

Hayling Challenge 2023

Chris Waite in his own-design lugger, *Polly Wee*

This entry is also eligible for the Allan Earl Trophy

Skipper - Chris Waite (single-handed)

Boat name - *Polly Wee* (PW)

Type and description - Own design, 11' 6", flat bottom, with optional water ballast

Rig - (Una - single sail), unstayed, Balance-Lug

Date of challenge - 27 August HW - 08.36 LW - 14.19 Chi BST

Start time - 10.20 Finish time - 15.36 (*One of our number, who was kind enough to give me a hand up the hard, said 15.37, but not on my watch it wasn't.*)

Anticlockwise

Wind strength and direction - Both variable up to F4 from W to N, but predominantly WNW

Hayling Bridge - Rowed under with the Yard lowered and little noticeable current

Runes etched onto the Alan Earl trophy will testify that this is not the first time that *Polly Wee* and I have been, er, 'challenged'; but it has been a while.



I wasn't going to put my nethers out for another five hours or so of perching on the side-deck coaming, (designer's mistake), but Joe is a persuasive fellow and when Mary Dooley press ganged Mark Smith into crewing aboard *Rhubie* (it's actually *Rhubarbie*) her Scamp, I inveigled myself - sounds uncomfy, doesn't it? Mary had already chosen 10.00, clockwise.

I immediately launched into a brief hour-long tirade as to why it should be two hours after high-water and anticlockwise, but she's not a girl to be moved by old codgers, so there we were on the hard not long after ten in the morning. I'd popped *Polly Wee* in the shallows and rolled her over to remove the burgee, not wanting to destroy the emblem of the DCA on the underside of Hayling bridge, or anything.

We shoved off together-ish at twenty past ten and once round Cobnor point started to separate into windward anticlockwise and leeward clockwise courses. The last I saw, they were disappearing into the swarms of sunny Sunday sails (Super), with intent to cross the Winner, while I set *Polly Wee* to creep across Thorney front.

This piece of Chichester Harbour is very shallow at the best of times and even remotely toward low water it can become a serious obstacle to the challenge. It is mostly quite sandy with some seaweed patches and the odd dangerously sharp looking detritus poking out. My answer to the last is to keep an eye out and fingers crossed. The seabed also undulates gently and irritatingly this is at right angles to those in transit such as ourselves. It means that half a dozen times in the process the bottom keeps reaching up and fiddling with your foils; the centreboard and rudder take a hammering, here and in many other locations during the course.

I actually use the board as a depth-sounder and it has a row of stainless screws mounted in the forward lower tip just for the purpose. Not only the paint, but the softer wood and sheathing gets worn away in between the screw-heads, giving it a lean and hungry look; makes me wonder if it wouldn't end up with the appearance of an inverted stegosaurus, if I didn't repair it every few years. Same applies to the rudder blade.

The next problem is the wind; not the strength so much as the direction. Unless you have a perverse delight in beating to windward and shallow Hayling Bay is not the ideal spot for smooth water; unless that, with Cobnor and Langstone entrance at opposite ends of the course, then the most favourable wind directions are Northwest or Southeast - ish, as they make all the long stretches and most of the shorter ones navigable on one tack. The latter is best as wind off the land tends to be much less steady, having been obsticularly interfered with for many, many miles before it reaches your canvas.

Sunday was no exception; before long I was convinced Mephistopheles had his *X-box* switched to '*Aeolian Antics*' and was laughing his head off while strumming the controls. I always think the last time out was the worst for fickle breezes, but I must say the day was a doozy. The gusts would slam in and veer as they petered out, then the lulls would be from somewhere outside the entire quadrant and the whole game would start again from a somewhat different direction. Mostly West-north-west, but every now and then a whisper of South would creep in, though not as often as going well North. It was awful and so as not to let the side down, I had not taken on ballast, leaving *PW* as tender as a loose Laser with me rocking around on top, trying not to be tipped in backward one minute or simply laid flat to lee the next. Un-ballasted, she does not take prisoners.

