

Through the Breakers Over Strangford Bar in a Dragon

By

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In the summer of 1945, I was cruising in the Dragon Elfin. We were old friends for I had steered her during the Clyde Fortnight of 1939. Although the Dragon is a purely racing type, two people can, if they are prepared to do without much comfort, cruise quite successfully. Especially is the case in the type of cruising we were doing. We had sailed down from Cultra, the Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club's headquarters on Belfast Lough.

We had had some very pleasant sailing in the smooth and sheltered waters of Strangford Lough. Sleeping aboard every night but doing most of our eating ashore, we were able to live well. A copious flow of ham and eggs in these sad times goes far to make a success of any cruise.

As we were the first Dragon ever seen on Strangford, we were an object of great interest to the yacht-conscious natives. Our modern high rig and up-to-date gadgets evoked much comment, favourable and un-favourable.

A couple of weeks of this life had, I'm afraid, made us rather soft. It was so long since we had seen anything but dead smooth water and perfect sailing conditions that we had forgotten that things could be different. That the Irish Sea was still the Irish Sea, and that Strangford Bar was still Strangford Bar was brought home to us in a very forcible manner. Now the time had come to sail for home. My crew and I spent our last night in the perfect anchorage of Strangford Hole. It blew hard from the east all night, but in such a place we hardly noticed it.

The following morning we were joined by two friends, who were to sail with us on the trip back to Cultra. One of these was a complete novice, and he expressed great disappointment and astonishment when I told him I was afraid the trip was off. He couldn't understand how the Bar could be too rough to cross when it was so calm and peaceful here. I explained to him that the

easterly gale which had been blowing all night would have kicked up a considerable sea. This sea meeting the 6-7 knot ebb pouring through the narrow entrance to the lough would make the Bar far too dangerous to attempt.

The disappointment that this occasioned was such that, against my better judgment, I allowed myself to be persuaded to go ashore and consult local opinion as to how had the Bar really been. Local opinion agreed that it would be suicidal, but pointed out that as the gentleman seemed to be disappointed it would do no harm to sail down and have a look at it. It would be quite safe : There was a strong breeze, it was a run home, and by keeping close to the shore we should be able to buck the ebb tide when we had seen enough. We heard the roaring of the Bar while we were still more than a mile away, and our landlubber began to get some idea of what we were afraid of.

As we approached, close-hauled on the port tack, we could see that the Bar was certainly carrying on the top of its form. We were still in dead smooth water, but ahead we could see a wall of broken seas extending right across from shore to shore. There wasn't just one wall, but row after row stretching for more than a mile out to sea. One look was enough for me, and there were no complaints when I put her about and ran for Strangford Hole.

We boomed out the Genoa and by keeping close to the shore in the slacker water were able to make fair progress away from the roaring minster. We felt fairly safe and kidding ourselves we weren't really afraid and were quite capable of taking Elfin across if we really wanted.

This feeling of security quickly changed when the wind began to fail, and we started to lose ground to the ebb. We sailed all we knew, but nearer and nearer we were carried to the Bar.

At times the breeze freshened again and our hopes rose, only to be dashed as the drift recommenced. We took bearings on the shore, and it was soon clear that we were slowly but steadily losing ground.

Many a time I have prayed and cursed for the wind to come again, but never so hard as now. Closer and closer we were dragged towards the Bar, and the sound of it was fearful. Millions of tons of water were pouring out through that narrow bottleneck, and, crashing into the big sea coming from the east, were producing a maelstrom that had to be seen to be believed. If we went on like this we were going to be carried over stern first. With no alternative, I told the crew to get into beating trim to get her into beating trim and we would take it bow on. Even bow on I considered there was little hope, for the smallest of these breakers in front of us was capable of swallowing Elfin at one mouthful. In close to the north shore the seas were not just so horrible, so I decided that our only chance was to try and cross there, in spite of the fact that by doing so we stood a good chance of being smashed on the rocks of Ballyquintin Point.

These rocks would at least give the crew a chance to scramble ashore, but for myself I doubt if I would have had the nerve to face Elfin's owner and confess I had smashed his lovely boat into matchwood.

