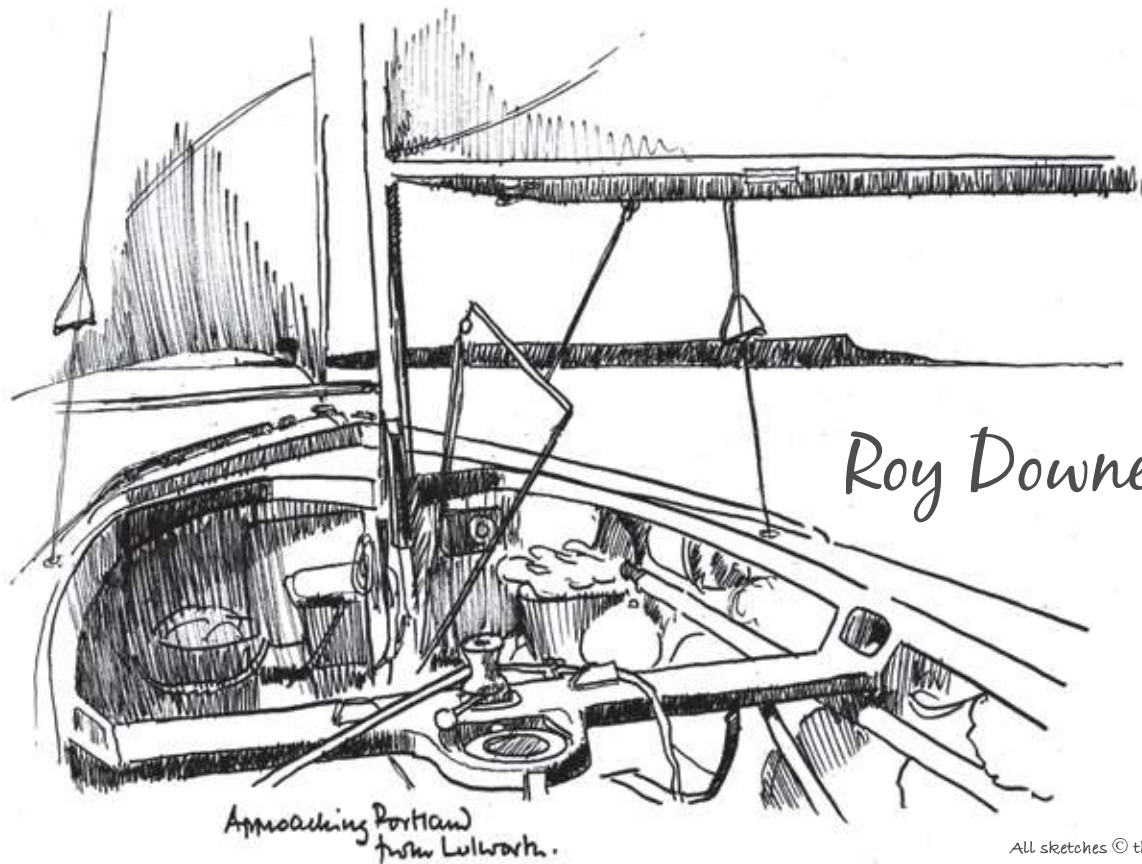


Passage West



All sketches © the author

One or two decades ago National18 *Surprise* was built by her owner from a bare glass hull. At first she sported conventional racing and cruising Bermudan sloop sails, not the powerful cat yawl rig you saw on the cover of DC219. Roy Downes and Janet Ladd had not yet married and they raced and cruised *Surprise* on the South Coast. After accumulating wide experience in the boat, they undertook a lengthy cruise from Leigh-on-the-Solent to Helford — and back. Exactly when this was accomplished I leave you to consider: reference to a Royal Wedding and another to Crimplene™ clothing may provide useful clues. (Roy published an early account of this cruise in *Yachts and Yachting*.)

‘YOU’RE MAD’, friends and family opined as we prepared *Surprise* for the summer cruise. ‘Why not trail down and enjoy the whole holiday on the Helford?’ More ghoulish acquaintances persisted, ‘But it might BLOW — then what will you do?’

