

'Working Yacht 1', Bristol Channel Area

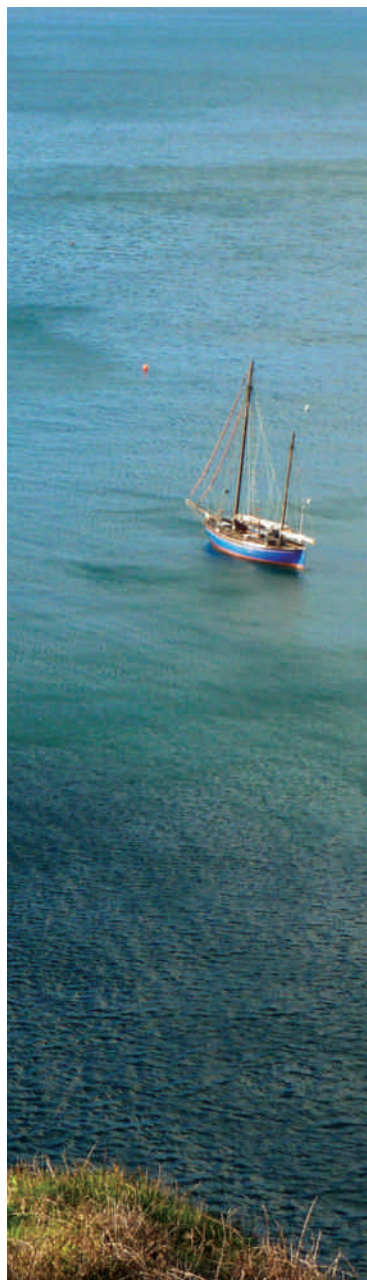
'Working Yacht 1' is a 55ft ferro gaff ketch built by her skipper, John Laband, during the 1990s. Often sailed single-handed, on this voyage she had a crew of two, and was awarded the BCA 'Hidden Challenge' trophy, 2013.

It was early May, and we'd anchored off the white mark at Minehead to wait for the tide and go ashore to collect firewood which I'd spotted on a previous trip. It was sunny and calm but the light breeze 'on the nose' (which we all know about in the Bristol Channel) meant we were motoring towards Ilfracombe along the N Devon coast to have a look at the latest addition to the harbour infrastructure, Damien Hirst's sculpture, Verity.

We were on the way to Lundy to await good weather to make passage to the Isles of Scilly, intending to join the OGA Round Britain Challenge (RBC) fleet, planning to be anchored off St Mary's in calm weather after a perfect trip down the English Channel. Well, it wasn't quite like that.

May is usually a good time to get going (if there is a 'good time' in these waters) but not this year. We were off Lundy for a week, as low after low battered the island. I've dragged from this anchorage before but the solution seems to be a CQR anchor, 4m of heavy chain then nylon 3-strand to the boat. Some people like this because the stretch in the nylon helps prevent snubbing loads to the anchor, which can easily jerk it free. I've started sending a second anchor down the line with a large shackle to ensure easy sliding and, with it's own line attached to the lifting eye, it's not too difficult a job to raise and lower. Well worth the peace of mind it imparts. Initially I sent it halfway down, to help increase the catenary, but after seeing it hurled out of the water repeatedly like an Orca with a seal, I have taken to sending it to the bottom where it rests against the chain and seems to do a good job helping to hold everything on the bottom.

We had to be confident in the anchor because there was no alternative but to abandon the boat and explore the island, and excellent tavern. We had to collect water, carry it down the hill with the aid of a pole between two people





Windswept anchorage in the lee of
Lundy Island

Swallows taking shelter

Photos: John Laband

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If you are an OGA member you can find
out more about ‘Working Yacht 1’ online
at the OGA Boat Register:

www.oga.org.uk/boat/working-yacht-1

and slinging the 25l can from the pole. It was amazing to see how well protected the anchorage was from the gale force westerlies and how rough it was around the island. There was a sizeable swell in the anchorage, especially on the ebb, and this made landing and launching the dinghy very interesting, especially with the water on board and two adults.

On researching this problem there seemed to be a lot of different methods all with their advocates, which usually means there isn't a universal method, so we developed our own. On the way in to the beach and before getting entangled in the surf, drop an anchor (perhaps 10kg) with a light floating line attached. The rest of this line which has to be quite long, say 50m, has to pay out with no tangling. One way to make this happen, we found, is to stuff it all in a bag, although I expect a reel would be best. Pay out the line from the bow and row the boat backwards towards the beach. As you reach the breaking surf, hold the boat with the bows towards the waves and it's an easy job to pay out the line and keep everything under control until you reach the beach. Take the line up the beach beyond the high tide line and secure it there. When you come to launch the dinghy, the line is ready to be used to help pull the boat through the surf towards the anchor which lies in calm water. Stuffing the line back into the bag as you go has prevented tangles so far. We used an 8mm polyprop line which was quite springy and bright yellow and had been discarded because it was unmanageable, perfect for this job though.

