



Plotters - Tom Cunliffe

13 March 2008

There were members we hadn't seen for years. They'd rather bolted their salmon paste sandwiches, put their scrimshaw and baggywrinkle projects to one side, told Elspeth they were off to the cruising club, climbed into the Rover and driven into the darkness - possibly already regretting the sandwiches. Elspeth cried out: "But you seldom go these days Angus and there's to be a lovely concert on the Home Service later". But it was too late. Angus was already opening the throttle a little more than usual and was focussing on the forthcoming treat. Mr Tom Cunliffe was in town.

There were over 100 in the room to see the presentations of some well-deserved trophies in a brief ceremony MC'd by the cryptic NG. And then Tom took the stage to talk, he said, about Plotters. Hearts must have sunk (or at least taken on water) at the thought of two hours on a topic only marginally more interesting than windlasses but they needn't have worried; this was plotters the Cunliffe way.

It started with an extraordinary tale involving a Brixham trawler that had lost its engine off Portland Bill, the Hamble river, a bowsprit, a woman making 10 knots along the river bank waving a gin bottle and a loping man (although these two weren't central to the story, rather additional colour), a shed and a man with a flat cap. I'll say no more but, when they make the film, go and see it. Peter Sellers would have been a good lead but Mr Bean could probably do justice to the man in the shed at the climax.

This was a classy warmup but it was relevant to Tom's central theme which was that we should take advantage of modern navigation systems based on GPS but not rely on them. Of course, that's not novel but there were some in the audience who clearly thought the Man had gone a little too far: while he advocated keeping a proper log, he wasn't insisting on paper chart plotting in parallel. It seemed inconsistent with his love of an older style of boat, his nostalgia for days when he crossed oceans without an accurate clock or an engine and his affection for his old Walker log and his sextant.

But of course it wasn't. He'd moved with the times.

And, of course, he hadn't thrown all the old knowledge away. Even if you don't keep a pencil plot, it is important to know roughly where you are and essential to know where you aren't. Then you can get the full benefit of GPS and avoid the human errors, such as inputting incorrect waypoints, that go with it. Anyway, the GPS/chart combinations are sometimes inconsistent: one sailor,

having safely piloted himself onto a foreign berth, found that the GPS had his yacht on the High Altar of a nearby cathedral.

He could, at the same time, pity those folk who thought it their right to know their position within a boat's length and extoll the benefits of modern electronic navigation systems, rave about GRIB files for met info and the routing software you can use with them. He could, in a similar way, pine for the days when he never took his lifejacket out of its sealed packet (it was anyway one borrowed from under a passenger's seat of a 707), didn't have a radio and EPIRBs were less than a dream and, simultaneously, praise AIS as a really significant piece of kit for sailors in busy waters. In those days, rescue of an ocean sailor in trouble was unlikely (he quoted Blondie Haslar – a mentor – who said when asked what he would do if he got into trouble mid-ocean “I'm resolved to die like a gentleman”). Now Tom's boat is a large black gaff-cutter, heated by a wood-burning stove, that could have tacked up the Hamble in 1900 without turning many heads but it's crammed with the latest electronics – including, I bet, an EPIRB.

It was all delivered with such style and brio, all reflected such a love of yacht cruising and all infused with so much knowledge and experience. Brewed up with some good tales too. Afterwards, the throng slowly dispersed to rethink what cruising is about and the relation between old and new.

Angus had his thoughts too. The taste of the salmon paste had almost gone, the Rover's clutch growled a little and he thought he might invest in a new radio for the boat – a VHF one this time. He'd discuss it with Elspeth over cocoa as he wrote the date of the next MCA meeting (Thursday 10 April 2008) in his diary.

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