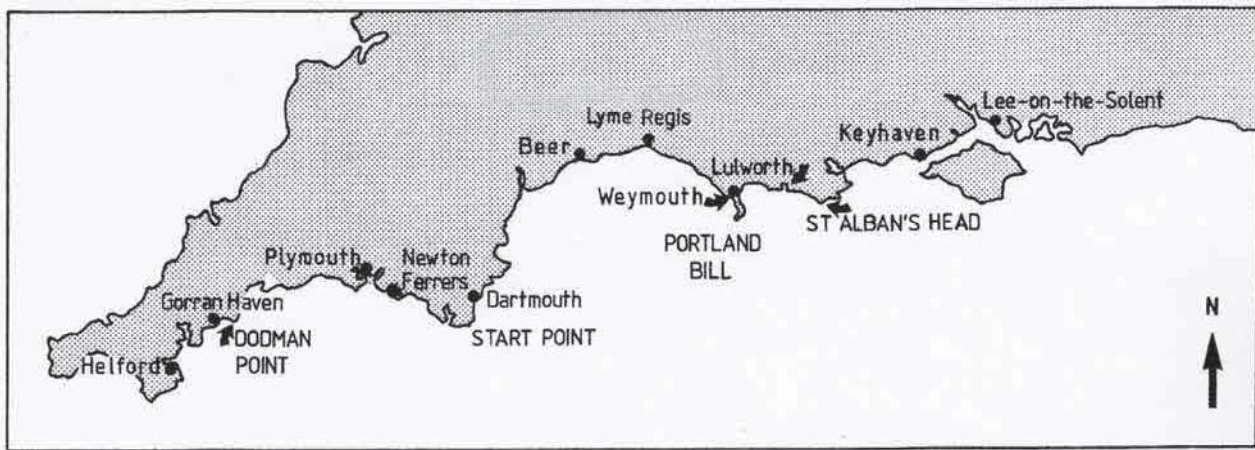
On paper the answer is simple: do not get caught out. In practice it is less simple. At least we could ensure that the boat and every single item of gear was fit for the task — nothing should break and nothing would break. More difficult to apply the same criteria to skipper and crew.

Surprise is a glassfibre National Eighteen with wood decks. Positive buoyancy is built into the hull, ensuring flotation even if the hull is damaged. The total sail area is 190ft² and, as sail changes must be made under way, the boat features some unusual fittings for a dinghy. The gear, developed over eight years of cruising, is simple and unsophisticated by modern racing standards but it all works and nothing breaks. For us there is no handy rescue boat — we simply cannot risk any failure or breakage.

Ashore, Janet supervised the final victualling and the organisation of gear and clothes

for the trip. It is a fact that two adults cruising for a fortnight in an 18ft open dinghy require precisely the same amount of clothing, gear and food as two adults in a 30-footer. Somehow we managed to stow it all: our packing would have won praise from the Tokyo Metro guards.

The splendid weather, by appointment for the Royal Wedding, was gradually slipping away as we set off on July 31st. The lunchtime forecast was not optimistic — variables and rain — and the Needles Coastguard accepted the news of our impending departure



with equanimity. Two hours later *Surprise* was drifting off the Beaulieu River — becalmed. We rowed clear of the deep water channel. How far to Cornwall?

Amazingly for a Friday afternoon there was only one other boat in sight, a cruiser with her spinnaker collapsed. She soon started her engine and we gratefully shipped the oars and accepted a tow to Lymington. There we bade them farewell and stood on for Keyhaven. A mile south of Jack in the Basket the rain descended and so much water cascaded off the sails the bilges filled rapidly. Rowing through the monsoon making $1\frac{1}{2}$ knots forward against half-a-knot head stream was just enough to slide us into Keyhaven to anchor in the lagoon behind the shingle spit before the weight of the ebb swirled us out.

Never in years of cruising had the tent gone up on such a wet boat. We mopped up, shed our oilies and unrolled the foam sleeping mats — little blue islands of dryness in a sodden boat. We raised our spirits immeasurably with a good hot meal and a bottle of wine. First night out dinner is always one of the best.

The rigging thrummed and whined all night and rain battered the billowing tent. We collected the drips from the halyards in a mug lashed to the mast and a sail tier pegged to the rolled mainsail wicked its trapped moisture into the centreboard case.

As the rising tide lifted *Surprise* further and further above the protective shingle bank, the next morning, our apprehension

increased with our expanding view of The Solent. Immediately to windward of the spit a rescue boat plucked hapless crews from their capsized racing dinghies. Keyhaven entrance was a lee shore to a chill north-easter and we were due for a wet start to the day.

A run up river to clean and stow the 15lb CQR in controlled conditions, then we gybed, faced downstream, unrolled the working jib and headed *Surprise* into the boiling Solent. The spray soon found the vulnerable gap between sou'westers and oily jackets. Equally soon, the strong stream plucked us into the fast lane and out past Hurst. The reefed main proved inadequately small for a broad reach, so we shook out the reef and changed the working jib for the genoa.

Inshore along the North Channel the sea remained smooth but as our course took us seawards towards St Albans the swell increased. We sat comfortably on the bottomboards and bowled along on a dead run, with the genoa boomed out to weather. Closer to Swanage peninsula the swell became noticeably bigger. Careful steering was needed to prevent a gybe.

The sun came out when we were one mile southeast of Durlston. It was still a comfortable and leisurely sail but then quite suddenly the swell ceased to be a swell. We were running through a roaring mass of heavy breaking waves. The sea was chaotic without form or rhythm, just bursting and rearing all around. There was no possibility of gybing

clear nor could either of us go forward for the lifejackets, stowed by the mast, as we trimmed *Surprise* down by the stern. By every reckoning we were well clear of Peveril Race — our running fixes as we closed the headland had given reassuring on-course positions. In four earlier passages around this headland we had never experienced conditions like these and the effect was a bad jolt to our sense of security.

