

Two Men in a Flotilla to Wells.....(AKA - At last - I made it!!!!)

Last year my wife and I attempted our first 'Flotilla to Wells' adventure – she lost her nerve, we capsized the boat and never left Blakeney Pit!! We got 'Warrior' back to our mooring safe and sound and with a little TLC from Neil & his team came back to try again.....

So here we are, the first to arrive at the quay, Steve (proud owner) and Colin, (coach at arms) intrepid members of the 2017 Wells Flotilla standing outside Norfolk Etc waiting for the prebrief for the trip of a lifetime - my maiden voyage outside of the safe waters of Blakeney Pit. "It'll be good experience ahead of the 'Worlds' in a couple of weeks and we can give your new jib sheet a good shakedown' ...said Colin ... (sailed all his life and on more than seven seas/rivers/lakes etc)

As I look around me it doesn't matter who I peer at, everyone else looks like a salty seadog with years of experience (apologies to the ladies present!). Neil's brief goes something like this: 'Good to see you all, on station for 10.15am, turn left at the Fairway Buoy and Wells is the next port that you'll come to. Please take plenty of fuel 'cause its wind over tide and some of you will be on the motors for some time.....'

Everyone nods sagely and the question is asked 'What pub for Lunch please Neil?'. It was at this point that I thought I needed to ask the 'Idiots Questions' given this was to be my sea adventure!

Question 1 What does the Fairway Buoy look like?
(Ive never seen it!)

Question 2 How do I know I've got to Wells? (I've never seen it from the water!)

Question 3 What's your mobile number Neil? (I've never needed it before!)

Question 4 How do I contact Wells Harbour Authority? (Well – you never know!)

We turned to kiss our wives a fond ‘goodbye’ and went to prepare the boat.....

A Life on the Ocean Wave..... or ‘Never too Old to Learn’

We had a favourable south westerly with wind over tide both inside and outside the Pit. It made for an easy passage close to the wind to get out onto the ‘Open Ocean’, bearing off to follow the channel between the red and green marker buoys out towards the Fairway Buoy. First question answered!!! The FB is a blooming long way out, a little bit round the corner to the East and it’s a huge red thing (with very grateful thanks to the Blakeney Harbour Association!)

As the course around the FB takes you in the opposite direction to Wells we asked permission of the cover boat to cut the corner (not really but I had to write it). We headed off into the open ocean continuing on a westerly course and thoroughly enjoying the blustery but even seas..... slightly choppy into the wide and tide – me at the helm and Colin getting wet in front whilst figuring out how we could trim the boat with the new furling jib and kicker hauled in. The field was led by a beautifully sailed Gypsy and we tucked in behind as we (still) had no real idea where we were going! I think the Gypsy was being well sailed as we couldn’t hold Warrior so close to the wind and found ourselves after a couple of hours having to tack to get nearer the coast. Amazingly when we looked over our shoulder, and quite by accident, we found ourselves leading the Oyster crews but concluded as usual this was more to do with our ability to jump the start line than our sailing prowess!

Nearing our Goal.....

For those of you that have never sailed to Wells one might expect to see a large seafront appear with a big sign that says

‘Welcome to Wells – Moor Here’. However, due to the vagaries of the Norfolk coast it does a rather good imitation of ‘Brigadoon’, in that it appears and disappears behind bits of headland and vegetation not to mention wandering sandbanks.

You have to steer a course to the far headland and eventually you bump into the Wells Harbour marker buoy which makes the entrance to the Wells Channel. This buoy is a huge yellow and black thing, (whatever the logic is for the colours I still have no idea!) which you cannot miss. You then follow the channel port and starboard red and green buoys which beckon you into safe harbour..... or so one is led to believe.....!

Getting into Wells.....

Anyone that thought, (as we poor innocents did), ‘Ah! – Job done – Time to Celebrate!’ was wrong. Our able Leaders hailed each boat in turn with; ‘Get your motors running – NOW!’ The last time this was said to me I was at the wheel of a race prepared Lotus but this was a very different situation as I was soon to find out.....

Neil had earlier said that ‘It would be good to motor in together as it’s a little tricky to get in first time’. This is an understatement that only the English would come up with - especially to a novice such as myself!!!! Not only does one have to motor through what must be a mile of sinuous channel marked with buoys, but on an ebbing tide with water running at several (??) knots against you – progress was ‘interesting’ to the point where refuelling on the move was required by several of our compatriots. Nevertheless, through fortitude, skill and careful shepherding by our guardian angels (aka Neil & Will) we all made it in safe and sound after 40 minutes of motoring from the marker buoy.

The final step in this the first leg of our Ulyssian journey was to moor up on the jetty. Here we were met by two very friendly harbour masters who warmly welcomed us, made absolutely sure everyone was moored up safely and relieved us all of our harbour dues!! Lunch was duly taken at The

Globe on the Buttlands with tales of adventure, seafaring skills and acts of heroism from all concerned. How we all returned home that night can be left to your imagination – but the bus WAS involved.

The Following Day.....

Neil's instructions were that we should be back on the moorings by 10.30am sharp. Unfortunately, no one told the bus company. Their schedule proposed an 11.15am arrival! We found out at 9.00 and ran for the car, making it to Wells by the skin of our teeth.

The two of us were a little short of time and with permission from our Leaders we took the advice of the Harbour Master and made a break for open water around 10am. We were blessed with a continuing westerly wind and with jib and motor made quick time back out of Wells Harbour following the marker buoys. I am admitting to nothing if we are accused of mistakenly running aground and having to back track for a significant part of the run although..... I am reliably informed that the Harbour Authorities may have videos that will prove this 'fact'!!

From the Wells Marker Buoy we were lucky enough to get a straight dead run with the wind back to Blakeney. What took 2 hours the previous day took an hour to complete on Sunday. Again, for those of you that have never done this trip the entrance to the Blakeney Pit continues to be a mystery to novices..... until you are almost upon it when the aforesaid red and white Fairway Buoy appears on the horizon off the farthest headland. For us this coincided with a complete drop in the wind almost to doldrums levels and so we took a few slow tacks into the mouth of the Pit, whereupon looking over our shoulders the impressive sight of half a dozen red sails bearing down on us (very slowly, but very surely) was a welcome sight. At this point we made a decision to go onto the motor and head for home.

Looking Back.....

This is an absolute 'MUST DO' sail in the annual sailing calendar, especially for those with relatively little experience of the art of open water sailing. For anyone out there thinking 'Should I/Should I not join in' it was a MASSIVELY enjoyable experience and despite the attempts at humour in this little tale at no point did we feel any sense of trepidation. The organisation by Neil and the team to make sure we remained safe and sound and knew exactly what was going on at all times was exemplary – so a HUGE THANKS to all those involved in organising our fantastic jaunt. I hope this account gives you an insight what a great time can be had and I look forward to seeing you next time. (If Neil has the fortitude to take on the task once more!)

Looking forward to next year already,

Steve & Colin – Owner and Crew of 'Warrior' Oyster no 14 – the black hulled one.

PS – See you at the 'World's for more enthralling sailing – weather permitting!