

Pipedream's Atlantic Adventure

by

Stewart Willis (1959-63)

My 52 year old 30ft steel Buchanan Brabant yacht, *Pipedream*, has been repaired and modified continually for the 15 years of my ownership, an ongoing project with no end in sight. Tough as old boots with the windward ability of a square rigger, she has a mind of her own when going astern and at 8 tons, the 10 HP engine and 10 gallon fuel tank are only useful for harbour manoeuvring. Her pronounced even exaggerated sheer gives masses of forward reserve buoyancy and the long keel with a transom hung rudder on a sloping transom encourages waves to pass under her. Overall she is a fantastically capable sea boat!



Sailing single handed from the far North West of Scotland, I went down the Minch and into the Atlantic south of Barra Head. My passage then took me down the west coast of Ireland, west of Biscay to Bayona in Northern Spain, and then down the west coast of Portugal before finally turning east to the Algarve. Christmas 2015 and the New Year were spent at anchor at Alvor, between Lagos and Portimao.

My single handed southern North Atlantic trade wind crossing commenced in early January 2016, when I sailed to Las Palmas. Leaving the Canaries in late February, I had a very gentle 31 day crossing to Antigua, St Martin and the British Virgin Islands before making my way to St Augustine in Florida. Although enjoyable, the heat was overwhelming so to escape I sailed north to Boston for the experience and hopefully cooler weather. Unfortunately the heat followed *Pipedream*.

Leaving Boston on 15 August with a favourable forecast and 100 degrees F temperature, I had a fair passage out clear of the outlying islands and shoals. Then the wind died and for the next three days I had only land and sea breezes with very slow progress, followed by a shakedown gale that put me off to the south once past Cape Cod.

I had decided not to head for the Azores but to take the northern great circle route so as to avoid hurricane alley at the height of the hurricane season. Also with the great circle route, which is 500 NM shorter; I would avoid the risk of being becalmed in the Azores high on the approach to the English Channel. However the wind went round on to the nose, so I tacked 700 Nm out to the east of Nova Scotia before getting a fair wind past Newfoundland and to the east of the Grand Banks.



I was already days late when on 27th August, (passage day 13), a gale blew up from the west pushing me along at excellent speed. At 0730 hours the following morning I was watching 20ft waves with breaking crests approaching from the port quarter and overtaking me when the boat pitched forward and a breaking wave hit the exposed rudder. Suddenly there was an explosive sound like a 12 bore going off and the tiller broke at the rudder head!

The 1979 Fastnet Race disaster report had identified that when a yacht gets her lee deck edge under in heavy seas she will be tripped and roll right over. So I battened down and waited with the rudder slamming. After a while I recognised that this was not going to happen and went out with a club hammer and a piece of iron bar and managed to drive the broken stub of tiller two inches into the rudder head. This was sufficient to allow me to whittle down the remains of the tiller sufficiently to drive it into the rudder head and regain control, no matter that it was very fragile.



Using the cooker had now become impossible as it was swinging on its gimbals and hitting the end stops so there was to be no hot food from here on until the storm abated.

I thought someone should know that I was having problems but not in distress so I sent a text message via my Iridium Go to a yachting friend in Peterhead who knew I would not over-react. I asked him to contact the Coastguard in Falmouth who would get in touch with the Canadian Coastguard. I then got a call from Falmouth to whom I explained the problem and thankfully, about half an hour later, got a call from Halifax Nova Scotia. I explained that I was not in distress at this time but was disabled some 300Nm east of Newfoundland. We set up a 4 hour reporting schedule.

My next problem was to turn the boat round. I needed to avoid exposing the rudder to breaking seas which were now almost continuous across the horizon. I realised that if I could begin to make the turn downwind of a gap in the breakers, I would be able to work with twice the wavelength. I eventually plucked up the courage to try to gybe her round in one of these gaps and did so before dusk using only the Aries vane steering because the tiller was too short to get hold of. Not a manoeuvre for the faint hearted!

I had not anticipated going anywhere near Newfoundland and therefore had no charts, either paper or electronic, of the area into which I was sailing. However, using a chart of the 'Western Approaches to the English Channel to Gibraltar including the Azores', and renumbering the longitude, I put onto it the positions of places that I had in reference books. I then set course for Cape Race, the South Eastern point of Newfoundland and informed Halifax.

Two days of continuous heavy weather later I had managed to get to within 150Nm of Newfoundland when there was a further deterioration of the weather. Waves of between 25ft and 30ft with continuous breaking crests and spray had reduced visibility to about half a mile. I estimated the gale at the upper end of Force 9 or the lower end of force 10. My only option was to heave to and sit it out.