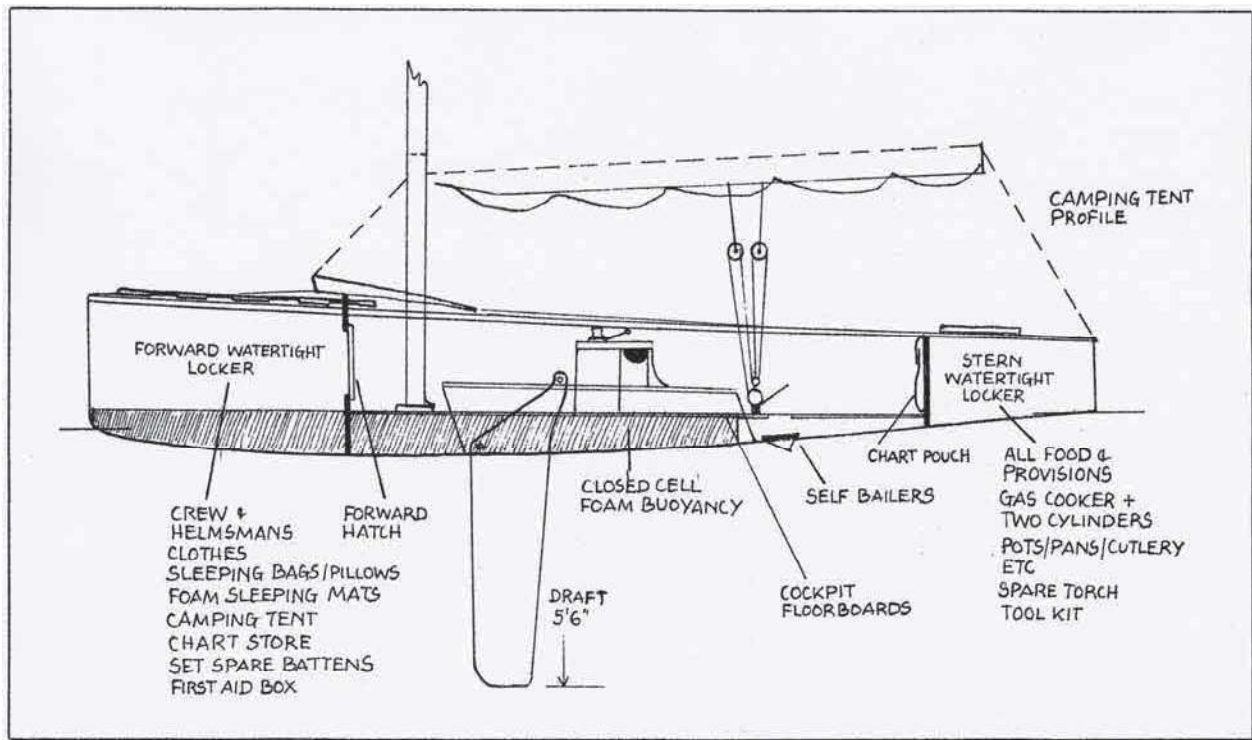
Long before we reached St Albans we had lifejackets on. Then we gybed safely and ran parallel to the shore. The dark sickle of the standing waves of St Albans

SURPRISE

National Eighteen: LOA 18ft; beam 7ft 3in; hull weight 550lb/250kg; sailing weight in cruising trim 800lb/364kg; sail area 190sq ft; trapeze and spinnaker fitted.

Sails carried: mainsail 105sq ft (reefing by two slabs to 78 and 51sq ft); genoa; working jib; spitfire jib; spinnaker; storm trysail. **Auxiliary:** one pair 10ft oars. **Navigation:** Bosun grid steering compass; Sestrel junior handbearing compass; Admiralty Charts; Stowe log; hand lead-line; Hurst plotter; Admiralty pocket tidal atlases; pilot books. **Flares:** 6 hand-held red; 3 orange daylight smoke; 1 set Miniflars (red) and projector (Miniflare 2). **Ground tackle:** 15lb/7kg CQR plus 2 fathoms/3.7metres chain and 25 fathoms/46 metres 1-inch nylon; 11lb/5kg fisherman plus 15 fathoms /28 metres 1-inch nylon; sundry warps and fenders.

Camping/Cooking: Tilley Trio, 2 burners with combined grill; Camping Gaz; 2 x 1 gallon fresh water containers; lightweight proofed nylon overboom tent; sleeping mats.



waded *Surprise* into the shallows — the beauty of 10in draft.

The sailing club held out a welcoming hand. We were among friends and were questioned closely: how did we cook, sleep, eat, live, get round Portland, manage in rough weather and calm, navigate? We talked and talked and it was only very late that evening I remembered I had not telephoned the Coastguard.

