# JESTER

I received a few quid in 2018, no fortune by any means, but since it was the first bit of my Dad’s inheritance money, it was important to me to do something with it that I would continually remember him by. Linda and I discussed it, and she laughed when I said I was going to buy a motorbike. I’m convinced that her reasoning was influenced by our friendship with Garry and Marie. Let’s face it, I don’t think the two girls really wanted to be out and about with two guys with less limbs than we possessed at that time. I found it hard to convince Linda that I was very sensible and would be very safe on a bike. “No” she said “ I’ve seen you two eejits blowing up tyres with petrol…..feck knows what ye’s would get up to with a bloody motorbike !” So a bike was ruled out (for the meantime).

I meekly suggested that a boat would be a good idea, and was surprised that she didn’t seem to mind that too much. I know that in her head she was thinking “ sure that’s OK, it’ll only be a wee boat, and he’ll mess about in the Swilly in it. It’ll be grand” And grand it turned out to be !

I badgered Garry in to looking at wee boats, and we had some great days out travelling around looking at boats. Eventually, we ended up in Carrickfergus to see a Sadler 25. It looked good. Obviously it had not got a lot of use for a while, but everything was usable, and a deal was done. Shortly after I bought Penwood, Garry planted the seed in the back of my head. “ That would be a great boat to do the Jester challenge in” he said. “What the f\*\*k is the Jester challenge ?” I replied. He smiled and told me to google it, but assured me that Penwood was the boat to complete the task. We were soon restricted in everything we did by the dreaded Covid 19 virus. I had mentioned the Jester Challenge to Linda of course, but what with the virus etc, she reckoned that if she let me rattle on about it, I’d forget about it by the time it would take place. Did I have any doubts about my abilities myself ? Bloody right I did ! There’s a big difference in doing any trip with other people and doing it alone. I went through every scenario in my head and came to the same conclusion every time…..I’m a crap sailor, I’ll end up drowned !

Eventually, after a few small trips on my own, I realised how exhilarating it was to cast off on your own, and end up safely in another harbour or marina. I still hadn’t done much solo night sailing, and that would be a big hurdle to overcome. While writing this I nearly wrote soiling instead of sailing. A few times in the following months I would come to realise how close these two words could be! I did some sailing and soiling intermittently…..but I learned an awful lot about the boat and about me. When you’re on your own there’s no one else to blame, or help, so you either sort the problem out and get on with it or give up. I spent a lot of time just messing about on the boat and got to know nearly every inch of her. There was always something to be done, but eventually in 2022, I decided to put my name down for the Jester Baltimore Challenge 2023. (Plenty of time to pull out if I wanted) And so began the preparations for a brand new experience. Garry reassured me on numerous occasions, and to be honest, I probably wouldn’t have even considered it only for him. It’s easy to build someone's confidence up, but it’s another thing doing that and being able to point out weaknesses in their skills. Thankfully, Garry can be honest with me, and tell me how crap I was at certain things . I didn’t huff that much really !

I began to feel part of the Jester family as soon as the emails started to arrive. There was an immediate feeling of being part of an unusual group. I was reminded of Jim Hughes telling me, just before he left Darren Robb and I on Stoney B in Sligo, in the driving rain at about three in the morning, after coming through a blow in Donegal bay, touching bottom on a dropping tide as we came up river, with his bag below his arm “ F\*\*\* this, this is a pastime for lunatics “ Maybe he was right, you do need a wee streak of madness. There were so many like-minded sailors, all a lot more experienced than I. Could I be as good as these guys ? There was only one way to find out.

They say getting to the start line is the hardest part, and I can confirm that that is true. After months, years , of planning, it’s finally time to leave the Foyle and make my way to Phwelli in Wales.

It wasn’t that hard to convince Garry to accompany me from the Foyle to Carrickfergus. Friday 9th June we spent a lovely evening in Greencastle before heading over to Rathlin on the Saturday. We were accompanied for a few hours with a pod of dolphins, huge dolphins ! Garry said they were the size of cows. I don’t think I’ve ever seen dolphins this big anywhere. A special day.

