

Homeward bound

Max Liberson tests his seamanship and comes to terms with grief on a single-handed voyage from Portugal to Plymouth



The best way to get from the Algarve to the UK is to sail to the Azores and wait for good conditions.' This was the advice I was

given when I suggested sailing *Wendy May* home. Others said not to go at all, the voyage would be too much for an 85-year-old wooden gaff cutter.

I'd been in Portugal for two months, having been commissioned to work on a trimaran, but due to Brexit rules I could only spend a total of 90 days in Europe in one go. So I really needed to get *Wendy May* home to Plymouth before flying back out to Portugal to complete the work and do sea trials.

I wasn't looking forward to the voyage. The problem was that the prevailing winds would be strong northerlies all the way up the Portuguese and Spanish coasts.

Wendy May is 26ft long but has a big bow and is quite beamy at 8½ft – not the ideal vessel for crashing to windward for hundreds of miles. I did have a plan, however. This involved steering the best course I could to get well offshore and tucking in behind one of the many depressions that were being blasted in by

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Boatbuilder and freelance boat captain Max Liberson is owner of the classic gaff cutter *Wendy May*. He's also author of *The Boat They Laughed At*, the story of a

ferrocement 42-footer he restored and sailed from Essex to the Caribbean.

the Jet stream that springtime.

My good chum and work colleague Mike Tattersfield went over the weather with me daily, until on Tuesday 4 May, during the evening, he said, "I think we have one". Sure enough, it looked like once the heavy southerly winds had passed there would be a period of lighter south-west winds becoming westerly, 120 miles offshore, and if I could hold onto them I might make it all the way up to the Bay of Biscay without having to stop.

Wendy May was lying at anchor, fuelled and victualled. I'd just serviced the engine and as far as I could see she was as ready as possible. I'd also spent the last couple of weeks working hard to get physically fit by swimming and bike riding.

One problem was that with the never-ending lockdowns I'd not been able to do any sea trails, or even go sailing, so



With sheet to tiller steering rigged, *Wendy May* will dutifully stay on course



LEFT *Wendy May* at anchor in Portimão on the Portuguese Algarve

BELOW Sunny sailing for Max Liberson off southern Portugal



'Wendy was going so well I couldn't bring myself to stop. This was a big mistake'

after six months I was a little rusty. Still, weather window was far too good to miss.

So, I got my passport stamped with an exit date, and on the last of the evening tide on Thursday 6 May, weighed anchor. I sailed *Wendy* out of the river, past the town of Portimão and out to sea. The northerly breeze gradually picked up until we were sailing well on the starboard tack toward St Vincent. The wind being off the land was not kicking up much of a sea and *Wendy* was fair flying along with the second reef in the main, the full staysail and the working jib on.

I had meant to stop at a little anchorage

near St Vincent and get a night's rest, but *Wendy* was going so well I couldn't bring myself to stop. This was a big mistake.

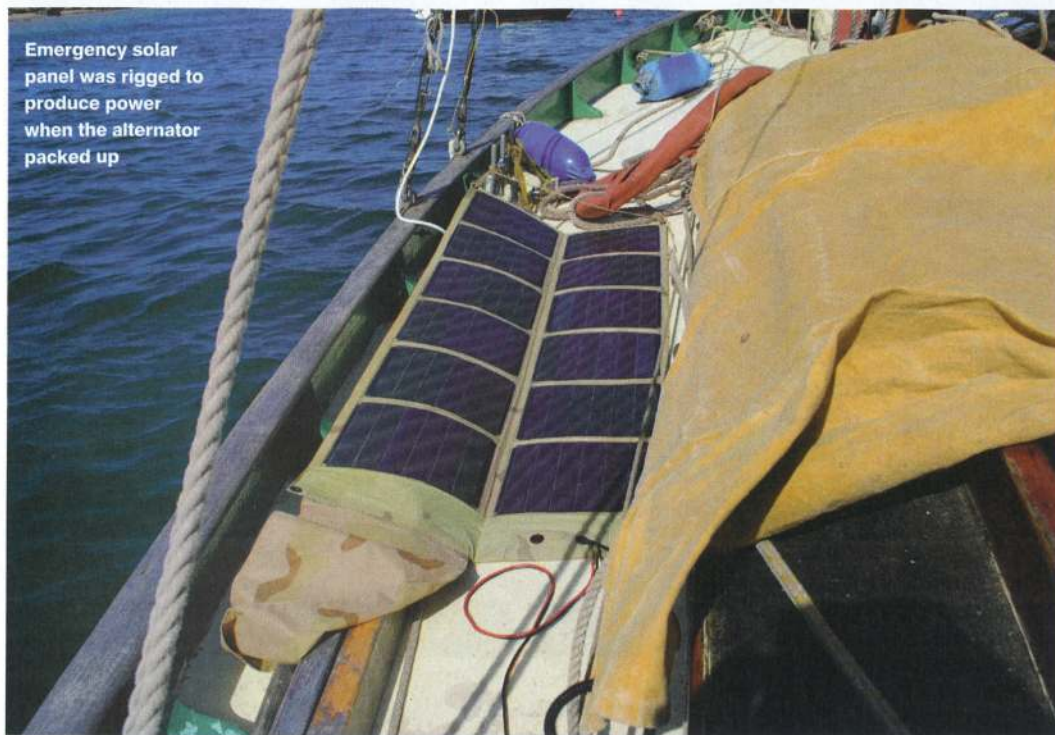
Out from under the lee of St Vincent the seas were running high, along with a big ground swell from the west. Amazingly *Wendy* didn't slow down at all, but just carried on with her mad dash west. I didn't have to steer but just pinned the tiller and let a bit of mainsheet out until she was holding her course all by herself.