During the night the fog rolled in. By morning its clammy hand had killed the wind and reduced the horizon to a few hundred

yards. We patronised the local launderette and strolled around exploring Lyme.

The fog and calm persisted so we persuaded our nearest neighbours to join us for a driftwood barbecue along the beach below the Undercliff.

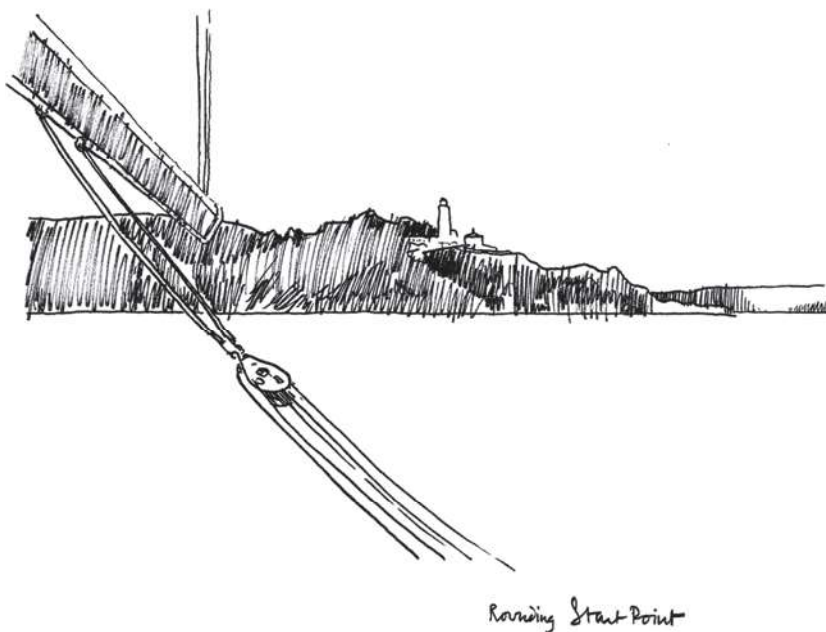
“*Within seconds the whole boat was ablaze*”

That evening there was a great drama in the tightly packed

moorings on the north wall of the harbour: a glassfibre Boston Whaler burst into flames as the owner disconnected the battery leads. Within seconds the whole boat was ablaze as the full petrol tank erupted. Neighbouring craft were cut adrift and pulled to safety. A quick-thinking young man hooked his anchor and chain onto the flaming whaler and towed her clear of the harbour. The trippers dispersed, the show was over, and we dined aboard our neighbour's yacht in great style and comfort.

The next morning, August 5th, the forecast was optimistic — a variable Force 2 with isolated thundery showers. We phoned the CG, stowed the fresh food and cleared the Cobb at 11:30 on a course along the incredible Undercliff shore. By lunchtime Beer Head was abeam and we were just making 2 knots. In hazy sunshine the wind dropped and headed. The speed dropped to 0.5 of a knot. We thought of the notorious Beer Smugglers: they would have been rowing by now — so would the Excisemen. With a long series of agonisingly slow tacks we inched our way along the shore.

When the rain started a better



Rigging Start Point

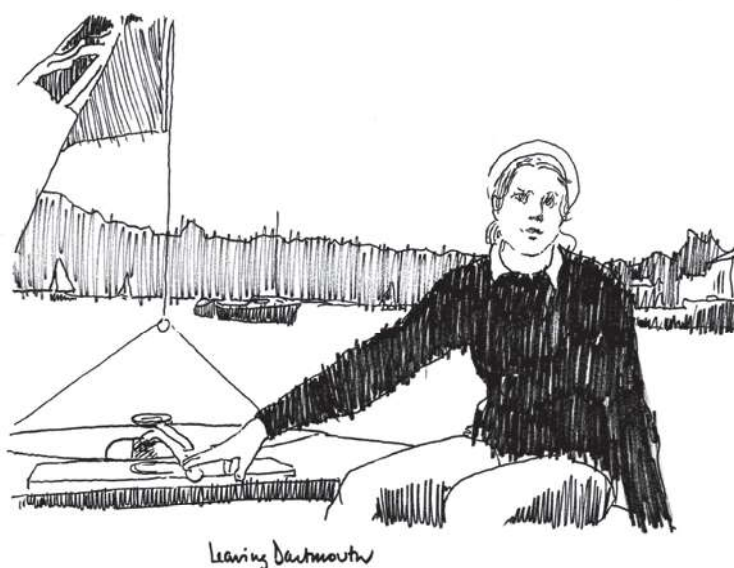
breeze came in but by 16:00 this had died again and we crept past Sidmouth. It was raining again when we reached Budleigh Salterton. We were becalmed long enough to consider the possibility of beaching *Surprise* but 30 minutes later we were broad-reaching at 4 knots towards Straight Point. We rounded the Point and tacked into Sandy Bay where we anchored for the night.

