



Alan and Anne-Marie Lindsay aboard their Sealine 290 *Hogganfield Loch* at their home berth of Brighton Marina



# First time across the English Channel

Alan Lindsay and his wife Anne-Marie make their first unaccompanied crossing of the English Channel in a cruise from Brighton to Beaucette in Guernsey

I maintained a slightly embarrassed silence in the yacht club as I sipped my beer. A friend was going on about how he had 'gone all the way' and 'how well she had performed'. I'd had a lot of experience myself, but had not managed it just yet – I must have been the only one in the bar who hadn't. I decided then and there that it was high time I did, so I returned to the boat, got out the charts, and started to plan our first crossing of the English Channel.

My wife Anne-Marie and I bought our Sealine 290, *Hogganfield Loch*, early in 2001. We both had a fair amount of previous sailing and, more recently, motorboat experience from crewing on passages along the South Coast and across the Channel.

For possible destinations we considered a direct crossing from our home port of Brighton Marina to Dieppe or Fécamp as fairly straightforward. Cherbourg was an

option, possibly going via Bembridge, Gosport or Southsea. But having done these trips before as crew, we wanted to do something new.

Earlier in the season, an old salt in the yacht club had told us about Beaucette in Guernsey. 'You have to go in through a narrow gap in the cliffs between some big rocks,' he said.

## Not for the faint-hearted

'There's little margin for error. When you get into the gap, you've got a concrete wall dead ahead. When you clear the entrance you have to turn hard to port to miss the wall!' swinging his arms to emphasise the point. 'It's no place for the faint-hearted, that's for sure!'

We have always liked the Channel Islands, and it seemed to us that the old salt must have been exaggerating because that's what old salts do. So Beaucette it was!

A week later, after an uneventful trip to Weymouth via St Catherine's Point on the Isle of Wight, we spent the night in Weymouth Marina. Early next morning the weather forecast was north-easterly Force 2-3, near perfect for our run south. We topped up our tanks at the fuel pontoon and headed for Portland Bill. The forecast had been pessimistic; it was more like Force 1, flat calm with visibility of about six miles in a slight haze. At 0900 we reached our waypoint at West Shambles buoy, and the start of the scary bit – 68 miles across the channel, out of sight of land and across major shipping lanes. With the GPS set to the next waypoint at Petite Canupe in the entrance of the Little Russel, and *Hogganfield Loch* cruising at a comfortable 23 knots, Portland Bill soon faded out of sight. We both concentrated on keeping a lookout for anything in the water; we had heard many tales of



Patrick Roach/PPPA



**ABOVE** Beaucette Marina is on the north-eastern tip of Guernsey

**RIGHT** Under way in Hogganfield Loch



semi-submerged containers, logs, nets, ropes and other nasties which could do untold damage to a small boat with outdrives. For some time we saw no other vessels, either visually or on radar.

Our course took us across the shipping lanes at around 75° – not quite the right-angled track that is recommended, but near enough I thought, bearing in mind that we could easily change course and that *Hogganfield Loch* was fast and manoeuvrable enough to get us away from any problems.

When we reached the west-bound lane, three ships had already crossed our path and were some distance away to starboard. A fourth appeared on radar and then came into view to port. We watched it for a while and it looked like we could be on a collision course, but I decided to let the distance close a little before altering course. The ship came clearly into view, but the radar now showed it gaining slightly and I reckoned that it would pass safely across our bows, which it did by a mile.

Crossing the east-bound lane was uneventful, and Anne-Marie was the first to spot land on the port bow. 'Land-Ho!' she shrieked, like some latter day Columbus.

I told her she'd spotted Alderney, and that it had already been discovered Guernsey

next appeared on the bow, right on cue.

The sun had burnt off the earlier haze so we could clearly make out the rocky shoreline, and could now see Platte Fougere lighthouse which I intended to leave well to starboard, recalling pictures I'd seen in the national press of a Moonraker motorboat balanced on a rock there.

About a mile off Platte Fougere I got the shock of my life. Dead ahead, waves were breaking gently over some rocks! I turned hard to port, slowed to 7 knots and checked then rechecked the chart and the GPS; I was exactly where I should have been on the approach. I was checking for the third time when Anne-Marie laughed and said 'those rocks seem to be coming to take a look at us'.

It was three dolphins swimming towards the boat: I'd mistaken them for rocks as they swam on the surface!

Staff at Beaucette Marina were very helpful when I raised them. We were told to call them when we reached Petite Canupe and they would send out a dory to guide us in to the marina.

I had timed our arrival for high tide to lessen the effect of cross currents at the marina entrance, as mentioned in the almanac. With the wind almost nonexistent, the conditions were good but, especially when visiting a port for the first time, any help is always gratefully received.

It was now midday and the sun was shining down the Little Russel, the reflected glare making it difficult to spot buoys. From the GPS I could tell that Petite Canupe was close and somewhere off the

starboard bow, and I asked Anne-Marie to look out for a southerly cardinal, one with two cones pointing down.

'I know what a southerly cardinal looks like,' she sniffed. 'All I can see ahead is a little stick. But it's got two black cones and they seem to be pointing down,' she said, handing me the binoculars.

'Southerly stick it is, then!' I said, reaching for the VHF to announce our arrival.

We idled just south of Petite Canupe, looking towards a line of buoys that seemed to lead straight to a cliff face, but saw no sign of the marina.

Suddenly a dory appeared ahead of us as if it had materialised from the rocks, the driver waving. We slowly and apprehensively headed towards him and the rocks beyond; as we approached, he turned around and headed back, the rocks now looming even larger and more daunting than before.

'I don't like this,' I said to Anne-Marie. 'We could always head for St Peter Port instead...'

'Look!' she said, pointing ahead. The dory was in a narrow gap in the cliff and at the end I could see a concrete wall. I thought back to what the old salt told us – his story hadn't been exaggerated! Now in the entrance itself, our engines echoed off the steep sides of the entrance. I steered a middle course hoping that nothing came the other way.

When safely through, we turned sharply to port avoiding the wall, followed our guide to our berth and moored up.

It was then that I noticed the depth sounder reading was more than 26m – obviously on the blink, I thought, that's the sort of reading to expect in mid-channel. I added it to my mental list of things to fix.

An hour later we climbed the steep stairway to the restaurant and bar, high above the marina. Lunch ordered, we were drinking cold beers as we looked down on the narrow channel we had come through.

'We did it,' said Anne-Marie. 'Us and the wee boat, all that way and no problems!' '... Apart from the depth sounder,' I said, recalling the 26m reading at our berth.

A man at a nearby table overheard our conversation and leaned across: 'There's nothing wrong with your depth sounder, mate. This used to be a quarry. When they finished with it they blasted out a channel to the sea and flooded it. Hey presto, instant marina!'

■ Visitor berths at Beaucette are limited so you'll need to check there's space beforehand. For details visit the Beaucette Marina website, [www.beaucettemarina.com](http://www.beaucettemarina.com)

## I thought back to what the old salt told us – his story hadn't been exaggerated