At last we set sail for Padstow, in a NW F5-7, but unable to make this heading as it was too fine in the conditions, so reluctantly turned back to Lundy having sailed 13nm. The sail back was very fast, exhilarating sailing at 7-8knts, with 9-10 at times.

Back in the anchorage we heard those never to be forgotten words of the forecast. NW, gale force 10, imminent. Why we had so little warning I'll never know, but it's a feature of this area that weather forecasting is often unreliable. I surmise that it's because the weather systems are often forming overhead and being unpredictable about their intentions.

This was the storm which caused havoc in the marinas of south Cornwall and cut off the electricity supply to many in the peninsula. We were close to the centre, due to travel up the Bristol Channel. Lundy offers excellent shelter in the usual anchorage for gales from west to south, but if there is any north or east in it, then you should get moving. We had two choices, it seemed, but here I may not have chosen the best option. The best cover from winds in the north was in the lee of the island off the south side close in off the high ground, surrounded by rocks and inside the tidal race that sweeps by offshore. Very recently this alternative has made it into the Cruising Association handbook as a recognised anchorage of refuge. It can only be imagined what these waters must have looked like a century ago, with many sailing craft anchored in the Roads. We weighed anchor(s) and went to have a look. It was clear that the cliff offered excellent protection from the north, but rocks everywhere and I imagined the bottom shelving steeply. If anything went wrong we would not be able to get round Rat Island back into the anchorage against the gale force northerly. We would have to let go of Lundy and then what?

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I imagined becoming embayed in Bideford Bay in a gale force northerly, or trying to run up-channel desperately keeping offshore of a North Devon lee shore. Ilfracombe would be impossible. Trying to go west, avoiding Hartland Point, didn't look such a good idea either. So, no sea room in a northerly.

The other factor was the new moon, so pitch blackness as well. We motored back to the usual anchorage and prepared ourselves. We anchored as close in as possible with two anchors out and measures to avoid chafe around the bow fitting. Some small buoys around us gave a good transit to estimate dragging and they became my friends throughout that night. I put the engine in slow forward to try and take some strain off the anchors but this caused some yawing around the cable, but still I think it was a useful measure. The waves got up considerably and we watched them career past in the half light to crash against the shore quite close behind us.

I had earlier considered abandoning the boat to look after herself and try to get to dry land, but there was some resistance on board to this plan. In any case, landing the dinghy would have been extremely hazardous with what seemed like a 2m swell. We tried it once, and were unceremoniously pitched off the landing ramp.

It was necessary to stay exposed in the cockpit all night in the torrential rainfall. It's surprising how time flies when you're enjoying yourself!

At some stage in the night, a fishing boat joined us and moored to a heavy mooring buoy. Another useful transit and with its bright lights a companionable presence as it plunged, pitched and rolled. I will remember that buoy for another occasion and hope that it's

'Hidden Challenge' trophy winner, 2013

ground tackle has been inspected in the recent past. We had to endure about six hours of the strongest wind before it moderated. But then another report it would veer more into the north. That really was the end of our Lundy holiday.

Mooring to that same heavy buoy we prepared the triple reefs in the main, making sure to tie in the other reefs first so as to save work later. With some trepidation, we set course SW, and emerging from the wind shadow of the island, we found ourselves in a moderating NW5-7, good visibility and just the dying storm swell to give us a majestic scene. The boat rode comfortably to the beam seas as we charged down the North Cornish coast towards the Pendeen. Adding more sail as the wind moderated, then through the inshore passage at Longships, round into Mounts Bay, past Mousehole and anchoring at last off Newlyn.

The OGA Isles of Scilly rendezvous had been cancelled and the RBC fleet had become dispersed, making it's own way to Dale in Pembrokeshire. We just had time to put back some of the blue paint washed off the bow sections, before setting off with a magnificent sunrise illuminating Mounts Bay from behind St. Michael's Mount.

We didn't see another vessel until we also reached Dale, after a short stop in the Pool outside Padstow. The trip over from Padstow to Dale was worth mentioning, because it really was trouble free, the F3-4 NW breeze kept going all day and we made it in one tack across the tidal streams, only motoring towards sunset as the wind died. All sail was raised and the tiller pilot, operating on a semi-balanced trim tab off the trailing edge of the main rudder, kept us on course.

Dolphins accompanied us for many miles west of Lundy. We were in time to enjoy the excellent supper organised by the BCA to host the RBC fleet. We would so much have liked to continue on around England and Scotland, but our holiday time was used up, and we had to plan the return trip.

We hope there will be another chance to join this cruise in company without having to wait another 50 years.

Jacqui Furneaux and John Laband, BCA



'Working Yacht 1' underway

Photo: John Laband