We arrived in Church Bay at 16.00 and had a chat with Stewart Geddes about the possibility of getting sailability going on the island. We booked a table in the Manor house hotel for dinner. After an excellent meal, we somehow ended up in McCaigs bar for a couple of Guinness and enjoyed a reasonably quiet Saturday evening.

On Sunday morning at 11.00am we set off for Carrickfergus. The weather was very kind to us and we had a lovely sail the whole way along the coast. The Lillies of the Lough passed us as they were starting their circumnavigation of Ireland. We waved them on their way and it felt good to see the club so well represented out on the sea. Arrived Carrickfergus at 19.30, hungry and looking forward to a nice meal in the Windrose. On entering at 20.05, we were promptly shown the door ! Kitchen is closed, goodbye. Thank god for Mickey D’s. We spent an hour or two trying to fix a couple of leaks. Gave up and decided I’d just have to live with them for another bit. ( Still on the to do list ). And so, it was back home for a few good nights sleep before setting off on the Jester challenge.

On Wednesday 14th of June, Garry drove me back to Carrickfergus. I’d arranged to meet an old school pal of mine for a couple of pints in the sailing club. Ian had a terrible leg break many years ago, but amazingly he lived a very active life despite a bit of a limp. Unfortunately, in recent months he had some issues which resulted in the loss of his leg from the knee down. You’re probably wondering why I am mentioning this, but it’s important, because I had quite a few fears about what I was setting out to do. Yet here I was having a couple of pints and a great bit of craic with two guys who had a lot more to cope with in life than most of us. Despite their troubles, they got on with it, made the best of things, and seemed even more determined to enjoy life every day. I went to sleep aboard Penwood in good form, and also determined to finish.

I set off early on Thursday at 04.45 in fine weather. Inside the Copeland Islands I passed a French yacht heading north. It was a lumpy passage there and for a few hours into the late morning. If it had stayed like that it would have been a quite unpleasant trip, but thankfully, by noon and onwards that evening and night, the Irish Sea remained very calm. Not great for sailing but for a trip to the starting point, it would do me. I spotted Holyhead light at 22.00 as I kept an eye on the many ferries passing to and fro. The sun rose on Friday at 05.15 on Bardsey Island as I passed through into Cardigan Bay. It was a beautiful morning and I came across a few dolphins. I took a few photos, but as happens on many occasions, missed the best. As I was watching them from the coachroof, two large fish jumped in the air followed by the dolphins. Shit timing again !

After phoning the marina in Pwhelli and being advised to wait until after 17.00, I dropped the hook at the river mouth at 12.30. Later, at 17.36, I was tied up safely in Harfan Pwhelli marina. Most of the other Jesters had already arrived and were tied up nearer the clubhouse. I walked in to town and had a burger and chips washed down with a pint and went to bed early. I had a lazy wander around Phwelli on Saturday morning. A pleasant place and I was intrigued by the common use of the Welsh language. The Jester group met for a meal in the Clubhouse and exchanged stories and advice.

 We were also asked to sign the “blood chit” ! It is a simple note saying that you are taking part of your own accord and taking full responsibility for it yourself. There are no fees for taking part and no prizes. The Jester Challenge is described as a modern experiment in old-fashioned self-reliance, self-sufficiency and practical responsibility. The task is to finish, if at all possible, and to look after yourself and your vessel. If you get into any difficulties, you deal with it in a good seamanlike manner. And there I was, not feeling very much of a seaman, and not sure how responsible or practical I was. No pressure sure !