Why is it that the fear of losing the boat is always greater than the fear of losing one's life ?

If I smashed up a beautiful Rolls-Royce it would hardly cost me a thought; but to lose a boat is different. After all, cars have no soul.

We hugged the point dangerously near, but even in close over the rocks the seas were dangerous. I was sailing her as slowly as possible, so as not to hit the seas too hard, but I had to be careful not to overdo it and lose steerageway, which would have been fatal.

She hit the first sea with a crash, the spray flying mast high. Up, up, rose her bow till I thought she was going to fall over backwards like a rearing horse. She managed to climb over the top and fall into the hole on the other side. Now it was down, down, down, standing on her head till I feared she was going to continue her dive to the bottom. I thought this was the end, and it seemed ages before out of the welter the white top of the coachroof appeared. I was taking her as close to the rocks as I dared, and we could see the brown weed close over the port side. We had only a narrow lane down which to steer : too far to port, the rocks would smash us : too far to starboard, the seas would swallow us.

With an heroic effort, she rose to meet the next sea, and my heart warmed to her as up she went again. All this time we were breathlessly waiting for the awful bump that would land us among the foam and rocks close to port. In the middle of all this the memory flashed through my mind of the picture in our family Bible showing the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, marching between two upright walls of water. They were better off than we were : they were going between two seas : we were going through and over them.



She hit the second sea with such a smash that I wouldn't have been surprised if her bows had burst wide open ; for a moment we thought the rocks had us.

These were the most vicious breaking seas I had ever seen, or ever want to see again. They seemed to be rising vertically and falling straight on us bodily.

The first three lines of breakers were the worst, and having cleared them there seemed some chance now that we would be all right.

It was still very unpleasant, for the wind had faded right out and we were left drifting in the confused sea outside the Bar. In a few minutes the ebb had carried us past the dangerous Ballyquintin Point and out into the Irish Sea. Our first look was to see if she was making any water after the hammering she had received. It says something for the Johan Johanson and his shipwrights that she wasn't making a drop. The novice who was deep-sea steamship sailor and who had pooh-poohed the idea of the Bar being dangerous, was practically unconscious from fright and

sea-sickness. He had had a bad introduction to small boat sailing, and was so ill that we were keen to get him ashore as quickly as possible.

The wind was so light and the sea so confused that we were unable to make any progress up the coast towards Belfast Lough.

The only thing for it was to wait till the tide changed, when we knew the seas on the Bar would go down and the flood would carry us back to our anchorage at Strangford Hole.

After four very unpleasant hours, the tide at last began to flood. The seas went down like magic : it was amazing how quickly they flattened out, and, as we recrossed the Bar, what had been a raging lion was now a playful kitten.

The strong flood soon carried us back to Strangford Hole, where our landlubber got ashore as quickly as possible, swearing never again to set foot in anything under 5000 tons.

I have always considered the Dragons fine boats, and after performance my admiration for them knows no bounds. I believe, as Uffa Fox says, that the light displacement types have many advantages. Their great buoyancy is the quality which stands to them in conditions like those I have described.

Soon we were seated before platefuls of ham and eggs which would of astonished Mr Strachey, and even our landlubber was able to smile again.

On emerging from the meal we were met by the boatman who had advised us to "have a look at it." His opening words were : "Ye were very foolish , sir. It's surprised I am to see ye alive. I didna mean ye to go over the Bar, only to have a look."

Only his grey hairs and the good meal I had just eaten saved him from getting one on the jaw.

Notes on the Author.

Eric Strain was 4th in the 1948 Olympics at Torquay. He emigrated to Sidney Australia where he sailed in the Royal Sydney Yacht Club Dragon Fleet. He was reserve helm for Britain at the Melbourne 1956. He was part of Sir Frank Packer's Australia 1'st America's cup challenge sailing the tune up yacht. My father said he as crew would be made to sail back from regattas with the Helm on the lee bunk having had a 'good tea', and he would receive cries of 'Luffing or off the wind' from below decks – and on checking below decks was correct. Eric died in Australia, 1975, his ashes were spread on the racing waters of RNIYC