

# Yachtmaster log

or

## 4 days in Glenarm



*This being the recollections of a Yachtmaster practical preparatory course and the ensuing exam. All events taking place on the sailing vessel Scallywag along the Northeast coast of Ireland, during the late spring of 2013.*

I always wanted to be a sailor when I grow up and the Yachtmaster qualification was a longstanding milestone en route to this ambition. Apart from a desire to pick up another professional qualification, I believe this obsession was rooted in a late entry to sailing. Growing up in land-locked Tyrone was not conducive to a life on the ocean wave. Hence I have an underlying need to prove I can go to sea and handle a boat like an old sea dog. My cruising experience extends to over 25 years, with passages around the coasts of Ireland, UK, France, Eastern Mediterranean & Australia. By the end of 2012, I had logged over 7000 sea miles, with 150 night hours and 20 qualifying passages. I had more than enough sea time with extended passages between Ireland and France and across the Tasman Sea. I had had a few experiences on my trips, I had done the theory and had a few practical courses under my belt. I am a big fan of the RYA cruising programme and like a diligent RYA student, I had rounded my sailing experience with some racing pedigree. Another box ticked, I was more than ready to take the pinnacle of yachting standards. No more delaying, it was time to go for it.

Own boat or Prep course? An easy choice really. The benefit of own boat is cost but the downside is getting it into sufficient shape to meet the examiners satisfaction. Not only would that mean correcting charts and getting them up-to-date, but it would also mean fixing all those things that one tends to put off until the next season. Starting out by explaining the quirky way my boat worked wouldn't have been the best of introductions. The next issue was getting crew. The official guide cautions on the use of spouses or close family for such an occasion. A "domestic" spat during a man overboard is not likely to be helpful. Doing a prep week meant the boat would be Yachtmaster ready. The week offered the opportunity to get in shape, iron out a few bad habits and pick up a few tips about getting through. There was also the possibility of doing it with a fellow hopeful and getting necessary crew for the occasion. I duly enquired with Fergus Henderson of Causeway Power & Sail based in Coleraine. I had enjoyed sailing previously with Fergus on the Donegal coast when he had skippered Viking Lord on a training week for the girls. Fergus had a few ideas and arranged for a week at the end of April. He had another Yachtmaster candidate and a Day Skipper candidate who agreed to stay on for the exam as crew. He turned out to be a great asset on the day and certainly wasn't prone to tantrums. My fellow candidate turned out to be a renowned LSYC member and recent circumnavigator John

Harkin (which made my logged miles & night hours pale into insignificance). Off watch, John would regale us with his stories and experiences of life on Derry-Londonderry Clipper.

In the quiet of the sailing season, the winter months were spent brushing up on theory. Colregs were dusted off and many an earnest evening was spent trying to put in mind a system to recall light, sound and symbol patterns. In the end, there was nothing for it but hard learning and repetition. Charts & tables were rolled out to work up imaginary courses to sail, determine ETAs and predict tidal heights. Passage plans for the Inner Hebrides were drawn up and tucked away for future reference. I took Viking Lord onto the Swilly and worked on man overboard drills, steering without tiller and approaches to mooring buoys. I went down below and tried blind navigation between Spit and Flat with reasonable success. I got close enough to Flat and managed to avoid hitting it. I took bearings, transits and even doubled the angle on the bow - for what it was worth. With 2 weeks to go, an email advised that the examiner wanted a passage plan for an unspecified date in May for a 35 foot yacht sailing from Audleys Roads in Strangford to Coleraine. It wasn't one I had stored away but it was familiar territory. Back in the 90's I had kept my Sabre 27, Auvergne, on a mooring with Strangford Sailing Club at Audleys Roads. It was a beautiful spot from where our early cruising adventures across the Irish Sea had begun. I had executed passages through the restless Narrows on many occasions and was familiar with the tidal gates and the best times to leave for points North or South. My chosen passage was a morning departure to catch low water slack at the mouth of Strangford Lough. A couple of hours against the tide would then be followed by 6 hours of North going ebb tide. This would take assist a passage through Donaghadee Sound and make greater use of the stronger currents further north. Somewhat prophetically the preferred overnight stop was Glenarm. A fore taste of what was to come!