Leaving the last under-hump of Thorney, I determined to head to the windward, Hayling shore as we fought our way up the Emsworth channel. Shortly I was approaching a muddy runnel where someone had been digging for bait-worms leaving several large lumps of mud at the water's edge. It wasn't until one of the lumps lifted its head and looked at me directly that I realized I was staring several harbour seals in their little furry faces.

Remembering the harbour code, I bore away into the oncoming ebb until I was well

clear of them, then snuck up to the slimy shallows of Northney corner. It doesn't matter how you cut it, the stretch between Marker on Thorney's Western-most tip and Hayling bridge is the worst part of the whole deal. If you get there toward high-water, then there's definitely not enough room under the bridge, even for a small mast. There is around low-water, but then all the mudbanks in tarnation are showing their grey-green, greasy backs and the New Cut by Northney Marina is a disgusting trickle. I've dubbed this two and a half nautical miles-worth *The Devil's Elbow*.

It is only two and a half miles, but a bridge runs over it. Consider this though, there are four other segments to the challenge and they're all about three and a half nautical miles, as the crow flies. It follows that if you can manage three point five knots; the challenge would take you five hours, yes? "Ah yes, but that requires using all the swatchways", I hear you say. Yes it does and this is important, cutting corners and therefore shortening* the distance seems to have more effect than getting the right tide or wind. Though obviously if you can arrange to have those on your side as well, then you're really onto a *winner* and I'd like to say we're not talking sandbanks here, though they're an important aspect....

Even if this isn't a race; tralaa!

Anyway, I was just off Northney marina and about to enter the 'New Cut', which heads straight for the bridge rather than taking the natural channel, which dog-legs over via the Royal Oak pub. A couple of hours before low water, it's a meagre, muddy gut, even on neaps. I use neaps as they provide more water in the *swatchways than springs and occur at the right time of day not to be out there before the day has had time to air properly, or when the first gin and tonic is due as the sun settles.

Already there before me, four paddle people perched precariously on various brightly coloured plastic logs. No problem though; glancing at the oars, I was rather surprised that *PW* managed to tack through this geographically restricted and well populated thin water, all the way up to the bridge, with only the odd smear of black ooze clinging to her foils. (I know this because some of it was still there when I got back to Cobnor.)

Time for an assault on (?under) the bridge. I've sailed through once previously with the yard scandalized part into the topping lifts; this was not one of those occasions. The sun had gone in and the wind fine on the starboard bow through the concrete pillars, had developed an edge to it. As I dropped the sail right into the lifts this time, my mobile went off.

Inconvenient....

Back at HQ the toaster had grabbed a brioche and in refusing to let go had tripped the kitchen, leaving my American step-daughter in the dark, so to speak. It took a few moments to explain where the fusebox was and which way to dis-unswitch it. By this time, the oars were becoming imperative; out they came, but I hadn't time to raise the sail/spar bundle to 'high enough for rowing' mode, so it spent the next ten minutes trying to shove my head off to starboard, while I struggled with the wind and a distinct lack of vision, among the concrete, the moored cruisers and Tom Edom's

dragon's teeth - the rotting stumps of the Hayling Billy's old railway bridge.

Out after a brief struggle, I hove-to long enough to clear the decks and make sail, just sneaking to windward of a low, weedy looking spit protruding northwards from the island side and set course for the imagined Mulberry Harbour. I say 'imagined', because though it is huge horrible and bent with a broken back, all I could see from that far up the harbour was a series of low lying concrete flavoured blocks and none of them looked even remotely Mulberry.

It eventually made itself known though and getting closer, two things. Firstly I passed the wrong side of the main starboard-hand buoy, leaving myself nearly at the mercy of the sand spit, sneaking north from old Mulberry herself; Christopher really! And how long have you been sailing?

