

Lunatic Voyage

John Hughes

Sailing from The Wirral to the
Lune Estuary on Hitia catamaran,
Star Catcher

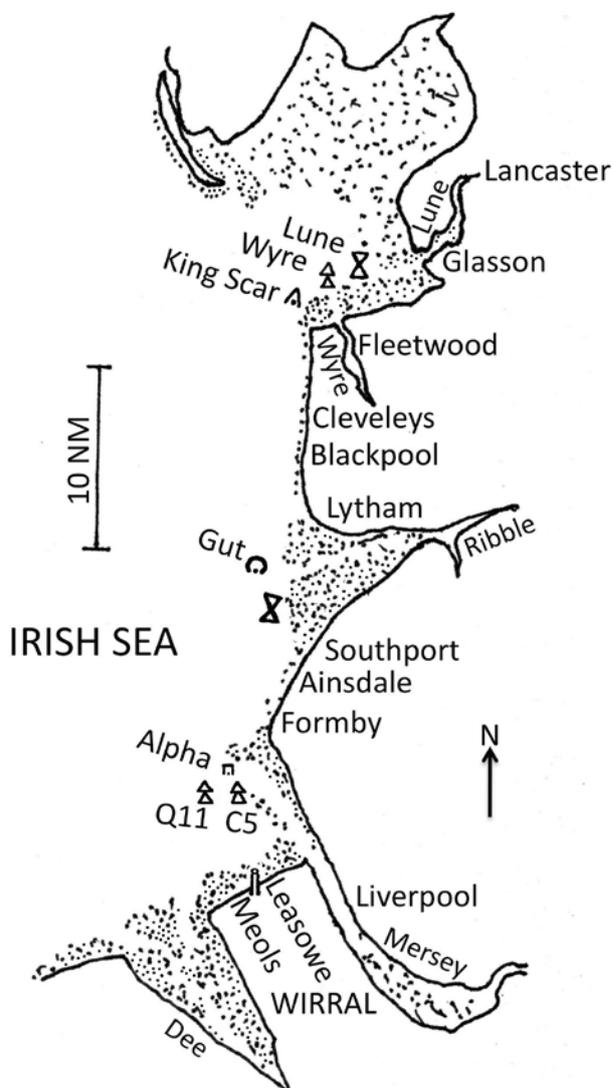
WELL, THE MOON WAS FULL at the weekend of the DCA Lune rally this year, but it was not madness that drove me to sail there. I sail a Hitia 17 catamaran which I keep at a mooring at Meols on the north Wirral coast. At 10ft in the beam she is too broad to be trailed by road so she must first be dismantled. To bring her ashore, dismantle her, load her on the trailer, drive to the Lune then reassemble her in the river would have taken longer and been much more hassle than sailing her up the coast. But there were other incentives too. Concerning sailing, one always has yearnings and ambitions. There is always something about which one thinks, 'One of these days I'll do that.' So it was for me to sail up the Lancashire coast. It has always appeared as a kind of boundary, a dark line stretching out across a silvering sea on a calm evening, beyond which, when the air is clear, mysterious distant forms loom above the horizon: Black Combe, the clustered peaks of the Lake District, and the Bowland Fells, alluring but remote.

The notion of exploring under sail purely by negotiating wind and tide, accepting and working within those constraints, has always appealed and seemed to me to be immensely satisfying. This, I decided, would be how I would get to the Lune rally. The idea also appealed to my son Rick, so he decided to join me.

HW (Liverpool) was at 21h54, 8.1m, on the Wednesday evening, 5th July 2017, before the DCA Lune rally. We slipped our mooring soon as we floated and sailed slowly down channel in a light sea breeze to anchor for the night in deeper water just off Leasowe, from where we'd be able to make a timely start in the morning. We wanted to arrive in the Lune before darkness and before HW the following evening.



Seeking deep water prior to an early morning start



Rick peeped out from under the tent as the water of the morning's incoming tide began to trickle round the hulls. 'I can't see the wind farm!' he exclaimed. Sure enough, the Burbo Bank wind turbines 4NM away were completely obscured, and we could barely see across the Mersey. This was not good. We wanted good visibility not only to navigate unfamiliar waters but also to cross the shipping channel. We would see how we got on. The forecast was fair, but we could always turn back within a couple of hours if it didn't clear. At 08h30 we stowed the anchor chain and ran off before a light S'ly breeze off the land.

Within an hour we were passing the first of the wind turbines, the mist was clearing, the sun was starting to show through the haze, and we were



The Mersey Shipping Channel

keeping a careful eye out for ships. Our aim was to cross the shipping channel in the vicinity of the Q11 and C5 N cardinal buoys, where the Crosby Channel leading out from the Mersey becomes the Queens Channel leading into the Irish Sea. By the time we could discern the twin cones of the buoys we had seen three ships pass up the channel but for now the coast appeared to be clear and we held our course.

