



The P&H Irish Sea Crossing, 14/15 June, 1996

'Chance Favours The Prepared Mind' (Louis Pasteur, 1822-95)

'You Make Your Own Luck'
(John Chamberlin, b. 1946)

At 22.30 on Friday, 14 June, 1996, Tim Oldrini and myself left Soldiers' Point, Holyhead, Anglesey and headed out past North Stack to assume a compass bearing of 280 magnetic. Sixteen and a quarter hours later, at 14.43 on the Saturday, we nosed our two, single-seat sea kayaks into the beach adjacent to the walled harbour at Dun Laoghaire, Ireland. We had completed 60 miles to cross the central Irish Sea in conditions which can only be described as ideal.

The trip was sponsored by 'P&H Sea Kayaks' of West Hallam, Derby, who had supplied the two boats used on the crossing. I had chosen a relative newcomer, the glass-fibre 'Outlander', whilst Tim was in the 'Capella', a polythene kayak brand new to their range for 1996. Both kayaks were designed by P&H's Peter Orton.

Why do it?

A good question. I remember an A.S.K.C. (as was) article many years ago in which Duncan Winning asked what people saw in open crossings, but I guess until you've been out there (which I'm sure he has too), in darkness or daylight, and sensed the thrill of isolation, tinged with the buzz of individual commitment, then that will remain a question. I know I have sensed it before, and in fact said 'never again!'

I am conscious of first voicing it to Tim as a potential partner, one summer evening in 1995, in the 'Holly Bush' at Makeney. (Don't all good trips start in a pub?) He says I've been on about it for longer than that. Either way, I had a desire to complete a trip across the central section of the Irish Sea during the year when I was 50, which I reached in January '96, partly because my father died at 50 and I wanted to mark the year for me.

However, when I examine the desire, it is difficult to pin it down to any one source, as another is my pathological fear of water. Confronting that is clearly part of the challenge. These days half the stands at the NEC/ICE show have a video of some canoeist going over a waterfall towards what appears to me to be certain death. I stand amazed at the apparent lack of fear with which they shoot ever-steeper falls, larger rapids and deeper gorges. I know I never could. Few fellow canoeists understand, but, fortunately for me, Tim does.

Next was the carrot of completing all three Irish Sea crossings; 'unescorted' and in single-seat kayaks. I had done the St George's Channel in 1972 and the North Channel in '86, so for me therefore, this latest crossing would achieve a personal objective, with the possible bonus of the 'hat-trick' being a 'first' in itself. I am not sure about that yet and it is of lesser import.

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To Tim, I think it is safe to say, it was just another trip. Not one he would have personally chosen to do, but one he was happy to because I had. He knew how much this one meant to me, and I pay tribute here to the companionship, understanding and solid friendship he has shown from conception through to success. Thanks Tim.

Another question was why write it up? Who else is interested anyway? My view is that this is primarily our record, because when compared with other trips reported in the ISKA N/L, it certainly lacks 'thrills'. However, rough water is not essential to a worthwhile sea excursion, and definitely not on crossings such as this. Whilst the Irish Sea may be 'old hat' now, perhaps there will still be many for whom it, and hopefully therefore this account, may hold an attraction; not just the facts, but the feelings too.

The Trip

When pondering the chart it was clear that the Aberdaron to Wicklow crossing was reckonably shorter, but the snag with that route being all the hassle at each end, getting the boats to and from ferry terminals, especially Holyhead. So Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire was chosen despite the extra distance.

Above all else, we wanted to 'enjoy it'. This had been agreed early on, and had in fact influenced the 'weather envelope' decision. Being out on the open sea in the daylight, completely out of sight of land in good visibility, carries a buzz only the experience can replicate. Being out there at night carries another.

We left on a forecast of 'variable 2-3', which whilst not bad on the face of it, we did not wish to do 60 miles against even a Force 3. There is no way we could have anticipated the ideal conditions that obtained.