Next day the rain eased to a drizzle and then evaporated into mist. A light northeasterly carried us past Exe Fairway buoy on course for Torbay. Visibility was less than two miles and we were soon self-contained in our own little world, the spinnaker adding a splash of colour to an otherwise drab scene.

The hourly DR plot crept across the chart. A great silent fleet of tankers appeared to port, all anchored. Well, where were we? A single distinctive rock broke the monochrome of sea and sky and we took a fix on the Orestone. The low cloud ahead became Berry Head: we had two good fixes. The sun appeared and the northerly brisked up to fill the spinnaker. Passing between the Mewstone and the shore saved half a mile but cost us every breath of wind. We edged into the Dart and a racing yacht steamed up, the crew busy furling sails. Her helmsman held up the traditional rope's end and we accepted the lift.

On August 9th we rounded Start Point just before 15:00. The wind fell light as we were now blanketed by the craggy backbone of the Point. The spinnaker made several journeys up and down and, a quarter mile further on, the wind finally evaporated. A yacht appeared round the Point, spinnaker pulling well and closed rapidly but then she too fell into the hole. She reached us under motor and offered a tow but ten minutes later the wind returned and we sailed again.

Just west of Salcombe entrance we fell into a new calm but before we reached the deadly Hamstone, which sealed the fate of *Herzogin Cecile* in 1936, a firmer breeze set



in. We tacked shorewards towards Ramilles Cove and as the wind increased we had an exhilarating sail under reefed main and working jib. Tacking up the river we picked up a mooring below the hotel.

On a gloriously hot and sunny morning the next day, we made for Polperro. By early evening *Surprise* nosed by the fishing boats waiting for the tide through the narrow harbour entrance. Janet's paddling was appreciated by the fishermen: 'Good fur a gurl, that iz'.

Avoiding the sightless fish heads and skeletal remains of Kentucky Fried which littered the harbour, we waded in through the unpleasant detritus of a tripper's paradise. We wore sea boots.

The Harbourmaster was busy assisting high-heeled, crimplene-clad lady tourists aboard his boat for Jolly Trips Around the Bay. We expressed a hope and a preference for lying further up the harbour: no such luck.

Reluctantly we secured alongside a massive bilge keeler, her topsides towering over *Surprise*. We had forgotten our crampons and the heads outlet faced us squarely. The owners were very kind and lowered their longest ladder for us; it just reached.

At the first opportunity, on August 11th we paddled out, hoisted sail and headed towards Mevagissey on a sparkling sea.

Fetching across St Austell Bay

gave us a chance to marvel at the amazing lunar landscape of the China Clay works, the white spoil tips dominating the horizon, rising starkly above the green countryside.

After the night in Mevagissey we had to wait patiently for the wind and it was almost 11:00 before the first catspaws riffled the calm. We tacked again and again towards the massive Dodman Point, the last major headland between us and Helford. We passed along the beautiful shore and made an extra board towards Gorran Haven. It looked lovely, a tiny harbour protected by the crooked arm of the breakwater and a clean sandy beach with Regency and early Victorian houses right down on the sand. It was noted as, 'The harbour we would most like to visit,' but time and tide urged us on. We tacked out along the spectacular sweep of Vault Beach: it was almost deserted.

Rounding Dodman at 13:45 we sailed into a crimson sea, which was completely covered with a mysterious layer of red algae — or was it oil? It stretched for miles.

Passing safely clear of The Gedges, we entered the Helford and four hours after rounding Dodman *Surprise*, still under sail, grounded gently on the foreshore of Point Cottage at the head of the Porth Navas Creek. We had made it.





Passage East

The Return Journey

Beached in Bridport - West Bay.

THE 200-MILE return passage to The Solent did not start well: we left ashore the frozen casserole (our first night's dinner). This traumatic discovery came as we ran down Porth Navas creek towards Helford River channel.

Even in the sheltered creek the wind funnelled down to give a fast run under genoa only. Powered on by unpredictable squalls, *Surprise* tore across the river to the Ferry Stores for an urgent reprovisioning. The southwest bank of the Helford was fully exposed to the blustery nor'northeasterly but it gave an opportunity to gauge the real wind and sea conditions: rough and cold.

Dodman would provide the first real lee but that was 12 miles upwind. A deep-reefed main and working jib seemed a sensibly small sail plan. It was uncharitably cold.

To say we settled down for a long windward leg gives a false impression of modest comfort: an open centreboard dinghy in a Force 5 can never be comfortable.

Straining every muscle we clawed out precious ground to

windward, encouraged only by the steady 4.3 knots on the log. Abeam of Nare Head the wind backed and increased (or were we weakening?) and we furled the headsail. It cost almost half a knot of boat speed but we were under proper control again.

Dodman's shelter gave a welcome respite from the continuous spray and muted the icy blast of the wind. In calmer water we treated ourselves to the headsail and soon shook out the deep reef. As the afternoon wore on the wind backed towards the west and a welcome sun appeared.

By evening we were closing Rame Head on a fast broad reach under full sail. We had to decide now between Plymouth and Newton Ferrers: the former was well lit but we did not know the harbour whereas the Yealm is unlit but we did know the river.

