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An East Coast escape

A sudden engine failure at the worst possible moment called for some quick thinking, as Peter Dance recalls

For no apparent reason, the engine stopped. It didn't cough or splutter: it just stopped. With such a strong tide against us the boat didn't carry any way, and we were instantly swept out of the channel. The day had started so well...

My three children had all grown up on or around boats: my two sons had only a passing interest in sailing, and certainly none of the passion of their father. I had been a Yachtmaster instructor for over 25 years and an Ocean instructor for seven years, and felt I was destined to leave this world

without passing on the little knowledge I had acquired. However, ever since she was six months old, my daughter Kelly has accompanied me on many voyages, both locally and afar. Forty years later, after marriage, the birth of her son and a divorce, she finally decided that she wanted to learn a little more about the art of sailing.

I am a great fan of the RYA Cruising scheme and, although not perfect (nothing ever is in sailing), I had learnt and taught techniques in a week that had taken both myself and, I suspect, many others, years to acquire. I considered, therefore, that the

RYA Day Skipper syllabus was an ideal starting point. So it was that we found ourselves one cold but bright April day, on a mooring just off Pin Mill in Suffolk. Kelly had just finalised her passage plan for an entrance to the Walton Backwaters, with the intention of visiting Titchmarsh Marina for the night.

Pre-set reefs

Several years earlier, she had completed a Day Skipper theory course so was well up to the task, albeit a little rusty. Kelly obtained an inshore weather forecast that indicated a westerly Force 4-5. Once she had given the command, the crew (myself, my wife and our 10-year-old grandson) hoisted the mainsail, complete with two pre-set reefs.

On her command, we let go the mooring, backed the heavily-reefed genoa, bore away from the mooring and sped down the magnificent River Orwell towards its confluence with the

River Stour, then on to the Harwich harbour entrance. Broad-reaching most of the way, the tide was now ebbing: but Kelly, using the almanac's tidal

graph, had already calculated that with a suitable margin for error we were ok to pass the relatively shallow entrance of the Walton channel up until 3.30pm.

Kelly's pilotage plan for exiting Harwich harbour required us to initially find the south cardinal buoy off Shotley Spit and then the more important east cardinal off Harwich Shelf. Although it wasn't indicated on the chart, I knew that the Harwich Shelf cardinal would be much harder to spot as it's only a miniature compared to the Shotley Spit buoy, but Kelly found it easily, mainly as a result of us broaching. Induced by a sudden gust blowing out of the River Stour, the boat took itself to windward and the intended buoy presented itself directly on our bow.

Once we had discussed the merits of skippingper the boat from the cockpit rather than navigating the chart table, thus avoiding a



EVERITT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born in London but brought up on the East Coast, Peter Dance (68) has sailed much of Northern and Southern Europe, the Caribbean and the Atlantic. He has been a RYA Yachtmaster Offshore instructor for 25 years and a RYA Yachtmaster Ocean instructor for seven years. Peter is also a RYA instructor for VHF, Diesel Engines, First Aid and Radar.

broach, Kelly's next task was to spot what many consider the starting point for entry into the Walton channel, the red and white safe water marker buoy 'Pye End'. Difficult to spot from Harwich or indeed from sea, it requires a compass course to steer, which Kelly had again calculated and which we then followed. As if by magic, some moments later a buoy appeared on our bows, and I indicated to Kelly that as this was an important marker for a substantial course alteration, it was absolutely essential that we didn't accept it as the Pye End buoy, just because it seemed to be where that buoy should be. We needed to positively identify it, which she duly did.

Now close-hauled, we tacked down the channel past the No2 red can buoy, past the No3 green 'Crab Knoll' and so on until we had sight of the 'Island Point' north cardinal buoy which marked the entrance to the 'twizzle' and our route to Titchmarsh Marina. By now it was 2pm and the tide was ebbing strongly. It was clear that tacking through the twists and turns of a narrow entrance against a fiercely ebbing tide into a strong westerly wind was not going to happen, so on went the engine and down came the sails. With the 'what if' mantra firmly fixed in my mind, I was pleased to see that Kelly had just furled the sails and not completely put them away.

The area of most concern was the very narrow twisting channel from the north cardinal 'Island Point' to the green No11 channel buoy. I knew from experience that the skipper needed to keep her wits about her as the trillions of gallons emptying out of the Walton Backwaters had a habit of washing the unsuspecting sideways out of the channel's deep water. There's no room for error here.

As if ordained by Sod's Law, at the very worst point – between the red No12 buoy and the green No9 buoy – the impossible happened. For no apparent reason, the engine stopped. With such a strong tide against us the boat didn't carry any way, and we were instantly swept out of the channel onto the Pye Sands.

In those first few seconds of inner panic I knew this was beyond a Day Skipper's brief, and I gently took control. At this point, I remember a number of things going through my mind, firstly and least importantly: 'How long are we going to be stuck here when the inevitable grounding occurs?' Secondly, 'should my first job be to deploy the anchor and avoid us drifting further onto the sands?' And finally, 'As we haven't actually grounded yet, should I tempt fate and try and sail out of trouble?'

In the nanoseconds that followed, for whatever reason – I assume instinct – I took the more improbable third option.

Desired effect

The bows had been blown downwind so the mainsail was out of the question. I quickly paid out half of the furling genoa's reefing line and asked Kelly to sheet in on the windward side, which she did without question. This had the desired effect of backing the genoa, forcing the yacht to gybe; and once gybed, the half-furled genoa began pulling. We slowly gathered speed and the ability to steer. Going northwards, the echo sounder – which is set to go aground at zero – was beeping madly whilst displaying 0.1m. This quickly dropped to zero, but with a little heel we slid into the deeper water of the channel that we had sailed along not 10 minutes earlier.