I tabulated my sea miles, night hours and qualifying passages and collected the requisite certificates for inspection. Departure day for Prep week arrived. I turned up at Coleraine Marina on a blustery Monday Morning, with head stuffed with muddled knowledge, clean undies and a sense of trepidation. The vessel was Scallywag, a well maintained and very comfortable Bavaria 36. Our prep-master for the week was Kevin Bammer, a seasoned yachtmaster instructor and examiner. Kevin had tons of experience and a patient proficient manner. He was to be a guiding hand throughout the week, tweaking and encouraging. John and myself, as yachtmaster candidates, we were to take turn as skippers. No free ride. Our crew was complemented with David Paul an eager novice, who was keen on developing his cruising skills. Fergus completed a briefing above and below decks before seeing us off. Scallywag was sound, we were well provisioned and the company couldn't be beat. A sailor needs little more than a warm hostelry and a good pint at the end of a passage.

The forecast for the week ahead was unsettled. It was April. West to Northwesterly winds would persist and were not to fall below force 4. Prediction for Friday, exam day, was wind and lots of it.

John got first shot as skipper and the departure from the pontoon berth to break the ice. This was a tricky one. There was a downstream current and a breeze fore of the beam pushing us onto the pontoon. John concluded correctly that tide was king. A spring off by the stern got the bow out. Lines were slipped and we were underway. The second manoeuvre, coming alongside at Seaton Marina

identified some early weaknesses with line & crew handling. A quiet briefing from Kevin and we understood the standard expected. Crew management and communication were under the spotlight.

The wind was building and showed no sign of abating for the rest of the week. It doesn't take much above a Force 4 from Northwest to build up a chop at Barmouth and make it impassable. By early afternoon it was crunch time. Push out of the Bann or spend the rest of the week cruising between Coleraine and the sea. The latter option offered little to the intrepid sailor, so we went for it. We crossed a lively bar with a hefty swell and took the tide east. John and I took turns as skipper, did crew briefings, handovers and kept the log bang up to date. The yachtmaster candidate must always know where he is, so we took bearings, ran transits, converted to true and plotted fixes on the chart. Some of the advantages of cruising the north coast out of peak season are the uncrowded anchorages and easy availability of visitor berths in marina. We pulled into Ballycastle for the evening, dodging the exiting ferry on the way. Fergus's wife, Anne, had provided the evening meal which just needed re-heating and was delicious. The craic in Ballycastle on a dreary Monday in April was reserved but we finished of the evening with a quiet pint in the Bakewell, increasing evening turnover by 100%.

Tuesday morning was an early departure to catch the tide and the opportunity of a few night hours. The wind remained fresh and by mid-morning we had arrived in Glenarm and we weren't going any further. The bay afforded shelter from the Atlantic conditions and we could get on with practicing the requisite manoeuvres. It was time to settle in.

Over the next 3 days we worked on various set pieces – coming alongside and springing off, the good old man overboard, sailing up to a buoy, and blind navigation. We rehearsed Col-Regs and were tested on light & signal recognition. We had a good team thing going and all was jelling nicely. We got to know Scallywag and how she handled. She was a light boat capable of accelerating rapidly when wind was aft the beam, even with tiny scraps of sail. She needed sail reduced early when the wind picked up. Upwind her bow blew to leeward as soon as the way fell below 2knots. It made for tricky close quarter work in the blustery conditions that prevailed.

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Antrim coast from Larne to Portrush remains a place apart. Traditionally it was easier to travel and trade this region by sea than by land. It still retains a remote island character, but one where the influence of modern times is in evidence. Glenarm exists in an uneasy mix between the glory of by-gone times and the economic realities of modern life. Marinas at Glenarm and Ballycastle have opened a window for the cruising sailor into this coastline. Life exists at a slower pace and there is little that cannot wait. The café didn't open for breakfast until after 10, so they were not catering for the professional commuter market. While there is farming, fishing and farming of fish, it is difficult to obtain truly local produce from local shops. The pub culture is in decline as in most rural areas, challenged by cheaper off-sales, television and drink driving enforcement. We visited the two pubs on the corner during our stay. Both were quiet but welcoming and served good pints. On a later trip in May when I was bringing a friends boat from Bangor to Derry, I found myself back in Glenarm on a Saturday evening. We discovered another pub (The Barbican) at the top of the town. It had a late licence and a disco and a good crowd. So crack can be found if you wander a bit further from the tourist route and who knows what I'll discover on the next visit. Eating out was limited in Glenarm,

