faster yachts do it as a weekend race, and the RORC measures mean speed due to a slight change in course length. The monohull record holder is *ICAP Leopard* which completed the 2007 race at an average speed of 13.7 knots, but the multihull *Fujicolor*, in 1999, managed 15kts. To give an indication, *Leopard's* time was 1d, 20h, 19m. By far the most successful design team has been S&S, with 10 winners.

Right: *Morwenna* making time, outward leg



STEFFAN MEYRIC HUGHES

Morwenna

LOD: 45ft (13.7m)
 LOS: 60ft (18m)
 Beam: 13ft (4m)
 Disp: 27.6 tonnes
 Engine: 75hp Beta four-cylinder
 Launched: April 2009
 Built: John Raymond-Barker, Bristol
 Designed by Ed Burnett, after Major WH Tilman's cutter *Mischief*
 Build: Larch on oak, pine and tar deck
 Cost: c£275,000 + VAT

sailed steadily down-Channel, placing about halfway in our class, IRC3. Things were looking good until the wind dropped, for the first of what would be many times.

Off Portland Bill was a strange place to be anchored, too far from land, but we dropped our kedge next to a Nicholson 32, and both of us sat there all night, taking turns to drag our anchors along the seabed, slipping backwards through the blackness, the stilled lights of the fleet all around us like fireflies.

Limerick blog

Tommy came up from the companionway, chanting rhythmically in what would have sounded to the uninitiated like a sort of 'pilot's rap'.

"We've been here a long time sitting on our kedge; waiting for our beef stew, spuds and two veg." It was an idea for our daily

limerick, which we were sending to race organisers, the Royal Ocean Racing Club, in response to their request for boat blogs.

Soon we were all in the cockpit eating the second of our reheated frozen suppers, prepared in advance by Sue Jenkins, Stuart's wife. We'd be off to our bunks soon, leaving A Watch to compose limericks and play a bawdy verbal game in which each in turn is presented with 'one to marry, one for a night and one to get rid of'. Alex the skipper, stuck for choice, had chosen Bin Laden to marry (lots of money, never home), the Iranian president to get rid of ("I don't like cheats"), and had

"Now I understood. The Fastnet is a technical race, a challenge to ingenuity more than endurance"

Saddam Hussein left over... I didn't know who to feel sorry for.

They would be up till midnight, checking the GPS for anchor dragging, which was otherwise imperceptible. If we'd just got the last mile or so around Portland's headland on our tide, we could have ridden the back eddy in Lyme Bay, ghosting against the foul tide that would be running further out to sea, waiting for the next fair tide to head out again. At least we were gelling well as a team, I reflected, sitting on the coachroof, washing up with a salt-water pressure hose and watching the silhouette of land slowly grow dark.

*There was a wooden boat named Morwenna
 Not as fast as the late Ayrton Senna
 In light airs she floundered
 But at least we're not grounded
 We'll reach Plymouth for our silver later*



Above: Dawn rises as we lie to a kedge off Portland Bill



STEFFAN MEYRIC HUGHES

Left: Bosun Jimi makes the best omelette: perfectly runny in the middle



STEFFAN MEYRIC HUGHES

Right: Tommy is sweating with both hands. Will Paul help him tail?

The next few days went by marked by a succession of long, 90° gaff-rigged tacks, as we balanced the need to find wind against the likelihood of what the wind would do later, the position of the strongest tidal currents and the likely sea state all these would combine to produce.

When they say the Fastnet is one of the stiffest challenges in yacht racing, I'd never understood what they meant until this point. People would say it in such a way that implies that the Vendée Globe or Volvo Ocean races are mere warm-ups for the Fastnet. It's misleading, but now I understood it. The Fastnet is a technical race, a challenge to ingenuity more than to endurance, especially these days when the fastest boats complete the course in a couple of days. What we really needed was the power of prophecy. Add to this the frequent fog and the busy shipping lanes, and we

were glad to have five of us on each watch, even though conditions never got hairier than the top of a Force 5. By about day three, we'd reached the position of last in the fleet, and I thought bitterly about all those clichés people batter on about when they talk about pilot cutters. Man and a boy? Must have been some boy. Fast and weatherly? How about 'overtaken by an oil rig' instead? Even if it was under tow...