So to the start ! Sunday 18th June 2023 at 12.00 noon, 11 small boats set off from Pwhelli on our way to Baltimore west Cork via the Fastnet rock. Another 33 had left Plymouth at the same time. Light winds made for slow sailing for us after the start. I was trying to work out if I’d make it over St Patricks Causeway. The Colvic and Trapper in front of me had cleared it so I should be ok …shouldn’t I ? The wind died and I bobbed about for ages. Bloody hell, should I chance staying on this route or tack. I tacked ! I reckoned there was no point landing on the causeway on my first day. “Play safe Ken I told myself. Amazing how much you talk to yourself when you’re on your own. The sky was changing quickly. Dark clouds followed by increasing winds and lightning. Lightning ! Jesus this soiling… I mean sailing is scary enough at times. It lasted no more than 10 minutes or so, but in that time, the heavens had opened. I was soaked to the skin and the wind had now died completely. Becalmed, I tried fishing, with no luck. I covered 18 miles in 8 hours. This could be a long trip. At 23.30 there was still no wind, the sails were flapping about, I was going slowly in the wrong direction. There were at least 3 other Jesters close by so I didn’t feel totally disheartened. Just after 01.00 on Monday morning the wind picked up. More lightning appeared, just to scare a bit more shit out of me. The white horses told me to reef, 1 reef in the main and a bit rolled in the genoa and I was comfortably doing about 3.5 knots. Time for a sleep. I’m not sure how most people manage sailing alone and getting sleep. I found it very difficult to start with to be honest. Anyway, I did doze off for a bit. I don’t know how long I was asleep before I was awakened by a tapping sound. I checked the clock, 02.20 and there was definitely someone or something tapping on the starboard window. F\*\*k ! I grabbed another torch. I already had my gear on, including my lifeline. On climbing into the cockpit and peering up the starboard side, My heart missed a few beats. The inner shroud was swinging loose and banging against the side of the cabin. Amazingly, there was no sign of the damaged shackle. I took a little length of dyneema and tied the shroud off to stop it rattling about. I couldn’t find my spare shackles so decided to wait for daylight to sort it out. I was still sailing slowly. After moving every box on board about 3 times I eventually found the shackles. At 06.00 there was enough light to change it. I managed this without ant great difficulty, but now I had other problems. It had still taken over an hour to sort. Why did it break in the first place ? Obviously something to do with the tensioning, and my knowledge of rigging tensioning is practically zero. I was being pushed back up the Irish sea with the tide. The winds were light again, the traffic separation zone near the Tusker rock had to be contended with. I decided to go outside the separation zone rather than get caught up in loads of traffic. Amazingly just after noon I spotted Mischief and called Andrew up on the VHF. That call lifted my spirits, and started a great friendship with one of the other Jesters. We were beating into the wind heading west, and I was absolutely delighted with how Penwood was sailing. I was keeping up with Mischief and Dave Knowler on Headway III, both bigger boats, and was creeping in front at times. I decided that I’d tack to port to slip behind Mischief in order to get a few decent photos. I’d seen Andy taking a few of me. As I tacked, disaster struck again. The same inner shroud gave way as I tacked. Bloody hell. I felt sick to the bottom of my stomach. Not time to hang about though, I dropped and stowed the sails, called Andy and told him I was out of the challenge. I decided to motor to Kilmore Quay. I went forward first and tied the spinnaker halyard to the toerail on the starboard side to ensure the mast was safe. By this stage the sea was rolling quite heavily and of course it was bang on the nose. I raised the main with two reefs to steady the boat up, but it was a long run in. I had serviced the little Yanmar 1GM10 regularly before the trip and prayed it wouldn’t let me down now. It didn’t thankfully, and I plodded on, as the light disappeared. In hind sight, it would have been easier and safer to go straight to Dunmore East. As I tried to find my way around the Saltee Islands I was so tired I began seeing strange sights. Lights would take off into the night. Soiling at it’s very best. Mistakes are made in these situations and I count myself lucky that I made it in to Kilmore Quay at 02.00am on Tuesday, I’d been motoring for about 10 hours ! I phoned Linda and told her the news. I said I’d look for a bus and make my way home in the morning. I wrote in the log before retiring “ I’m as tired as a ghost ” Then I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke about 08.30, messaged Garry and he reckoned I could get going again if I put my mind to it. After the rest, I was in better form mentally anyway. I went and had a beautiful breakfast, and found a chandlers. I got what I needed and fixed the shroud for the second time. I reckoned I hadn’t tightened it enough both times previously. Once I tacked the second time and the full force went on that side the damage occurred very quickly. Amazingly, a guy who had built boats, as well as taking part in the Clipper race, came to my aid. He was confident he could get the rigging set. I adjusted as he eyed up the mast and rigging and told me to put another turn in one and the another until he was happy. He was happy so I was happy too. At 15.30 I departed and had a leisurely lunch under sail. I reckoned I was about a day behind everyone else at this stage. The wind was still on the nose and had dropped off too, so I decided to motor for a few hours. It wasn’t a race after all and I must be miles behind at this stage. At about 18.00 I was back under sail, admittedly slowly, and still heading west. I was still just getting short bursts of sleep, and just rested when I felt I needed it, setting a clock for 20 minutes. This, along with the AIS alarm gave me the comfort of knowing that if a boat did come towards me, the alarm would alert me or I’d see it anyway. Wednesday at 00.15, I woke up and as usual checked the AIS. I jumped up and saw the cargo ship “Wilson Dundee” on the screen…..coming my way. I still had a bit of time so I called her up. After a few minutes , I got a reply. I asked did he see me on his AIS. He said “No Sir, I do not see you “ I told him my position and told him I would tack immediately and that I would be well out of his way by the time he reached this position. I asked him to call me up if he picked me up on the AIS at anytime. I never heard from him again.