Arrival at Soldiers' Point just before 10 o'clock on the Friday night, however, confirmed the suitability of the conditions; no wind, the sea flat calm, magic! Eight miles directly north of the beach, the Skerries light blinked lazily in the gathering summer darkness. Only two weeks from the longest day, we had dropped lucky with almost the minimum period of night ahead of us - my guess being five hours at the most.

10.30 p.m. on the dot but 20 minutes later than schedule, we slid the two craft off the shingly beach and checked the skegs were free. Out of the cove we turned and set a bearing of 280 mag., ten minutes later approaching North Stack.

The first minor but amusing panic was Tim thinking he'd not locked the car, and me that I'd forgotten my dextrose tablets, found safely lurking in the bottom of the Co-op carrier bag between my legs! - symptomatic of my need for a totally positive mind-set, like a tennis pro's pre-service ritual.

A mile or two beyond North Stack, and by now west of South Stack, the usual overfalls were asleep to our passing, exactly as planned. This was in effect the final hour of the north-going flood and the next hour would begin to see it turn south; remaining so for the following six. This was good because, again by design, it meant this first and largest dip in our sinusoidal curve of tidal drift took us well south of the beeline ferry routes, until at least about half-past eight the following morning.

Less than an hour into the trip the reason for wanting that 'dip' south through the night became audible before it was visible to our searching eyes - one of the huge, 40-knot StenaLine HSS catamarans. The problem was, it was to port and therefore to the south

of us, meaning consequently it had to come north and towards us to miss the Stacks and enter Holyhead Bay.

For the next ten minutes or so our eyes flitted between torch-illuminated deck compasses and the ever more rapidly growing lights of the approaching ferry.

Gradually it became apparent that the galloping beast would continue to pass to the south of us, making me at least grateful for that first hour of northerly drift. There was no chance they would see us, neither on radar (we would merely be 'flotsam'), nor through visually spotting our five lights. We had to avoid it, and on this occasion we did. Phew!

Breaking briefly for liquid and glucose intake at 23.30 we agreed that after the 00.30 shipping forecast stop we'd lengthen the period between breaks to 1 1/4 hours, so that as little time as possible was wasted. The next stop was important because, again by prior agreement, that would be our true point of no return. If the 00.30 forecast was outside our criteria, we'd turn back, even then.

'Variable 3-4'. We seriously considered turning back. Not because Force 4 itself is a problem, but because 'variable' meant it could just as easily be westerly and in our faces, and we didn't want to get that once in the middle. The coin came down heads. We carried on. And aren't we glad we did!

The best way I can describe the sea conditions is through demonstration. Pour a glass of water and stand it to settle on a firm surface - that smooth. The photographs show unbelievable, mirror-like reflections of the kayaks on the sea, hour after hour. Looking at them a couple of weeks later one guy in our canoe club said, "This looks like serious flat water John." It was, exceptional in the extreme.

Tim had very wisely written down the ferry times so we had some idea when to increase our vigilance, especially astern. Glancing behind us also enabled the confirmation of the onset of the southerly drift, the Skerries light very gradually slipping to starboard as South Stack came astern, before also passing to the north as the night wore on.

One such north-easterly glance revealed another set of lights worthy of closer monitoring, and sure enough about 20 minutes later, at 02.00, a large, grey naval vessel bore silently down on us. So silently in fact, that if we hadn't spotted it we may well have been run down, as the convergence of our paths was such that if Tim had not stopped paddling he would have hit it. As it was, the flashlit photograph I hoped would show him against the bulk of its 300' port flank, merely shows him, with five of its lights just beyond. Dark grey doesn't show up very well at night. Perhaps I should have let it pass between us, so I could have caught the ship silhouetted against the bulk of Tim's port(ly) flank!

We took this opportunity to have the first real snack, Tim tucking in to a tomato and chicken leg, the sea absolutely flat.