With the last of the evening breeze we planed across the bay to skirt the Mewstone, and finally crept into the Yealm entrance. The wind deserted us and, with an ebbing stream, we paddled into the inky blackness, navigating by torchlight. We nosed slowly

upstream and found a vacant mooring. It had been a long day but we had covered 50 miles in just nine hours.

We left Newton Ferrers with a steady westerly on a broad reach to Bolt Head. It was fine, sunny, comfortable sailing and *Surprise* swooped along. We approached the Salcombe Peninsula physically and psychologically prepared for worsening sea conditions and we were not disappointed. *Surprise* tore along the rocky shore, riding the big swell until the Salcombe ebb broke the rhythmic pattern, confusing and steepening the waves. Ever since leaving home in July we had been trying to achieve the magic 10 knots — the maximum the log speedo would indicate: now we were getting close. We braced ourselves for a gybe as we passed Prawle (at least if we capsized there somebody might see). Choosing a long downhill wave we turned cautiously across the wind and as the boat speed increased we flicked the main over. *Surprise* did not object and we surged on at 9 knots.

Safely through the tidal

confluence we ran on across Lannacombe Bay towards Start with the wind dropping. The sea calmed completely and we slowed to under 2 knots: rock spotting in the clear water was a fascinating task. The outlier to the south — that terrible trap for the unwary — was pinpointed by ominous whorls in the smooth sea. The chart is littered with the wrecks and it was a sobering exercise to sail so gently in this ship's graveyard, delicately skirting the terrible tombstones.

We had arrived too early for a favourable lift and now we stemmed the last westing tide, a small price to pay for such an exhilarating sail. Breaking clear of the big windshadow from Start gave a close reach along Slapton Sands. Passing the mass of gleaming caravans we engaged in a serious race with a Half Tonner. She took an inshore course, finding weaker stream, while further offshore we had a firmer breeze. Neck and neck we approached the Dart. Finally she motored but we could still sail and carried a puffy breeze on our port beam right up to the Dart Harbour Board moorings.

The next day a fitful breeze, between spells of rowing, took us downstream past the Castle and so out of the Dart. Equally fitfully we tacked slowly clear of the Mewstone and the sweeping Channel tide gave us a helping hand northwards up the coast toward Berry. Squarely facing Torbay the last of the catspaws was burnt up by the brilliant sunshine. *Surprise* lost steerage way. We lunched and fretted at the lack of progress, anxiously scanning the glassy horizon for signs of a returning breeze. The prospect of a seven-mile row to Torquay did not appeal. Finally the breeze arrived and with a slight sigh — like an old lady who has been kept waiting unnecessarily — *Surprise* made way at last to meet the firmer wind funnelling down the Exe valley.

Within an hour the trapeze was needed and during the next hour

we shortened sail twice, finally fighting our way northeastwards under just a reefed mainsail towards the gleaming chalk headland of Beer.

We passed Sidmouth in the early evening and were soon treated to a beautiful sunset. Reaching along the shore we closed Beer as dusk was falling. Time for night sailing routine: torches stowed ready, sandwiches and hot soup to up spirits and extra sweaters and full oilies to keep the vital warmth in and efficiency up.

Broad-reaching comfortably threequarters of a mile offshore, we would be in Lyme in about an hour as long as the breeze held. The town lights twinkled ahead and we sat comfortably on the bottomboards peering into the darkness. The faint glow of the compass showed a steady course towards the Cobb.

Then it hit us: quite suddenly out of the darkness a roaring wind poured over the cliffs and struck *Surprise*. We reeled gunwale down under the onslaught, the boom showering spray in the waves and the genoa flogging madly as we staggered shorewards in a wild broach, water pouring over the starboard deck. Within seconds the wind was shrieking in the rigging but somehow we were still upright. Feathering the main gave us vital moments to roll the genoa.

Without the genoa we had better control and *Surprise* leapt onto a furious plane on the flat sea. The usual sedate clicking of the log became a demented castanet chattering in the darkness. We could not see the speedo but it took just 22 minutes to cover the four miles to Lyme. *Surprise* shot round the outer end of the Cobb towards the half-dozen yachts anchored outside the harbour in the sweep of the bay.

The thunderous staccato flogging of the main as we depowered in the squalls brought many inquisitive heads popping out of cabins. It was apparent that we could not sail into the harbour — not only was it packed but in

that weight of wind it would have been far too dangerous to attempt to sail in such a restricted space.

We closed the shore by the bathing beach, gradually finding a lee from the battering wind, and gratefully we anchored safely. That had been quite a day.

The following day, with there being no possibility of making Portland, we rowed into the harbour, berthed alongside the wall and enjoyed a rest day in Lyme renewing acquaintances. After an early dinner we paddled out again and picked up a mooring to be ready for an early start to the Bill.