I eventually managed to get her sitting reasonably comfortably about 60 degrees to the wind with the tiller secured to leeward by bungee elastic and the deep reefed main slacked off a bit to leeward. *Pipedream* was then nodding along at about half a knot to windward severely heeled and with the lee deck edge permanently under water. In fact the water line was half way up the cabin windows most of the time but fortunately fairly stable.

By mid-afternoon I was picking up 'mayday' calls all round me. At dusk I secured the companionway wash boards with duct tape, sealed myself in and reported to Halifax that I was hove too and not in distress. Breaking waves were now hitting the port bow very hard and with great regularity. The impact of these waves was so violent that I had to put a net around the galley to catch jam pots heading for the electrics on the other side of the boat. The wave height had now increased to over 30ft, but the distance between each crest was now longer.

During the night the glue joints holding the cabin sides together began to fail, letting water in and the windows also began to leak. This was not good news. I could not get to my stock of timber and screws and there was little more that I could do, so I went to bed with an excellent Bernard Cornwell book to divert my mind from the current grim situation.

At 10pm Halifax informed me that the coastguard vessel *Sir William Alexander* was on passage to my position and would be with me in about three hours after transferring survivors from a fishing boat and a yacht to shore. She arrived half a mile away at half past midnight but with the violent sea and darkness there was no question of transferring to her.

By this time the cabin sides had become dis-bonded from the hull and water was seeping in on both sides. I had my work cut out to keep the electrics dry so that I could maintain contact with *Sir William Alexander* and keep the navigation instruments and lights working. At about 0400 the wind began to drop and I made *Sir William Alexander* aware that I had no charts, either paper or electronic, of Newfoundland. They kindly agreed to put together an information pack and gave me waypoints for entry into St Johns (NE) and to Trepassey (SW) which they would transfer by fast rescue craft when the weather abated sufficiently. Having had no chance to bake for four days, I cheekily asked if they could spare a loaf of bread. We also discussed the weather forecast. The wind was now from the NW meaning that I could not make St Johns but it was due to back to W and then SW. Checking with my sailing friend Brian in Peterhead, he confirmed my forecast.

By 0530 hours I was under way and doing 4 knots headed NE out to sea. At 1000 hours the *Sir William Alexander's* fast rescue boat came alongside and handed over photocopies of the paper charts and two loaves of bread. I was now only 50NM from St Johns, the wind was beginning to back and my course was North and curving round toward St Johns. This impressed the navigators on the *Sir William Alexander* who had thought I was slightly deranged and had questioned my decision to make for St Johns. She stayed with me for a further 3 hours which I most appreciated before leaving *Pipedream* and heading back to port in St Johns.

At midnight on 1 September, 18 days out of Boston, the wind died to nothing and I lost steering control. Trying to motor in to St Johns I kept falling asleep only to be woken by the Coastguard radio as they saw me veer off course. With my Class B AIS, they were able to track my position, course and speed when in VHF range. By 0200 hours I could no longer stay awake and finally requested assistance and was gratefully towed the last 9 miles into St Johns arriving just before noon. Once there I discovered that the mainsail battens had come adrift from the mast slides placing much higher loads on the slides above and below. I have difficulty imagining the nightmare scenario of the situation should they all have failed and let go.

I finally moored up in the southern end of the harbour at a wharf just across the road from a hotel as directed by the Harbour Master. Having made fast I immediately crossed the road and booked into the hotel for a deep bath and a dry bed. I was exhausted.

The following morning I returned to the boat and inspected the port bow. *Pipedream* looked as though I had starved the poor girl. Her ribs are all showing through and she had been dented by the waves.

It is now too late in the season to safely cross the Atlantic so I have decided to take *Pipedream* out of the water for the winter and return in the late spring to make the crossing to the Azores via Nantucket.

I feel extremely grateful that my 52 year boat, with its jury rigged tiller and failing main sail rig, has survived such a severe gale whilst other vessels foundered. A couple of days after arriving and having caught up on my sleep, I went to the *Sir William Alexander* where they showed me the records of wind speed and wave height as they stood by *Pipedream*.



95 knots (110mph) and wave heights of 45 feet! (Beaufort Scale Force 12+)

And that, thanks to the remarkable cooperation and co-ordination between the British and Canadian Coastguard who are the true heroes of this tale, is how I came to be in Newfoundland.

On returning to the UK I visited Falmouth where I took the opportunity to visit the Coastguard to thank them for their support. On my boat in the middle of that horrendous storm, my perception was of a room manned full of calm, highly experienced people analysing my situation and surrounded by all the latest technology, monitors and wall charts. Yes, the room with all the equipment was there but with just one lonely Coastguard!

I hope this provides cruising members of the OWYC some entertainment and contemplation whilst they plan for their 2017 cruising whilst sitting around the security of their winter fireside.