so we took a taxi one evening to the Londonderry Arms in nearby Carnlough. This quaint hotel retains a period charm harking back to Victorian age of the Marquis of Londonderry himself. Its role in history is secured as the Marquis was active in the Crown diplomatic service during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and boasts Winston Churchill as a previous owner. Supper was most excellent in the bar lounge with the special steak proving an almost unanimous choice. While there was no dining out in Glenarm itself, we discovered that the bar on the corner will permit patrons to have Chinese takeaway delivered and eaten on the premises. It wasn't an option we took up but something for another visit perhaps.

Friday the day of the practical arrived and we ate the subdued breakfast of condemned men in the café (when it eventually opened). I have sat many an exam & interview but have never come to relish the acrid taste of impending doom. Still chin up and time to get on with it. We tidied the boat and made preparations for the arrival of the examiner. There is a sense of joining a club or guild associated with the Yachtmaster qualification. As part of this good hospitality and victualing are essential. The practical takes a minimum of 8 hours, so lunch and dinner must be considered. Fergus arrived with some more fine examples of Anne's cooking. Lunch and dinner simply needed reheated and instructions of just how much heat and for how long were supplied. Yet another reason for taking a prep course.

Our examiner, Tony Weston arrived and we tucked into lunch. Tony was jovial and reassuring – he didn't do surprises. Lunch was a chance to break the ice, discuss cruising experience and to smell the fear! With the examiner fed and watered it was down to briefings before departure. John got above decks and I stumbled through below decks. On your own boat you will know where everything is and how it works but not on someone else's. It pays to pay attention at the start of week briefing. Briefing completed it was time to suit up and head out into a near gale. The wind, as predicted and bang on time had freshened to a Force 7. It was still dry but it had also swung into the Northeast. That presented 2 immediate problems- getting off the berth and then getting out of the marina.

I got first shout at skipper and the task of taking Scallywag out of her berth. However things had changed. We had practiced during the week with moderate to fresh winds from West to Northwest. Now we were pointing west with berth on starboard side and wind tanking in from Northeast onto the starboard aft quarter. Careful preparation and good team work were going to be needed for a successful departure. My thoughts were on the many departures that had gone awry when a single line had been overlooked or snagged on slipping. It could all be over very quickly. But the team had bonded and we got our lines ready. RYA textbook would say spring off by the bow but that risked the stern blowing away and into adjacent berth before control speed in astern could be achieved. Plan A was engage astern and see if she would hold position as the midships stern spring was eased. Balance was achieved. Crew then slipped bow and stern lines together allowing the boat to remain parallel to the pontoon as she exited. With the aft end of the pontoon amidships, a little nudge of the wheel to starboard had the stern seeking the wind and we were underway and making way. One of my better exits. No domestic incident and a big relief.

Not for long. Next request was to put her back in again! Instructions were to berth her on the opposite arm of pontoon facing into wind. I could choose which side to lie alongside. Pontoon to lee

offered the easiest manoeuvre but would be a bxxgxr to get off again. So I went for pontoon to windward. To get close enough to allow crew to step off (jumping was not encouraged) was going to take attitude. Keep nose up with power and way on until near certain collision with pontoon, then ease off and allow wind to blow nose off while crew secure lines. Again the plan came together and I got a breather.

A few more manoeuvres in the marina and then it was time to put to sea. I was back on the helm. The wind blowing directly down the North Channel had worked up an unhealthy looking swell at the marina entrance. This we knew to be rather shallow. We hadn't touched the bottom all week but at low water we had recorded zero metres on depth sounder. There was in fact a dredger working on the bar that very day. A little parrot on my shoulder commented that it was ultimately the skippers decision to put to sea! This was a judgement call and not to be taken lightly. Decision made to proceed. Harnesses were issued, the anchor retaining bolt was removed and the lower washboard in the companionway was inserted. Seamanlike preparations perhaps but in this instance they were more driven by necessity than a need to make it look good. I anticipated the cockpit was going to get wet.