*Across the Irish Sea we bounded and jiggled
Overtaken by a bloody oil rig!
We tacked, it tacked too
But its shape grew and grew
And soon it went by, with us fully rigged!*

Two days earlier, we on B Watch had come on deck at four in the morning to a thrilling ride through the Celtic Sea, with our usual orders: steer by the wind, lay the

best you can... The sea was running a decent swell, and every 20th wave or so we'd bear away to ride over a larger wave. *Morwenna* creamed along at nearly eight knots, a pilot cutter in her element, some real seas, and she rode over the water with all the grand comfort of a flying carpet. Occasionally, the lee deck would ship some black Celtic Sea, which would come alive with phosphorescence, glittering towards the stern as it ran back to the ocean.

Life on board

"Pigs live better than this" muttered the Grim Reaper darkly as we went off watch that time, undressing in the swaying saloon as the boat careened through the black Irish night. Two of our watch mates had gone to bed almost fully clothed – but we weren't giving up that easily, clinging on to a semblance of civilisation. As a naval



Back row, L to R: Paul, Jimi (bosun), Tommo, Tom, Alex (skipper), Mike.
Front row, L to R: Kirsten, Diana, Darryl, Frank (Iceman), author

DIGBY FOX



Left: Morwenna's route, and our retirement point

fighter pilot turned vet, Mike was ship's doctor. "I'll try to cure you, but if I can't, I'll have to put you down," he'd warned us, hence the Reaper moniker. And about those pigs – it was true: eight men with damp oilies and no showers will, after a few days of sharing a space not much bigger than a walk-in wardrobe, create a rich, proteinous funk.

That night, as we lay in our bunks, the ship careered over the swell and it was hard not to let sentiment overcome logic, and to think that the boat, with its ability to steer itself into the wind for hours on end, the tiller adjusting as though the hand of a ghost were upon it, was more than just a collection of dead trees, that it was alive; or at least had some, unidentified, sort of soul.

On Friday, day six, we were becalmed again, this time baking on deck, the sea changed from dull grey to a deep, glittering blue. We dived off the shrouds, splashing around in the deep Celtic Sea, and dried off on deck, praying for some wind. Most of the fleet was already back in Plymouth now, having made those crucial headlands on the way out, while we were getting headed or becalmed off every one. It was clear that we'd never beat *Jolie Brise's* 1925 time: the only question was, could we complete the race at all? After a tense discussion in the cockpit, it was decided we turn back. Most of us had wanted to continue and the disappointment was palpable. Being English, most of us knew our way around disappointment pretty well. Frank the Dutchman, Iceman as we called him, was also stoical but the Kiwis – B-Watch leader Kirsten, and Jimi – took it harder.

Later on, those who'd wanted to complete were refunded fully, an extraordinarily generous gesture on the part of the owners. And even 24 hours later, surrounded by a pod of about 30 dolphins as we ran back past Land's End in perfect winds, we were feeling a lot happier. Our fondness for our stout vessel and the bonds between us counted, in the end, for more than a rock in the middle of a featureless ocean.

Return to reality

Our return to Plymouth was marked by much cheering and clapping from other boats. This was embarrassing to some; others, more easily pleased, and unused to praise, just joined in. The next day, it was time to return to reality, to charge phones, pick up messages, and to start thinking about trains home.

"After a tense discussion in the cockpit, it was decided we turn back"



Left: Skipper Alex Day points out something in the distance to Mike (left) and Tommo

STEFFAN MEYRIC HUGHES

It was hard to leave new companions, hard to deal with the failure of the main objective of our voyage and hard to leave the ship which had become our home. We'd learned a lot despite everything. In fact, we find it quite hard to stay away from *Morwenna* these days, I reflected as I swung myself out of my old bunk on a return visit at the Southampton Boat Show.

And as a learning experience, the voyage was invaluable and finally, we understand the mysterious language of the gaff whisperer. I thought a lot about pilot cutters on the way home. Without a doubt they are boats of great charm, accommodation, handsomeness and, in the right circumstance, speed. As for weatherliness, *Morwenna* pointed as well as could be expected in a good enough blow, and went like a dream off the wind, even in a Force 2. She was a lot of boat to handle though. I would think very hard before recommending one as a private boat, though as a charter vessel, she was perfect.

Ultimately, we were racing the Fastnet the way it was intended to be raced – as a medium-distance, crewed race on a gaff-rigged boat, contemporary in design with the age of the race. These days, it's a one- or two-day jaunt for the quicker yachts, with fast internet weather reports and swinging keels and some of the race's original purpose has been lost.

We might not have won. We might not have even completed – but our attempt was the real thing, just as Fastnet founder Weston Martyr had intended. And just as the crew of *Jolie Brise* had, we swam when becalmed, and when we had wind noted with surprise how quickly bananas at sea go black and spotty. Some things, like gaff rigs and headwinds, never change.

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