Feeling queasy

I had thought I didn't get seasick, but for the first time in many years I felt distinctly

queasy. The motion was extreme, and I was spending a lot of time below stowing items and pumping the bilges, which were filling up worryingly fast. I realised I had a big leak when – even with the electric pump on and me operating the Henderson bilge pump – it still took 15 minutes to clear the bilge. I hoped this was just because *Wendy May's* topsides had dried out in the Algarve's warm winter sun during her six months of inactivity.

Gradually, through the next day, the wind eased up and so did the leak, though it still took 10 minutes of pumping to clear. By the evening the wind had dropped



Emergency solar panel was rigged to produce power when the alternator packed up



LEFT Well sheltered by the massive harbour wall of Peniche

so much that I had to start the engine. Using my satellite tracker, which I could also use to send and receive short messages, I let my brother Alex know what was going on, and he updated my wife, Eva. By 0700 a slight wind had filled in from the south, and I could turn off the noise. We were 135 miles from Portimão. I felt exhausted, after not having eaten for 24 hours or drunk much other than small amounts of water. I gave up trying to just sail at 1000 and fired up the engine. There were 370 miles between me and Finisterre at that point.

Barometer dropping

During the day, the wind filled in from the south-west and we started to make progress. The barometer was dropping, however, and although it was lovely and warm with a blue sea and the boat steering herself, I didn't think it would last. Later, I put in the second reef, and then before nightfall, the third.

By the end of the night we were making 5.5 knots, but heading towards Greenland on a broad reach. I could put us on a dead run, but Wendy was rolling on the big swell and jerking the gear so much the wind was being spilled from the sails and slowing us up.

The wind continued to veer and in the new day we were headed north. Then the wind really came in and I had to continue under headsails through torrential rain. We couldn't steer a course that would take us up the coast. Additionally, because of the constant pumping, I was exhausted. The boat was still leaking badly in the chop.

The only thing to do was head for the nearest safe haven, which was Cascais, 88 miles to the east. We made it there at 0800 the next morning. I hoped to be able to argue 'Force Majeure' if the authorities asked to see my papers. I anchored, pumped the bilge, and turned in.

I was up at noon to eat a large breakfast then went ashore to buy an electric bilge

pump with a built-in float switch, some pipe, clips and cable. I brought it all back to the boat then pulled out my woodworking tools and fitted the new pump.

I fixed the pump high and on top of the keel so that I could normally keep the bilge water below it by using the hand pump, but if I was otherwise engaged the automatic pump would then keep the bilge level below the boards. I figured that at least with some help I might be able to cope with the leak while the boat took up.

We'd not made much water while at anchor. I would have liked to have had the boat hauled at that point, but I knew that I would have to officially re-enter the country if I was going to use the marina's haul out facilities, and I did not have enough spare days for that. Thankfully, the authorities ignored me during my brief stay.

The next morning I woke up at 0630 and went for a swim, before having a big omelette for breakfast. Well fortified, I hauled my dinghy on board at 0800 and went and got some fuel. At the fuel dock a man called Paulo came and talked to me. He was a big fan of classic wooden boats and he came on board for a look around before I departed.

Sadly, what had looked like a good day soon went downhill when I noticed the alternator was not charging. I switched off all electric equipment – including the autopilot and my newly installed automatic bilge pump – and rigged a 60W emergency solar panel.

