

NIGHT PASSAGE FROM THE OLD BAR

A last voyage before the season ends?

Late September had arrived and with it thoughts about the looming crane-out and the conclusion of the cruising season. Roundel's log showed 14 days of day sailing, a three day/two night cruise in company with Arawa (David Pocock) to Findhorn and the Old Bar and a challenging two day/one night with Arawa to Beaulieu. I was keen to fit-in at least another one-nighter before crane-out on 3 October. As David was away it would be a solo trip. The weather forecast for 26 – 28 September looked favourable for most things and I fancied the Old Bar again as it is a peaceful anchorage. There was a snag though. It was neaps and while the tides worked for an entry late afternoon on 26 September, a departure the following day on the early HW would have to be in the dark. Would it be sensible, or even possible, to cross the bar in pitch darkness?

Passage Planning & Risk Assessing

I was fairly confident of finding my way-in in daylight. I had a good set of way points marked from the earlier trip on 11 July (when we had used recent information from Nairn SC as a starting point) and had spent some time while on the mooring 'reducing depths to soundings' and calculated that the bar was around 1.2 to 1.3 metres above Chart Datum. Of course things could have moved a bit in the intervening 3 months but with Roundel drawing a metre and allowing for 0.5 metres under-keel clearance the necessary 2.8 metres height of tide should be available from a bit before 1600 hours on 26 September with a HW predicted (Burghead using Belfield) @ 1722/ 3.0 metres. Other sources showed the prediction for Burghead to be HW @ 1711/3.4 metres so I decided to stick with Belfield as being 'pessimistic'. With sunset at 1903 light wasn't going to be an issue going in and the forecast was for 5kts wind from the NE so while a bit of swell could be expected it was hardly likely to be a problem. If the entry looked risky my bolthole would be Cromarty.



*Old Bar 2012 from RFYC with the warning that **'there are not normally any real buoys'***

So I gave some long and hard thoughts about the exit. Belfield had the first HW @ 0557/2.9 metres with sunrise @ 0708. I focused on the issues in leaving on the first tide in the dark. Clearly GPS and the depth gauge were going to play a big part in this manoeuvre especially as there was 100 degree bend in the channel and the navigable gap over the bar is only around 20 - 30 metres wide (according to Nairn SC and confirmed during my first visit with a LW walk). Roundel has a chart plotter mounted to be visible from the helm and I have practised backtracking a GPS route and it is fairly straightforward if you use a high refresh rate and keep in mind your 'lefts & rights' (or use a boat's head-up display). As a back-up I have a handheld eTrex and a written note of the critical waypoints so unless the whole GPS was down that side was covered. My main concern as I'd be leaving under power was snagging one of the small buoys that Nairn SC had laid near the bar. I decided that I'd have to resort to the torch when the chart plotter showed me to be close to a buoy entered as a waypoint. So I decided to go ahead.



Roundel's chart plotter and depth gauge taken during the first trip to the Old Bar note the SOG was 4.7kts with the impellor reading 3.0 – a 1.7kt 'push' into the OB

Departure

Thursday, 26 September was a glorious day and my first log entry at 1130 records an Easterly Force 1 with a pressure of 1014 Mb (close enough to standard atmospheric pressure to have a negligible effect on tidal predictions). I slipped under power at 1140 – a bit after low water so I expected to be



'headed' on passage. As I motored towards Chanonry Point I could see a Dutch registered schooner doing the same in the south channel from Inverness and a small fishing boat heading towards Avoch.

Towards Chanonry Point

By 1155 I was round the point and had identified the Dutch schooner through the binoculars as the Flying Dutchman ! Was this an omen? Crowds had gathered on the point to wish us bon voyage (or possibly spot dolphins?).



Well wishers on the point!