One puzzling phenomenon was that to the south it was pitch black. I felt I could touch it, the eeriness suggesting that if I stuck my left arm out my hand would disappear. To the north in contrast, it never became completely dark, not exactly Borealis, but Aurora nonetheless - the goddess of the dawn stayed with us through the night.

The cold was never really a problem to Tim, to use his own words he has "plenty of lard" to keep him warm. But I did feel it, so the salopants and fleece top didn't come off all night.

Just before 04.00, in the emerging dawn, dolphins appeared ahead right - they, or some of their friends, staying with us for the rest of the trip. By 05.00 the sun cleared the horizon and we had dipped to the lowest point on the sinusoidal curve of tidal drift, about six miles south of the beeline course.

The still unbelievably flat sea, its surface dappled slightly by an imperceptible breeze, stretched in every direction for as far as we could see.

The two torches and three cycle lamps between us could now be switched off. Wales gone and well behind us, Ireland nowhere to be seen.

The next six hours, climbing back up that hill of drift, were probably going to be the longest. But it was also the stretch to enjoy, as the conditions attained quintessential perfection. Even the dappling disappeared to be replaced by diamond-ground smoothness. One careless paddle stroke and it would shatter like a windscreen. It felt like cheating. No complaints. No-one to complain to, Tim and I often a few hundred yards apart. This was my wildest dream, total relaxation, basking in the solitude, remoteness and scale, the inconsequentiality of our craft against the vastness of the sea. Not yet halfway there.

05.55, 'Variable, becoming easterly, mainly 3 or 4; fair, good.'

No problem. What could be better? Nothing, and we recorded it at 06.34, eight hours out, with a couple of photo's to mark what we then thought was 'bang in the middle'. Conversations had lulled and the radio Tim had bought now seemed to get every station but the one we wanted.

Ships appeared in the distance but never close to, just tiny shapes, 'Monopoly' counters. Ferries didn't appear at all, surprisingly, since we could see for miles. Dolphins again too, still never close, and frustratingly never long enough for a photo'. I began to get tired, so did Tim, unbeknown to me.

Two more hours. At 08.17 we made what we then thought was our first hazy sighting of land, and within the next two hours what we thought was a 'buoy' at Kish Bank, but equally way in the distance. Our spirits heightened by mental calculations of how soon the buoy would be reached, we paddled on, now with a reference point with which to observe also our accelerating northerly drift, midway through the flood.

As usual, misguided elation and a misread chart photo-copy combined to produce misinformation. There are buoys at Kish Bank, but the one we were interminably peering at and willing to get nearer was actually a lighthouse!

At the same time we slowly realised the north-easterly flowing flood tide in the area 10-15 miles east of Dublin Bay and Bray Head was all but negating our forward speed. The realisation slowly dawned that this was the reason for our depressingly slow closing on the 'buoy' ahead.

Earlier optimism on our obviously good progress had indicated a possible ETA of mid-to-late lunchtime, but that dissipated along with our energy as we fought the glassy conveyor belt pushing us back towards Wales.

A StenaLine ferry appeared off the starboard bow, sliding by to the north on the still mirror-like sea, and the land gradually clarifying as I at last managed one snatched

photo' of a surfacing dolphin way off the port bow, Irish hills in the background.

Yet again I recalled Martin Meling's comment, battling our way back across The Wash in 1985, 'You've just got to keep plugging away at it!' Plug away we did and, arm-achingly slowly, Kish Bank light grew to its full 22m, sunlit in red and white splendour. About half a mile short we passed through a strange area of glassy-smooth and perfectly formed standing waves, as the diminishing flood tide felt the sand beneath. Tim was first to tuck in behind the ten foot high black base, just after 12.00 noon, the sea beginning to show surface flurries from a now increasing easterly breeze.

Half an hour's rest and refreshment enabled us to check out the navigational plan for the final leg into Dublin Bay. With the ebb tide now increasing, we agreed transits via North Kish and South Burford buoys (they really were this time!) and set off at 12.37, arriving at South Burford by 13.33.