Secondly, Joe was absolutely right... and so was I. My fixed pile with two black balls was there, as expected up and over toward the Portsea Channel. However, two more black balls on a buoy were also apparent, close in to the Mulberry itself and immediately downstream of them a ring of small buoys around a lighter of some sort. Something must have met a watery grave right there and moves were obviously afoot to remove it for the temerity to have sunk in the channel.

I was approaching Langstone entrance narrows and being aware of Hayling Bay's notorious lumps and *Polly Wee's* predilection for acting out downwind, I took on water ballast (140 litres of seawater) and as I looked up, there was a small familiar sail just entering the harbour. We and Mary with Mark aboard *Rhubie*, passed in the narrows. We waved furiously and I may even have doffed my hat.

Joe assured me that the shifting sands had obliterated the swatchway over the East Winner outside the harbour, so I was preparing for a long flog out, round the bank. As I drew nearer, it was apparent that there was some water over the neck; but how much, I really couldn't tell. "*Come on, one of you seaside paddlers; wade across and give me a clue!*" But they didn't; neither did a single seagull oblige and the crowd further out on the sands made no attempt to retreat, so I had to guess.

"*Nyagh; in for a penny, in for a pound!*" - so I turned downwind and stood up looking for any depth I could find and dropped the sail into the lifts. Twenty minutes before a low water neap and I was soon grounding in gentle shifty bumps, but I was well on the way across, when she stopped. I'll pull Joe's leg here - I don't know what he was expecting, maybe a real channel with signs of human endeavour and perhaps someone with rolled up trousys, selling ice-creams from a tray? That's very rude Christopher and I apologise immediately Joe, but I've only ever found this the gentlest of dissipated dips in the sand, much more *swatch* than *way*.

There are two ways to reduce the *Polly Wee's* draft - get out with a view to pushing and pumping out ballast. I chose the latter first, as I didn't fancy taking all (all?) my sea-boots and socks off and rolling up *my* trousys, if I could get away with pumping ship. It's been a long time since I've had reason to pump out the ballast at sea and it requires the reversal of three cheap plastic valves. The ballast vs. bilge and one (70 L.) water-bag shifted reluctantly, the valve to the other bag was stubborn as hell and the handle started to give signs of impending dissolution.

I did it anyway and even disposing of the recently acquired ballast, she was still not going through without a fight, so it was off with the kit and overboard; this worked and I managed to persuade her across the shallows. Once in deeper water she was facing the shore on a slow drift that way. I got down to the business of trying to ballast her back down; all well and good apart from the really sticky valve, which was jammed part open. Open to what I hadn't a clue and this was important as I was about to downhill-it all the way along Hayling front with a rolling swell coming in from Bembridge direction.

I dare not really let rip, as she possesses a serious penchant for downwind capsize without enough ballast aboard. So I raised the sail until most of it was aloft in a bulgy sort of fashion and she was just beginning to show signs of considering misbehaviour. Also she has sister-hooks on her topping-lift for convenience in de-rigging and about once a season these spritely fittings cease to clasp each other to their bosoms and dance off on their ownsome. One is deliberately set to catch the boom and stop it falling into the water on such occasions, but the other is free to cavort about the mast and I was not in a position to retrieve it.

Beyond broad on a port reach, I was left standing grimly facing forward. This may sound strange, but having done time on windsurfers and with a foot firmly planted on the cockpit sole at each bilge gives you the best chance of ducking and weaving your way through, transferring your weight to each foot, just enough to meet the roll of the waves as they passed under her. All OK, but hard work for an old goat for the fifty essential odd minutes it took to get to Eastoke Point and Sumner swatchway. This was well open and comfortably benign with the merest hint of a bar, visible as a bilious lighter green stripe on the Chichester side.

It was a relief to take a moment on the calmer early flood in the main channel to get the sail set properly again, then harden up and come onto a reach. The decision to cross the Winner here was easy to make and with one momentary minor crunch of plate on gravel it was also history.

In fact the remainder of the trip past East Head and Camber, then slipping inside Chalk Dock and rounding Cobnor Point was delightfully uneventful....

Almost like going for a sail really

Chris Waite