We had narrowly avoided a very long wait, but we weren't out of



trouble yet. Kelly took the helm and, on genoa only, sailed us onto a close reach. I went forward and readied the anchor. Once we were just outside the gently shelving northern part of the channel we luffed slightly and let go the anchor in 4m of water. As I wanted the anchor to bite first time, we let go with 20m of chain. Furling the genoa once again, we came to rest with the tide sluicing past the chain. We could now relax, take stock, brew a cup of tea and formulate plan B.

Leaking badly

Upon checking the engine, we could see that the bilge was full of diesel. We mopped it out into plastic containers for later disposal and tried to start the engine. It was immediately apparent that the fuel lift pump was leaking badly, and this was the source of our problems. Calling for help was completely out of the question. I would never live it down and we were after all a sailing vessel, designed to be sailed.

If we tacked back, we could go right and anchor in the Walton Backwaters for the night, but that wouldn't solve the engine problem – and how would we be able to obtain spares in such a

remote spot? It wasn't physically possible to sail up to Titchmarsh Marina until the tide turned, and by then it would be getting dark. We decided we would have to sail back the way we had come and that the nearest refuge, where spares would be available, would be Shotley Marina.

For those that know Shotley Marina, its entrance is a narrow channel that leads to a lock. Sailing back to the Orwell/Stour entrance wouldn't be a problem. It would be a broad reach to Harwich Harbour entrance then a beam reach to the Stour. It would mean tacking against the tide up the Stour until we were able to make the Shotley Marina channel, but the river is quite wide at that point and we felt that we could do it in about 6 or 7 tacks. We would need to be sharp though, as the tide wouldn't take prisoners. If we flunked a tack, we would be swept back downriver in the blink of an eye.

We weren't able to delay our departure as our tidal window would close at about 3.30pm, and it was now 3pm. Our first job was to break out the securely set anchor, without an engine. I explained to Kelly that we would hoist the reefed mainsail and that I would want her on the helm



Boats entering Shotley Lock

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tacking backwards and forwards as the chain tightened. I would then bring in the slack chain in the middle of each tack until we sailed the anchor out of its holding ground. The manoeuvre went well and gave us all a much-needed confidence boost.

The tricky bit

Under different circumstances it would have been a pleasant and uneventful sail back to the River Stour. Once in the Stour, our tacking was good but interrupted by two very large, redundant light ships moored in the river entrance. Eventually, though, we made the Shotley Marina channel entrance and the beginning of the tricky bit.

We called the marina and told them of our circumstances. They asked if we needed assistance, which we declined other than to ask them to station a man on the lock wall who could take our stern line to slow our progress once we entered the lock. As there was no reverse, we didn't want to make contact with the lock gate at the far end.

It was apparent that the sail down the Shotley Marina channel would, mercifully, be a close reach. This meant we could sail

down the channel under reefed main and genoa. Once near enough we could furl the genoa and let go the mainsheet just before entering the lock. With the mainsail flapping, all way would be lost in a relatively short distance. The tide was still running hard: we needed to go fast enough to counter the effects of the tide and leeway, but once in the lock we needed to stop quickly. We could also see that the lock buildings presented a wind shadow at the lock entrance that we needed to sail through, and I knew that if we arrived at the lock gates too soon after they had been opened, the water at the gates would be swirling, and would knock us into the lock wall if we were going too slowly.

The entrance to Shotley Marina benefits from a moiré light that keeps vessels in the middle of the narrow channel and thus in the deepest water; but we didn't want to be in the middle of the channel. With a strong

ebb going from left to right and a strong westerly wind going from left to right, we wanted to be upwind and uptide of the channel. So, to keep ourselves on track, we ignored the moiré light and selected a casual transit using a mast and a background building behind the lock gates.

Again, all went well. To maintain our casual transit, we sailed quickly down the channel with the bows pointing about 30° upwind off the entrance. The wind was still strong, so we were able to furl the genoa well before the entrance: and as we glided into the lock, the mainsheet had been released and the mainsail was dutifully flapping. The lock master on the lock wall accepted our stern line and took off what remained of our forward motion by taking a turn around a bollard and letting it slip.

Once we had locked through, we warped the boat to the waiting pontoon. With brimming confidence, we asked the marina for an allocated berth that we

could sail into, but the staff were reluctant to let their new guests sail in and out of their pontoons, using their residents' very expensive boats as fenders.

In hindsight, probably a wise decision.

In the end, the problem with the engine was identified as a faulty lift pump. An internal valve had parted and punctured the lift pump's diaphragm. After much to-ing and fro-ing with ill-fitting new lift pumps, an overhaul kit was purchased and a permanent repair effected.

As for Kelly? I thought my dreams of perpetuating my hard-won experience had been scuppered, but quite the contrary: she was delighted. Our mini adventure had thrilled her. She said she had learnt more in one day than in all her previous experiences. Needless to say, she went on to pass her Day Skipper practical without incident and with flying colours.

The youngest of our crew, my 10-year-old grandson, was quite perplexed by all the fuss: as far as he was concerned it was just another day out on the boat with grandad.

The manoeuvre gave us all a much-needed confidence boost

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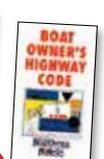
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