06:00 and almost calm. We carried the spinnaker for a mile from Lyme at the magnificent rate of one knot. 25 miles to Portland! So we rowed: we rowed past Golden Cap, we rowed past Seatown and we rowed abeam of Bridport. Finally we waited for the calm to break. We waited a week.

The wait produced a Force 3 on the nose, instantly doubling the distance to the Bill. We tacked laboriously along Chesil and as the visibility deteriorated the wind notched up, forcing one sail reduction after another. Five miles off, Portland was still completely invisible in the murk. We finally arrived in Chesil Cove under a deep reefed main and working jib. The wind accelerated through the low gap between Portland and the Wyke. The sea was rough, black and threatening.

On each tack shorewards we closed the land with 4 knots forward speed and an ever-increasing lift southwards. Nearer the Bill our speed broadside exceeded our headway by 50%. Just one day away from the biggest springs of the month the stream was not hanging around.

Out of the murk a yacht appeared to the west. It was comforting to know that we would be rounding in company. Our half-mile tacks were reduced to a few hundred yards, then a mere hundred feet as *Surprise* slewed into the rocky shore tacking closer in than any keelboat could ever



risk. The Race was there all right, rearing and foaming 100 yards to seaward, chopped up by the full force of the contrary wind. The inshore passage plunged undulating and furrowed eastwards and we swept along. The log showed three knots but our speed over the ground was close to eight.

But the inshore passage has its disadvantages. The wind baffles and lifts unpredictably over the land and northwards; by Grove we almost lost way altogether and we were lucky to make Castle Cove by dusk. Then the easterly returned and it was a rough night.

Almost any other anchorage would be more comfortable than Castle Cove in an easterly Force 6. Lulworth seemed a possibility and so, the following day, with deep-reefed main and spitfire jib we gained ground to windward in the comparative shelter of Portland Harbour. But outside it was rough. Too rough to trapeze safely. It was a slaughtering sail and as we closed the Lulworth shore we realised to our horror that the waves and the wind were bending to remove the last vestiges of a safe lee, and the vital shelter we so desperately needed in the Cove would be highly suspect.

We quickly decided that the lure of Weymouth, six miles downwind, was greater than the attraction of a free anchorage two miles upwind. In that decision

we were not alone: dozens of yachts converged on Weymouth, two at least blowing out sails on a dead run. We approached the harbour at nearly nine knots, rough riding the massive waves in an exhilarating plane.

The unsecured trots swung 10 or 12 deep and grew by the minute. Not relishing the prospect of being tail-end Charlie on one of these perilously swaying rafts we opted for the smallest trot visible, on the railway quay side and outboard of two yachts secured alongside *The Malcolm Miller*. We soon discovered why this was only two boats deep: the *Miller* was reputedly due to sail at 04:00 next morning. Accepting that threat as a marginally better option than the trot sandwiches in the Cove we came alongside. Almost before we were secured steaming mugs of tea were passed down from the *Cobra*. 10:50.

Some yachtsmen do not welcome a centreboard dinghy alongside but sometimes there are significant advantages — a trot is unlikely to grow outboard of a smallish dinghy, as most incoming yachts have enough berthing problems without the additional hassles of shifting already moored boats. One yacht only, of the scores that ran thankfully if unwillingly into Weymouth that day, moved *Surprise* outboard of her.

The owner of this particular yacht introduced himself. He lives

at Castle Cove and had watched *Surprise* buck and snatch on our rough overnight mooring there. He now recognised *Surprise* and once again we found ourselves explaining the passage ... the outcome was an offer to make use of a mooring in Castle Cove if the strong easterly continued so we could leave *Surprise* in safety rather than against the quay.

The easterlies continued unabated and many well-found yachts jibbed at the prospect of a Bank Holiday slog back to Poole and the Solent. On Tuesday morning we accepted a pluck down the harbour into the teeth of the easterly and quickly completed the shortest sail of the whole passage to the mooring in Castle Cove.

For the first time on the long cruise we omitted to inform the Coastguard of our passage plan — just a mile and a half round to Castle Cove. That omission had repercussions later.

We were back in London by 20:00 and the phone was ringing as we walked in. *Surprise* had been expected back in the Solent: where were we? The Portland Coastguard would like to know. They knew we had left Weymouth (another yacht had overheard radio conversations and had reported our departure) but where to? With more than a shade of embarrassment we telephoned Portland and received a well deserved admonishment for failing to tell someone what we were doing. Lesson learnt.

After an impatient fortnight in London waiting for a favourable wind we returned to Weymouth and finally, on September 12th, left Castle Cove for the long delayed leg to Studland. This short but fast run gave us the best average speed of the whole cruise and the Studland sunset was spectacular; suddenly it seemed a shame that we were nearly home.

