

A First Channel Crossing – Part 1

The ambition of many often for many years and frequently unfulfilled. The RYA sometimes runs an event where there is an organised cross Channel cruise with extensive support including an experienced person aboard every yacht to build confidence. It is a significant undertaking and something of a right of passage for a new skipper. This is a detailed account of how such a trip might be planned, organised and managed. It isn't the account of an actual trip but includes elements taken from many and can be regarded as typical to the extent that 'typical' exists.

Initial considerations

Crossings from Plymouth are 100nm or more and the Brittany coast is rocky with somewhat complicated tide constrained entrances which makes it possibly a bit demanding for a first crossing. Solent to Cherbourg is considerably shorter at about 60nm for the Channel part and Cherbourg is the easiest port in the Channel to enter at any state of the tide and in any weather. A suitable yacht is available in Hamble and chartered for a long weekend Friday afternoon 'til Monday afternoon. The outline plan is to leave Friday afternoon to arrive Saturday morning / lunchtime allowing for some shopping time and a good evening meal out. Then able to leave Cherbourg at a relaxed time on Sunday which would leave ample time to return the yacht on Monday afternoon.

Alternative

If the weather on the day is not considered conducive to the planned crossing the Solent offers plenty of sheltered sailing – plan B.

Putting it together

A suitable crew is assembled – one with experience to be mate. Total of six on board makes for comfort which is ideal for such a trip. All crew have done a fair bit of sailing so are used to being at sea.

The tide will be Westgoing during the afternoon and evening which is ideal as the prevailing wind is SW so usually a good idea to leave the Solent by the Western entrance rather than the Eastern, which often results in an upwind passage.

Having arranged a yacht, which will be fuelled and topped up with water, and a crew, it's necessary to put together the rest of the requirements. Check with the charter company to make sure that all necessary charts, tide tables, yacht paperwork and courtesy flag are on board. Then the all important provisions. Meals aboard for the entire trip could include Friday and Sunday evening, breakfasts for three days and ample for snacks. Some can of course be bought in France. Everyone can have a reasonably substantial lunch on the way down on Friday though alcohol maybe best avoided given the overnight passage.

Decision to go

The actual forecast turns out to be generally SW4 occ 5 decreasing 3 though a more detailed one suggests that it might back for a while before veering again. Outlook generally Westerly

with no strong wind in the forecast so OK for getting back (important). Visibility good which is also important. Looks pretty good overall so it is decided to go for it.

Heading for the open sea

The tide doesn't turn in the Needles channel 'til 21:00 (dusk) so there's plenty of time for it to give an ample push to get clear into open sea well before that especially as the yacht is available for takeover early in the afternoon and everyone has promised to arrive early. In practice it doesn't work out quite like that: handover takes longer than expected as does stowing the provisions and there are differing definitions of 'early'. By the time everyone has kitted up, sorted out a harness and the safety brief completed, the actual departure is much later than planned. Nevertheless, slipped and piloted successfully out of the Hamble where the main is hoisted though the breeze is pretty much on the nose.

In order to avoid the main channel the course chosen is along the East bank of Southampton Water to North Bramble Cardinal and from there to West Bramble Cardinal which avoids the larger ships, moving prohibited zones and the like. The main channel has to be crossed at that point but it's narrow and there is a good view in both directions so it can be seen to be clear before crossing. Small ships do use the Western entrance to the Solent but not many and none are seen on this trip. The breeze has got up a bit and sailing would be possible but it would involve some tacking. With an earlier get away time maybe, but no time now so continue to motorsail. Good time for supper though. Crew is sorted into watches and the watch coming on at midnight go below for a rest.

Change of Plan

Despite motorsailing the tide is just turning adverse on arrival at Hurst Narrows. Passage through the Needles Channel would now be into the increasing tide, wind and waves – a long and very uncomfortable bash. It might even prove impossible to get past the rough sea near Bridge (see note on chart and almanac). Change of plan: change course at NE Shingles cardinal to North Head buoy to use the North Channel. Wow! Able to sail at last, into a strong tide at first but it soon slackens allowing good progress.

Good idea to get plenty of Westing so harden up on passing North Head and carry on for a further 5 miles before tacking. After half an hour on the new tack clearance of SW Shingles* (essential) looks unlikely so a further tack is required to gain some more Westing for another half an hour. The next tack clears SW Shingles and Bridge where the tide. Position well South of Bridge (three point fix on Needles, SW Shingles and Needles Fairway)* marks the departure point for the main crossing. It's 23:45 – rather later than the original plan!

* Trad navigator would monitor bearings on the buoy. GPS navigator would use position and COG. GPS navigator would plot GPS position of departure point.

The wind has got up a bit so a reef is taken in and the other watch called.

Now that the yacht is sailing nicely in the right general direction the task of shaping a course to Cherbourg can be done as the watch changeover evolves.