The weather was glorious and the area full of normal nautical activity, but of course none of those who saw us had any idea where we'd come from, assuming most probably we were just local paddlers out for the day and enjoying the sunshine. By now also I was extremely tired, and this final two hours required all the energy I could possibly summon to maintain the opted course. Tim, who had admitted to some tiredness whilst battling for Kish Bank, was now bright again, encouraging me on.

Regular changes of transits, ending with two churches above Dun Laoghaire itself, slowly guided us in to a small, stony beach just east of the seaward wall of the town's huge harbour and ferry terminal. The freshening easterly wind probably reached the forecast '4', pushing us in as our energy reserves decreased, just as though someone was pushing us from behind, willing us on to ensure we made it.

I had no complaints, the waves were going in our direction and I took regular advantage of the surfing opportunities presented, finally following Tim in and easing my way through the rocks to land at 14.33, over 16 hours after setting out. We were both very pleased, and whilst obviously tired, in notably better condition than when we reached the Scillies in '93.

After a few photo's and getting changed, I rang HMCG who agreed to pass on news of our safe arrival to Holyhead. What happened after that is another story and definitely for a different time.

Two hours later we'd lugged the painfully heavy kayaks round and into the ferry terminal for a free ride back (the boats not us!) and once aboard we sat down for a couple of pints of Guinness. Why didn't we stay? At least for that night; B&B, a meal and a few beers?

For a number of reasons it would have been better if we had, but it's a question we've asked ourselves a number of times since and not answered satisfactorily. Ninety minutes later we were back in Holyhead.

The Kayaks

Clearly these were not tested in rough sea conditions, but they were never going to be on this trip. That has been done before and since. They were picked for stability and speed, and they performed with the excellence for which P&H sea kayaks have become long renowned. The Capella has firmly placed itself in the ranks of true sea kayaks, and because of this is now available in GRP also.

The Outlander is a different issue, to my mind a most underrated kayak, and undeservedly so. It is superbly stable, very manoeuvrable, and yet easily holds its own on pace. For example, Tim is much younger, stronger and arguably fitter than me, and was in the faster boat, yet well into the night had commented how well I was keeping up with him, or to approximately recall his words, "You're doin' all right tonight dad!" I put that down to the boat.

Tim and I extend our thanks to Dave, Julian, Peter and the rest of the P&H team.

John Chamberlin

Irish Sea '96, Postscript:

Life's 'ABCs' of Success are; 'Ability, Breaks, Courage'.

'Ability'

From the very beginning, and especially early in 1996, our approach was to be as pragmatic as possible. No commitment was made to the trip. First we would establish our fitness levels to paddle the distance and for a period equivalent to the possible duration of the trip. Initial estimates and chats suggested a distance nearer 60 miles than 50, and a time-span of anything from 13 (my sheer optimism!) to 20 hours. We settled on about 17, as that was how long '72 had taken over 50 miles, and, even though I was now twice as old, the kayaks would be faster.

Training began in March with a 16-mile paddle, doubling-up on an 8-mile circuit we have regularly used on the Erewash canal and the Trent. (NB I suppose realistically it started for me on January 7th, when I entered the Soar Valley CC 10-mile New Year 'Resolution' Race at Leicester. Looking back now, I suspect there was a mind-set issue involved there somewhere.)

Over the succeeding weeks the distance was jacked up through 21 and 25 miles, culminating in May in a 50-mile paddle in the Lake District, doing 5 lengths of lake Windermere. That excursion took about 15⁺ hours and, as Tim said at the time, "If you can do 15 hours, you can do 17!"

Navigation needed refresher, so a session one evening in early June concluded with a plot of 280 mag. on chart 1411, 'Irish Sea Western Part'. That gave an estimated paddling time of 17 hours, based on a 3-knot average, setting out an hour before High Water (Liverpool), night-time.

The aspect of sea kayak competence was taken as read. We had the ability.