On September 13th we tore off in an ever-increasing westerly on course to North Channel. Without the slightest hesitation *Surprise* reached 8.5 knots. Running dead downwind in exhilarating

conditions of continuous planing we scarcely noticed how both the wave height and the wind were increasing in the open water of Christchurch Bay. Soon we were approaching 10 knots on the downward wave faces and then for minutes at a time the speedo went off the clock. We had at least achieved one ambition, but there was the immediate problem of curbing this runaway boat before we executed a spectacular capsize. A continuous dull shriek from the wind emphasised the urgency and heightened the alarm as we planned the vital manoeuvre. Very carefully Janet edged forward to furl the genoa; when that was safely achieved *Surprise* was cautiously eased away from a dead run. We nursed her diagonally across the wave crests and gradually luffed as Janet clawed down the mainsail. Quite suddenly it was peaceful again and *Surprise* bobbed buoyantly to the waves, forereaching under perfect

control, the drive from the bare spar giving sufficient power for complete steerage. Our relief was immense. We had just learnt how difficult it is to shorten and stow sails in survival conditions and had been reminded again just how dangerous it is to carry too much sail downwind.

Turning square downwind with complete confidence we lashed in the mainsail and boom while running at nearly 4 knots under bare pole and the unreefed red ensign. Now relaxed, we lunched and then, feeling bolder, unfurled the genoa: the speedo needle shot up to 9.5 knots. More squalls swept across the Bay and we decided to set the storm trysail. Carried aboard for the whole passage it was now to earn its keep.

Bright red and loose-footed it was hoisted for its first serious appearance. With the genoa furled we could once again face the blackening squalls with confidence — if the wind notched up well

above Force 7 we still had bare poles in reserve.

Hugging the Hurst shore to pick up a favourable eddy through the Narrows we finally entered The Solent in the glassy slick of a fast tide and rounded up towards Keyhaven to hoist the mainsail again. In the smoother water *Surprise* ran easily at 8 knots.

By the greatest good fortune half-a-dozen fellow sailing club members were still around when we picked up our mooring at Lee-on-the-Solent at 17:30. Within half an hour willing hands had emptied *Surprise* of all the cruising gear and we dragged her on her trolley up the steep slip to the safety of the dinghy park. The 17:50 forecast predicted southwesterly Gale 8 to Severe Gale 9. We had just made it: our guardian angels at the Needles were equally relieved to hear that we were back safely — to say nothing of our respective mothers.

RD

Roy Downes tells the story of how National 18 No.303 came into being — in 1972-3 (Condensed from a longer article.)

I first met National 18s while I was a student struggling to keep an aged Merlin together (and upright). In those days we used to race level with the Eighteens, as Merlins and 18s shared the same Portsmouth Yardstick (91), but it's hard for a 14-footer to match the windward ability of an 18-footer. While we sweated and strained every muscle to get to the weather mark, the Eighteens just powered upwind and, once round, tore away. I kept falling over in any sort of wind (25ft mast and 4ft 6ins beam). The ultimate irony, as I clung to my upturned hull after one of my frequent and spectacular high-speed capsizes, was to be offered a cup of *freshly-brewed* tea from a solicitously attendant Eighteen. They weren't even wearing oilskins.

The Eighteens always arrived first. Then they disgorged whole families, dogs, cooking appliances and dry clothes for the 'small dinghy' sailors still to arrive. They could be sailed single-handed or with up to six on board, did not appear to fall over the moment the anemometer registered Force 5, and looked nice into the bargain.

The new Proctor-designed glass fibre composite boats — glass hulls with wooden decks — were introduced to stimulate interest in the class as the skyrocketing price of the traditional Uffa Fox ACE wooden clinker boats had slowed the growth of the class in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I liked what I saw: a big, stable, beamy boat with lots of room, lightweight alloy plates now down to 60lbs, a powerful rig and the promise of reduced maintenance and a more or less one-design hull. Within a month I had

joined the other enthusiasts at Tamesis and ordered a hull from the moulders. Price of a bare shell with bow and stern bulkhead and centreplate case — just £168 then. I specified a clear glass hull (no pigment) to ensure a first-class moulding, which I got.

Building *Surprise* then started in the boatshed at Tamesis, my work being supervised every Sunday by the knowledgeable and skilled members fresh from the bar at about 14:00hrs. Cocooned in a polythene tent, with a blow heater to cure the resin and glue, *Surprise* grew more like a boat, despite my spectators. As with any amateur builder, I was concerned with ensuring suitable strength throughout the construction, and the crucial weighing-in ceremony (administered by class President and Measurer, Murray Vines, that doyen of the 18 class) declared 630 lbs. Gulp! 80 lb overweight! (I subsequently removed 68 lb of this and I was prepared to concede the odd 12 lb, secure in the knowledge that *Surprise* would stay together through whatever weather I could take her).

There are, of course, those polythene-wrapped individuals, with their sanitized minds, who will say that no small boat is safe for cruising, and to sail at night — horrors, there ought to be a law against it. Thank heavens there isn't: with good preparation and a well-found boat, sound seamanship, careful passage planning, and a reasonable share of good luck, dinghy cruising is safe —and the most absorbing and rewarding recreation I know of. RD