The shipping channel is only a quarter mile wide, so within a few minutes we had crossed and left the red Alpha buoy astern, and the nearest approaching vessel, a gas carrier steaming out of the Mersey, was at least ten minutes away. Our timing had been perfect, just at high slack water with the sea calm, for at intermediate states of the tide the stream in the channel can be quite alarming and raise a choppy sea even in a light breeze. We should arrive in the Lune with time to spare.

The breeze had veered W'ly but remained light, giving us a delightfully relaxing broad reach up the Formby coast. The sun was starting to feel hot. It was time to peel off some layers and take morning coffee from a flask with a biscuit. We were gazing at the miles of bright, yellow-russet sand of the Formby dunes topped with dark green Scots pine trees sliding past a mile or two to starboard, and we could imagine a virgin, tropical shore, unexplored by people. There was little else to discern within our field of vision. Suddenly, something in the water caught our eye – a movement, a shape of something dark, briefly at

the surface. Then SPLASH! - much closer! And in an instant they were all around us: sleek, black, curved backs with sickle-shaped dorsal fins: a pod of about ten large bottlenose dolphins, breaching, their bodies sometimes nearly clearing the water. They were pursuing fish, for once or twice we saw a fish leap, and a couple of gannets were circling and diving. The nearest surfaced within ten yards of the boat, and we saw one swim directly underneath. It was a bit disconcerting because they were massive creatures - something between the half and the full length of the boat, so perhaps about 12 ft. We could hear their squeaking signals. They remained in our vicinity for about twenty minutes. At one stage we followed them, steering closer inshore, but eventually they went out to sea again and they disappeared

almost as suddenly as they had appeared. This was between Formby and Ainsdale, between one and two miles offshore. I had never seen such large dolphins so close before. This incident alone was enough to make the whole trip worthwhile.

It is curious how size and distance become deceptive in hazy visibility. In pursuing the dolphins we'd been distracted from our compass course and had come closer inshore. We thought the building at the end of Southport pier was a structure on the far side of the Wyre estuary, and we started to steer towards a tall tower that appeared through the haze, thinking it was Blackpool, until we realized that Blackpool Tower couldn't possibly stand behind Southport, and it turned out to be the tower of the cable-stayed footbridge across Southport marine lake. Blackpool Tower eventually appeared faintly to the north when Southport was off the starboard quarter some time after noon, along with a persistent periodic flash of reflected sunlight from the same vicinity, which puzzled us for two and a half hours until we came close and found it to be the sun's reflection off a huge revolving glass globe – it was the Mirror Ball, a giant, mirrored disco ball on Blackpool promenade.

A prominent seamark, about 4NM to port, which remained visible for a long time, was the Lennox gas platform. Other marks we were looking for, the outer Wyre buoys, a west cardinal and the Gut buoy,



John Hughes on *Starcatcher*



we failed to spot, so we must have passed them well inshore. But we met the line of perches marking the outer end of the training wall of the main Wyre channel and made a slight detour to leave those to starboard, although at HW+2.5h we probably still had ample depth. Thereafter we could make out the prominent landmarks of Lytham-St Anne's: the lifeboat station, and a bright white dome in the distance on the seafront shining in the sun.

The breeze slackened, becoming very light as we approached Blackpool. For an hour and a half we were within earshot of the screams from the roller-coaster ride. As we came closer we watched in morbid fascination as the train made its slow ascent up the long incline, then seemed to pause with bated breath on the lip of the summit, before plunging to its awful precipitous descent, while we awaited the screams, delayed by the distance the sound had to travel across the water. It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to pass the town – South Pier, then Central Pier and the Tower (abeam at 14h30), then the North Pier, then seemingly endless pastel-coloured residential blocks merging into Cleveleys. Rick dozed on the trampoline and I took to periodic spells of paddling, merely to flex and stretch my muscles.

About mid-afternoon moderately high cloud closed in from the west

and a few drops of rain fell. Just north of Cleveleys some kind of works and fencing seemed to close off the beach from passage farther north along the shore. Beyond here, we sailed past the most grim looking stretch of coastline I ever recall seeing. The skyline along the low, loose cliff top was dotted with heavy ground-moving machinery - excavators, diggers, dumper lorries, etc. - and tracks and rubble had been made and piled right down onto the beach. There was not a blade or leaf of green to be seen. It was a scene of utter desolation. This site is being developed for fracking. Had I any doubt about the mess this causes, my doubt was dispelled. Under the grey sky with already hazy visibility it created an ominous atmosphere of foreboding such that as we approached

Fleetwood we felt we'd arrived at the very outlandish ends of the earth.

There was one hazard to look out for along this stretch of coast: the chart indicated a pipeline running out about 3NM from the shore at Rossall Point, drying 0.2-2.0m. Low water (Liverpool) was 2.3m and by then it was about low water. We spotted a line of perches stretching offshore, so we slackened off as we approached and I asked Rick to keep a sharp look out forward in the water. "There!" he shouted. "Where?" I asked. We'd just sailed over it, a concrete casement beneath the surface. Probably we had plenty of clearance, but I felt we should have exercised a little more caution.