The Fort George range flags were hoisted so I decided to motor as quickly as I could through the range via the South Channel. My log impellor was jammed which seems to be an annual occurrence as crane-out approaches so I could only monitor the speed over the ground from the GPS which showed 5kts at cruising RPM which indicated the tide was heading us by about a ¼ kt. Having cleared the south channel @ 1300 and with the wind now NE Force Two, I decided to make sail. The same thought had occurred to the Flying Dutchman but she remained out of range for a photograph with my fixed wide angle lens camera. Sails up I was making 2.8 Kts SOG but wasn't in a hurry as I was aiming to cross the Old Bar @ 1600.

For some considerable I maintained station on the Flying Dutchman in the light winds until her massive sail area (532 square yards) and waterline of nearly 120 foot overcame her inertia. I had a 'go to' selected for a waypoint just off the Old Bar and after a pleasant sail with 3Nm to go @ 1515 I turned-on the

engine to motor-sail dropping sails by 1540 with 1.3 Nm to go. I checked the GPS horizontal dilution of precision (HDOP) which was a reassuringly small number and noted the pressure as 1013Mb.



The entrance to the Old Bar is between the 2 headsail sheets

It was nice and calm and I noted the following in my log post entry:

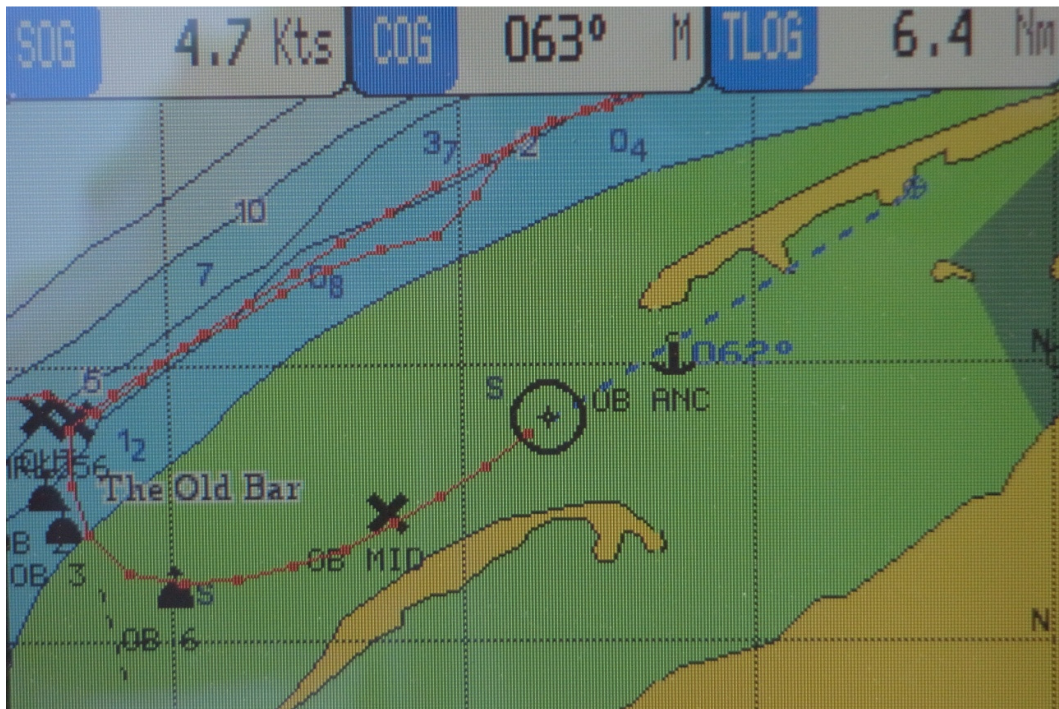
Route in:

No outer mark

Old GPS Route in was good

0.8 metre under the keel (1.8m water) worst between marks 065 & 064

NB one buoy (OB₃) in place lve to west (S in P out)



This screen shot from July shows the OB marks provided by Nairn SC and the red track sailed



This is OB3 – the one remaining buoy just before the bar channel narrows on departure



The small breakers indicate the extension to the main protective sand dunes and are left to port on entry



Having made the 100 degree turn to port the anchorage is between the dunes to port & starboard



The black object in the water is close to the anchorage (40 metres) but is high & dry @ LW