We punched through under power and made our way to the north end of the bay where shelter looked a more realistic possibility. We unrolled a postage stamp of a mainsail and an equal measure of genoa. We actually managed a bit of upwind performance with this sail plan. However the wind was building and we got hit by a powerful gust. The boat heeled and rounded violently to windward. Sheets were let go and sails flapped wildly as we struggled to regain control. At the helm, I called for a heave-to and pushed the helm over. Hove-to we had space to get sails in and regain stability. Tony came on deck and assessed options. We had limited ability to sail and conditions were not set to subside for the rest of the day. He saw little chance of carrying out the required set pieces and there was nowhere else to go. With tide falling, Larne with its shallows was not a suitable alternative. It was decided there was little we could do in the circumstances but return to Glenarm and try another day.

The return posed a bigger problem. We were past the half tide and it was falling. Dredging operations at the entrance had been largely ineffective and the swell at the entrance looked worse than when we had left. The wind behind us was producing 6kn boat speed without much engine assistance. I tried to reduce speed by slewing the boat in wide arcs to port and starboard but depth at the entrance was playing on my mind. The parrot on my shoulder spoke again – “it is the skippers decision on whether to go to sea”. Driving the keel hard onto a shallow bar didn't seem like the best way to finish off a Yachtmaster assessment. Another re-evaluation was required. There was no point in attempting entrance until after half the flood. So it was back out to sea to see what we could do.

We turned about and pointed back to the North end of the bay. We put together a sail plan with tiny scraps of main and jib. We could race off downwind at over 6 knots and even managed a credible upwind performance with this layout. Over the next few hours we sailed up to buoys, practiced man overboard drills, answered questions on crew management, meteorology, collision avoidance and light & signal recognition and even managed to keep up the log. True to his word, tony never dropped any surprises and provided reassuring feedback amongst the maelstrom.

The final rite was anchoring for dinner. Dinner was not an option- it was obligatory. In the darkening day, we approached the Carnlough shore and dropped anchor in 5 metres. It was shortly after low water. Instructions on how to avoid ruining dinner were quite precise. Warm Thai curry gently but do not boil and immerse egg noodles in boiling water for 2 minutes but no longer. Never mind the near gale! Anchor was duly dropped with plenty of chain and it held. In the blustery conditions the Bavaria swept from side to side in wide arcs of nearly 180°. Resolute sailors, we sat down to the evening meal. Jackets and ties were not insisted upon for this occasion. Dinner, by Anne, was once again delicious. The occasion was interrupted by a loud metallic rolling noise from the bow. We deduced that the anchor windlass had slipped and that the anchor chain was free flowing out of the locker. John and I excused ourselves from the table to attend to the anchor chain. We managed to get a boot to the chain and arrest its flow before it reached the bitter end. Anchor secured once more, we returned to the dining table. Dinner was completed in a most convivial manner anchored off the windy shore of Carnlough. Tony offered re-assuring words on our progress so far and we laughed about sailing, medicine and the world in general. A bizarre and perhaps baffling occasion for a meal but it did instil a sense of belonging to a rather erudite club.

Around 21:00 with a sufficient rise of tide, we weighed anchor and set sail in darkness for Glenarm. The marina entrance remained lumpy but we got across without touching bottom and found a convenient berth to tie alongside. Tony debriefed and John and I departed quite proud of ourselves. I said earlier there was a sense of being permitted entrance to an exclusive club. Indeed the examiner could not issue a Yachtmaster certificate, he could only recommend to the RYA that the qualification be awarded. The Board would then decide to confer the award and admit.

It had been a good trip in great company with a satisfying end. Perhaps it is the presence of a marina on a convenient section of tidal coast but Glenarm seems to keep calling me back. It has a quiet rural charm in a spectacular setting. While 4 days is a bit of a stretch, there may be a few more new nooks and crannies to explore on subsequent visits. I am a bit of a fan of the RYA cruising training scheme and would encourage anyone venturing to sea to log their trips and try out their training courses. In the end I feel rather chuffed after a spectacular day's sailing.



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