As usual during the night I had reefed and was doing about 3.3 knots. At 3.20 I rolled a bit more genoa out and picked up to 4.9 knots and was still very comfortable. 03.00 and we were doing 5.4 knots. I was really enjoying this bit of the trip now. At 03.15 I spotted the Irish sailing vessel Argonaut I on the AIS. I called him up and he assured me he could see me clearly on his AIS and to hold my course he was fishing and wouldn’t be in my way. Very comforting after the earlier experience. The sailing remained great up until 06.45 when the wind dropped away again. The sea state was very good, with no wind and the tide against meant a long day. I tacked and tacked and tacked trying to get past Old Head of Kinsale. Then at 19.00 the wind increased, enough to make me reef the main and put a roll in the genoa. It was heavy enough to make me take the helm as the auto pilot was struggling. After 20.00 I tacked in to avoid another vessel and shortly after that the wind died again. By 23.15 I had covered the grand total of 10 miles in 12 hours.

Thursday morning from about 01.00 I was becalmed. I left the sails up, but they slapped and banged as the boat rolled. I was talking a lot to myself again, and answering myself too. Between the two of us I decided to drop the sails, go to sleep, and float with the tide. I slept soundly for the first time since leaving Phwelli and woke about 03.30. There was a small craft warning for the evening but I was still becalmed. Very frustrating ! I could see One Day, Mischief and Green Tambourine on my AIS !! They were about 10 miles away at this stage ( bloody hell! half a days sail) At 10.30 I managed to contact Andy on Mischief and he was shocked and delighted to hear I was still on the water and not heading home on a bus. Despite the frustrating conditions and the stress of the last few days, This conversation on the VHF lifted my spirits no end.

10.55 and I was sailing past the entrance to Baltimore at 4.7 knots on my way to the Fastnet Rock. At 12.40 I started to round the Fastnet.. It’s a magnificent sight, and thankfully, one I got to see in pretty decent conditions. The wind died on me again I was terrified that I’d end up on the rock and not around it. There are weird tidal movements around it, and with the light winds I ended up just wishing I was away from it again. And so to the last leg in to Baltimore. I should have launched the kite but I was knackered and looking forward to a pint. So I eased the genoa out and rolled up and down the last stretch home, crossing the finish line at 16.13 on Thursday 22nd June. Of the 10 boats that started in Phwelli 7 finished.

We had all knew from the Tuesday from the VHF that there was a search going on for Minke and her skipper Duncan Lougee. It put a bit of a damper on the celebrations in Baltimore. His boat was found five days later but unfortunately he wasn’t on board. Duncan was one of the most experienced of the Jesters and had made videos of his trips across the Atlantic and to the Azores. Very sobering.

Anyway, I had completed the Jester Baltimore Challenge and a challenge it was. Now getting home……. Now there’s another story …….