

Quantum Sailing - Mileage Builder 2010

Like many would-be sailors, I spent the dark winter evenings pouring over RYA training charts, calculating tidal heights, estimating positions, and plotting courses. All those hours studying paid off in April and now my RYA Coastal Skipper theory certificate takes pride of place in my log book.

Keen to get out and test all this theory, I booked on the first Mileage Builder of the year, with my classroom partner Dave, and we joined skipper Glenn on Quantum Leap for a 7 day trip, destination Northern France and the Channel Islands. We had discussed the Channel Islands many times during the theory course, it promised to be a sailing challenge that we were both excited about.

Sunday evening was spent passage planning, working out our Course to Steer (CTS), tidal streams, reading pilot books etc. Monday morning, 06:00 we slipped our berth at Haslar, destination Alderney. Theory done, now we were doing it for real. The west bound shipping lane provided the first opportunity to take bearings and keep watch for ships. The wind direction wasn't doing us any favours and we were struggling to hold our course and make ground. We hastily considered alternative destinations, Cherbourg would work or, if we sailed very close to the wind, we could get through the Alderney races and press on to St. Peterport. Here was our first dose of reality, a frantic re-plan was urgently needed. A far cry from the spacious dining room table where all that theory was worked out. We had a small nav table, the boat was heeling and there was rain dripping from our waterproof hoods – oh joy! Could we make the Alderney Races with a favourable tide? Get it right and we'd blast down to Guernsey, get it wrong we'd go nowhere. With a new CTS, destination St Peterport, we pressed on in the rain. Now we were looking at an 18 hour passage with a night approach.

The pilot book made scary reading. We opted for the Little Russell channel to save time and Dave set about a pilotage plan - this was not going to be for the faint hearted. As we approached the channel the lights started to appear and take meaning, I was on the helm confronted with what looked more like a night approach to Heathrow. Constant, heavy rain on my glasses didn't help. With the binoculars seemingly glued to his face, Dave desperately tried to make sense of what was ahead and match the lights to the chart. Meanwhile our skipper Glenn, reassuringly at ease with the situation, kept a calm eye on the GPS and the approaching lights as if he was driving down his own street. Suddenly Dave announced he'd spotted the transit lights and all attention turned to getting the yacht onto the transit course, as we picked off the significant lights that guided us safely into harbour. It was approaching 1am as we rafted up on the visitors pontoon. Hopefully we'd pick a yacht that wasn't planning an early start. Alas not. Glenn knocked me up at 6am, announcing that we needed to move to let the other yacht out. Day one of our mileage builder had really tested us and we reflected back on a long, but very satisfying, passage.

Next day we moved onto to Jersey, passing over the sill at St Helier with less than ½ metre under the keel - the large digital display confirming our tidal height calculations and proving that those graphs do work. From St Helier we had a couple of options for the next leg, neither would be easy or comfortable. The wind was going to be coming from the NE and could be as much as 25 knots. We opted to go back to St Peterport rather than beating all the way up to Alderney in a force six. Even that was a very lumpy 22 miles in poor visibility.

Back on the berth in Guernsey, with a few hours in hand, I set about planning the next leg: Guernsey to Alderney. We listened intently to the weather forecast and whilst the wind was dying down, it hadn't changed direction and it was still going to be a beat. Timing was going to be critical, the tides around Alderney are not to be messed with. I worked out we would need to leave at 4:30 next morning to catch the eddy just ahead of high water. I had considered trying to navigate through the Swinge but our window was so small, that the risk was too high. Tom Cunliffe's words of warning from the Shell pilot book played on my mind. Having worked out my CTS, tidal streams etc. we set off, again using the Little Russell channel - it would be good to see it daylight. Out of nowhere, and

without warning, the sea suddenly became very rough. Wind against tide was something we'd discussed on the theory course but I never imagined it could be so dramatic. Added to that we were in a narrow channel, making for a very lively start of passage. The wind was on our bow and we were going to have to tack to make any progress. That could throw out my timings. The tide was with us and we were making good SOG but the Alderney Races were a constant nag in the back of my mind. We could not afford to arrive late. I kept one eye on the chart and one eye on my watch. This was going to be close.... too close. Time for some advice from Glenn. Tidal diamonds are all well and good for theory planning as they allow you to arrive at a nice precise number. In reality they don't accurately reflect the local situation. As we approached the south side of the island the tide was pulling us in the wrong direction. Glenn suggested that staying on the same tack would give us tidal help for longer. We would move away from the island's influence on the tide and then cut across catching the eddy that would take us round the corner and into Braye Harbour. This turned out to be sound advise. As we moved away from land, staying with our winning tack, the tidal help returned. We rounded the corner, the overfalls clearly visible, and quickly focused on finding the transit into Braye Harbour. The photograph of the transit marks in the pilot book proved an accurate guide as we lined up the church spire and white cone. - don't you just love it when a plan comes together?

With the wind still from the North East, we didn't want to be staying in Braye Harbour overnight. So a few hours ashore, chance for Dave to catch up with a long lost Uncle, a bite to eat and we were off again, destination Cherbourg. With a favourable tide we touched 11 knots SOG en route. The benefit of an overnight stay in Cherbourg is fresh croissants for breakfast, and time to stroll around the town and relax over a coffee in one of the many cafés.

Our final leg back to Haslar was going to be an overnight channel crossing, (good opportunity to do some nav light spotting) down the Solent via the Needles channel, stopping at Yarmouth for breakfast. The channel was calm, the sky clear, wind from the west but expected to back later. A spectacular sunset off the port side made a good photo opportunity. To think - 6 hours hence it would reappear off to starboard – how does it do that?!!!!. It was going to be a busy night in the channel. As darkness fell, a seemingly endless procession of lights appeared on the horizon. This was a good opportunity to take some bearings and do some radar practice, comparing our manual observations with the radar. Although as many as 10 vessels were in view in the east bound lane, I was focused on one in particular, it's bearing not changing and the radar confirming we were on a collision course. Although we had right of way she was a lot bigger than us and I was all for making an avoiding manoeuvre. Glenn reminded me that, as the stand-on vessel, our responsibility was to maintain course and speed. I knew that but I had also heard stories that the big ones don't always like giving way. Another check on her bearing – still the same, that red nav light now very clear – had she seen us? And then it came. Alongside the red light appeared the green, she had turned, the red light disappeared and she passed approx ½ mile off our stern. It sounds a long way but with a vessel that size trust me it looked a lot closer. All went exactly as it should – the theory and the reality finally came together.

We arrived at the Needles channel, exactly to plan, as the tide turned and whipped us into Yarmouth to grab a buoy and a well-earned cooked breakfast. It had been a very satisfying crossing. A slow meander back to Haslar to complete the week and add the 250 miles to the log book. But it was so much more than that. Sure I have another 250 miles in my log book, but I have taken so much more from the experience, more than I can write in the log book, more than can be learnt in any classroom. Knowing the theory is good, experiencing the reality is great. Thanks to Glenn this was less a Mileage Builder, more a Character Builder.

Paul – Abingdon