'Breaks'

We agreed a weather envelope of; no westerly component, up to Force 4 if an easterly component (NE, E or SE), but stable. The preferred conditions were a High centred over the Irish Sea or the north of the UK, and again 'stable' for at least 24 hours beyond the trip ETA, but we realised this was hoping a bit much. Very early on we had agreed the aim would be to enjoy the trip, not have 'an epic'. Tim had said one day on the Trent whilst discussing it, "I don't want to die doing it." Neither did I.

Comparing diaries, the first probable slot was going to be the weekend of 14-16 June. We were prepared to go on a weekday, but for a variety of mainly work-related reasons, preferred not to if possible. However, we knew psychologically we were looking at June or July, so would be as flexible as necessary, because in all probability we would not get more than one chance.

On that basis I began accessing the MetFAX service (0336 400 473) from Monday 3 June, and by Tuesday 11 June things began to look promising for the following weekend.

The prognosis continued positively until Friday's read, 'S or SE 2-3' for Saturday, and the Friday lunchtime Shipping Forecast gave 'Variable 2-3'. The 'one chance' seemed on. I say 'seemed', because we had also agreed the final decision would be at the point of departure, although realistically there was no reason to drive all the way to Holyhead unless we thought we were going, and we thought we were. We got the break.

'Courage'

In hindsight, which is always '20:20', this at first looks a little superficial (especially when you see the photographs!), but it should not. Despite all the other adventures George Bazeley undertook subsequently, some years afterwards he said that our 1972 crossing was 'the most committing' thing he had ever done. I think that was also true in my case, at least until '93 and the Scillies trip. Although the distance was only about half, the differing 'commitment' there was simple. You could miss.

Fear and 'courage' mean different things to each and every one of us. To me, courage is discovering that frogs' legs are edible. In Tim's case though, I have no idea what, if anything, he may be frightened of. Possibly nothing, but I doubt that. Similarly I do not know what he regards as brave, although I know he has canoed on big water, rivers and sea, from Iceland to Corryvreckan. He will have his own recollections of his thoughts as we set off on this trip, but my guess is that to him that's all it was, 'a trip'.

For me though this was much different, it meant yet another commitment. It was to be a test, to see if I could actually 'go'. One physical manifestation of the problem has often been the increasingly sleepless nights prior to any such trip. Despite 'no commitment' having been made, by Thursday we both knew it was 'on'. On the Monday of that week I had slept little more than 2-3 hours. On the Tuesday, that improved with a reasonable night's sleep, say 5 hours, but on Wednesday that was again not the case. On Thursday I had gone to the doctor's (I should have done it sooner!) to seek some sleeping tablets, and he gave me (for £5.50!) three 10mg 'Stilnoct', with instructions to take only one!

That same evening, 13 June, Tim and I were due to meet a guy from a local Diving Club to borrow their marine-frequency emergency radio. At that same meeting we agreed that, despite how good the weather might be, if I didn't sleep that night, the trip was off! I was home again by 10.00 p.m., did as I was told and took one tablet, was asleep by about 10.30. And awake again by 2.00 a.m.! I lay there thinking; 'well, that's it then, the usual format now is for me to be awake until getting-up time and the trip's off! After all this, do I want the decision to rest on me not getting a few hours' sleep?'

I went downstairs and took a second tablet and, I believe, was asleep again by 02.30. Waking again at about 5 o'clock, I reckon I'd had about six hours' sleep, but all of it deeper than normal. Good sleep. I believe that, from an entirely personal point of view, that second tablet was the deciding factor.

It would have been so easy to ring Tim on the Friday morning, offer profuse apologies but confirm that, despite 'taking the tablet', the trip was off. Of course I knew that at two minutes past two, and that if I left my bed to go down for a second pill, the likelihood was that we would leave Holyhead that night.

At 10.30 p.m., we canoed away from the beach at Soldiers' Point.

JC
Updated