Ahead off the port bow we spotted the King Scar green buoy, marking our entry into Morecambe Bay where we should alter course NE to approach the mouth of the Lune. Here we entered a strange world of the diffuse boundary between land and sea, neither completely one nor completely the other. Off to port grey misty shadows of ships were moving in the Lune Deep, whereas to starboard a vast expanse of intertidal sand stretched north from Fleetwood. Between the two, occasional figures could be seen: men standing in the water up to their thighs fishing, reminiscent of Anthony Gormley's statues, and a Land Rover crossed the horizon, seemingly travelling on the water's surface. Atop the sandbank rose the silhouette of a flattened, rounded



hillock, atop of which was the gaunt carcass of a tree, probably washed up and stranded by a storm-surge tide; we realized that this mound was the King Scar itself. Beyond, a large derelict scaffold structure came into view. This was the remains of the supporting structure of the defunct Wyre Light. This prominent structure, which dates from 1839, can be seen from afar and marks the mouth of the channel into the R Wyre. A fortnight after our visit a corroded leg collapsed causing the structure partially to keel over, leading to enquiries being made as to who is responsible for it. It turns out that no one knows to whom it belongs as neither Trinity House, Fleetwood Council, nor the Duchy of Lancaster have any knowledge of its ownership.

I have taken to keeping aboard *Star Catcher* a stout 8ft cane which has multiple useful functions, principally as a depth sounder, being much more handy than deploying the leadline, but also as a quant and as a pole with which to fend off. It stows conveniently against the main cross-beam, and it repeatedly proved its worth as we skirted the shallows, feeling our way across the mouth of the Wyre (inshore of the N cardinal Wyre buoy) until we spotted the outer Lune W cardinal (no. 1) buoy, with which we drew abeam at HW-4h. Glasson SC had warned not to enter the Lune before HW-2h, owing to risk of grounding not only on shoals but also on parts of the old training wall which are exposed at LW in the bend in the river between Sunderland Point and Glasson. However, we were not prepared to wait 2h. We guessed that with a draught of only 1ft we could probably skim across the shoals, and we could avoid the training wall by keeping to the inside of the bend as we approached Glasson. So we proceeded upstream, following the buoyed channel – mostly a matter of no choice as some of the buoys were still high and dry.

Once where there was a popple on the water the hulls rubbed briefly on sand but our progress remained steady and unimpeded. Some of the buoys were widely spaced but Rick was good at spotting them with his sharp eyes. Eventually we could make out the useful prominent landmark of the Plover Scar beacon. This distinctive Victorian stone plinthed structure has been repaired this year, having previously had its superstructure dislodged by a ship after collision.

The channel becomes quite narrow where it passes Plover Scar, where it twists into the bend round Sunderland point. The wind had picked up and we were running in fast with the tide, and as we rounded the bend and came onto a reach our speed increased

even more. Rick, at the helm, was enjoying the exhilaration of the exciting sailing, but it seemed wise to reduce our speed, so in mid-stream with a clear stretch of channel ahead we rounded up and quickly got the main down then proceeded under jib. To starboard, inshore of a green channel buoy, we spotted a nasty-looking large iron stake protruding from the mud. This was a particular hazard Brian Hill and I had been warned of when we sailed here at the rally last year, for at HW it is completely submerged. With Sunderland Point astern, we hugged the inside of the next bend to avoid the possibility of encountering the training wall, we swept under the windows of Glasson SC, passed the lock gates of Glasson Dock, then on starboard tack reached into the sheltered bay beyond, luffed up, released the sheet, and nudged the bow in against soft mud. The mud was ubiquitous and had a noticeable tendency to suck the soles of the feet, but we found a suitable place to set the anchor where we could climb the mudbank with relative ease near the edge of the salt-marsh. It was HW-2h, 12h after we'd weighed anchor on the Wirral coast. We'd covered the 45NM at an average speed of just under 4 knots. I had been aboard for 24h when I stepped ashore. Rick, who remained aboard and slept late the next morning, not stepping ashore until after noon HW, remained aboard continuously for 42h! I think this says something about the comfort that is possible camping on a small boat.

On Friday evening Alix arrived with the car and trailer and we availed ourselves of the facilities of Glasson SC. Then on Saturday we enjoyed the company of other DCA members attending the rally, and we sailed together up river, some of us sailing all the way into the city of Lancaster. Thus, aboard *Star Catcher* we had voyaged from the former Iron Age port of Meols on the Wirral coast to the former Roman port of Lancaster on the Lune purely under sail. And we took some satisfaction from knowing that we had completed the voyage and experienced it in a manner similar to how it had been experienced for many centuries, before transport by road and rail became the norm. To traverse the coast in a small boat under sail is to perceive the land from a completely different perspective. The strangest aspect of our journey home towing the boat by car was to see names on motorway signposts flash past in minutes to places we had spent hours passing by boat. I had achieved an ambition and fulfilled a yearning. Had I now sated my desire for extensive voyages by small boat? No, I had merely piqued my appetite for the next one. *JH*



Landfall in the Lune Estuary