This is Roundel at anchor behind the sand dunes offering protection from the sea (taken during the July trip). This is 16.8 Nm from the Fortrose moorings by sea

Safely anchored in 6.3 metres of water @ 1630, I 'reduced to soundings' again and calculated the bar to be around 1.1 metres above CD and the anchorage to be 3.3 metres below CD. Using 1.1 metres for the bar, 1.0 metres draught and

0.5 metres clearance (2.6 metres total) the Friday departure window opened around 0330 and would be firmly closed around 0630 on a falling neap tide. I decided to aim to cross the bar between 0545 & 0600 – a bit over an hour before sunrise. I set the chart plotter to night mode (a bit like a photo negative to look at) and tested all the lights including the cabin red. My intention was to go out with minimum lights and without navigation lights on to try to preserve night vision.

I then settled down, Kindle in one hand and glass of red plonk in the other to enjoy the sunset – it looked like it would be a good one.



Sun going down – totally calm



Afterglow at the Old Bar, Thursday, 26 September 2013 – taken @ 1921, sunset was 1903

Night Passage

The alarm went off @ 0500. Working under a red light in the cabin I made a cup of coffee and readied the anchor for weighing by reducing the scope. I was very conscious of some heavy mechanical noise out to sea but the sand dunes blocked the view. The engine went on @ 0520 and I was slipped by 0535 with the anchor roughly stowed in the anchor well. It takes a good 5 minutes to feed the anchor rode in to the locker and that's time I couldn't afford with a 1.5 kt current pushing Roundel further in to the Old Bar and the shallows. With just the light from the engine controls, the compass, the depth gauge and the chart plotter in night mode I could just make out the banks to either side. The weather was calm.

After a an initial veer to one side of the channel (under-keel depth dropped rapidly to about 40 cm) we settled in to the channel and used the incoming current to maintain good steerage while only doing 2 kts SOG. Using the GPS and cross checking with the depth gauge we started the turn out to sea at OB6.

Approaching OB3 I flashed my torch at it and hit it first time a few degrees to port and 20 metres away. I cleared it comfortably and concentrated hard on keeping to the navigable channel over the bar. I was also very aware though that the noise out to sea was a rig move. At 0550 I logged 'Over the bar 1.6 metres of water. Hdg towards Balintore'. My desired under keel clearance of 0.5 metres had been about right. There was quite a bit of traffic so the nav lights went on. The rig was well lit and had a tug fore & aft....I was fairly certain it was going left to right but took a bit of time to check it.



Rig move taken with a wide angle lens – 'objects in your lens may be closer than they seem!'

The right hand tug was well illuminated with nav, restricted ability to manoeuvre and towing over 200 metres, lights. It was right between me and Balintore. Around then the aft tug must have slipped its line and become the guard vessel as I saw a green-white-red as it turned to point at me. Taking the hint I turned port to show him my green and decided I'd visit Cromarty instead.



A stunning sunrise – but no wind

At 0658, I logged '1 CA W of Crom F SWM, calm'. I switched to Channel 11 and it was obvious Port Ops was having a busy day. After listening for a while it sounded like there was a tanker to depart Nigg then another to come in (there were 2 waiting at anchor) plus a small coasted anchored off the South Sutor also to come in and something else wanting to move too. By 0715, we were

'2 CA S of C F Gm, sun abv horizon'.



Approaching the Sutors



Flat calm!

I continued as far as the moorings getting a friendly wave from the Cromarty Queen as she backed out of the harbour for her first trip of the day. By 0832 I was at the Buss Bank Red outbound and with no wind decided to motor back (against the ebb of course) to the moorings along the North Channel. I noted that the ebb was running at about 1kt. Chanonry Point was reached at 1017 and I logged engine off @ 1055 back on the mooring. The word 'CALM' appears underlined in the log book. The total journey, mostly under power, had been 38.9 Nm.

Conclusion

While it would have been preferable to sail rather than motor on the way home, this was a very enjoyable last mini-cruise of the season. Leaving the Old Bar in the dark on a neap tide was certainly an experience for me and made this a memorable trip.

Richard Jenner