Another stop was needed, so I headed for Peniche. A slight wind built up from astern and I was able to stop the engine

Limestone stack and lighthouse at Cabo Carvoeiro, mainland Portugal's westernmost point



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With the a leak from

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and rig my sheet to tiller self-steering. The day was improving, and I started to appreciate the wonderful Portuguese coast that was sliding past.

My brother called and advised me to get a move on because there were some bad winds headed our way. I noticed that the barometer wasn't moving and so thought I had time to get into harbour before it struck. I was almost right.

Big squalls

About 15 minutes from safety I encountered big squalls. As there was – as always – a big swell running, we were being thrown about despite the third reef being in the main. By now it was nightfall and it seemed like a good idea to get into harbour and drop the sails in the smoother water.

It was not a pretty arrival, and I was glad it was dark and raining when we arrived, so unlikely anybody witnessed our shambolic entrance!

Peniche is an active fishing port with a fleet of large trawlers and a couple of big yards. There is a small marina but also an

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out-of-the-way anchorage area to starboard as you come through the entrance.

I motored to the end of a bunch of moored craft and deployed the anchor with 100ft of chain. I then rigged an anchor light and gratefully turned in.

I rose at dawn and lathered up with shampoo before diving over the side. A couple of circuits of the boat and I was clean. I then used a small jug of fresh water to rid myself of the salt. Feeling fresh, I ate a well-deserved breakfast, which set me up for the rest of the day.

My first task was to remove the alternator. I soon realised why it had died; the heat exchanger was leaking saltwater onto it. It was a right mess, and badly corroded.

I launched the dinghy and took the

alternator ashore looking for a replacement. I found a car shop, and there I showed the salesman the alternator and asked where I might get it fixed. He pointed me in the direction of a garage.

At the garage, I found a mechanic, who pointed me in the direction of an office. Here, I found a man who could help. He fired up his computer and found the very same alternator. However, after a phonecall, he discovered it was out of stock. Undeterred, he walked me down the street to a car recycling place.

They found something similar but it wasn't right. The kind man then took me to another shop where they ordered a new one for me.

I found Portuguese people to be very kind. If you stay friendly and smile a lot, they will invariably go out of their way →



With the alternator removed the salt water leak from the heat exchanger is revealed



Seawater and alternators don't mix... this one has had it



Temporary plastic deflects seawater leak away from the new alternator

to be helpful. The only mistake you can make is to be bad tempered with them, that just does not work.

The new alternator was due to arrive the following morning so I did some food shopping then rowing back across the harbour to *Wendy May*.

I was glad I'd brought the hard dinghy, because it was much easier to row than most inflatable dinghies and stood up to the usual knocks and abuse of being moored up at a public dock.

I took a look at the saltwater leak. Ominously it was coming from a corroded area of the heat exchanger. It looked like if I went near it, the cast aluminium would crumble away to nothing. I made enquiries as to the likelihood of getting a replacement. Bad news – not only was a new housing horribly expensive, but to get one in Portugal might take several weeks. I thought I could maybe deflect the water away from the alternator and so continue the trip.

Alternator success

I cooked a vegetable curry that night and went to bed early. I needed a good sleep, and blissfully did not wake up until daylight. I had my swim and breakfast, did a few maintenance jobs then went off to collect the alternator. It arrived as I entered the shop. I paid for it then took it back to the boat. It was the right one and although I dropped the vital spacer into the bilges and struggled to find it again, the thing was done in only an hour or so. Firing it up showed all was good. I then played around with it until I had a thick sheet of plastic wedged in that would stop sea water wetting it.

I would have left that afternoon, but it was the 13th and with the way my luck was running I didn't want to take any chances, so I had another night in Peniche. I quite liked the place. There is a large canal system that begs to be explored and an attractive castle. I would like to go back there some time.

The next day I went ashore and bought fresh bread before rowing back and stowing my dinghy, hoisting sails and leaving. There was little wind and I had to rely on the engine. I kept it at 1,500 revs, which gave us 4 knots.

There was no wind until 0930 the next day when a slight breeze built from the



'The morning was calm but the scenery was breathtaking'

south and veered to the west. It looked like it was going to keep on veering into the north, so I went into Bayona, Spain, for a rest and fuel. We arrived at the anchorage at 0400. I dropped the hook, set the riding light and turned in.

After my usual swim and breakfast I took off the engine cover and made an inspection. The alternator was still working, and the deflector was keeping it dry, but I was unhappy with the situation as it looked like it was only a matter of time before the heat exchanger failed catastrophically.

The hull leak, however, was at least not getting any worse. It still took 50-60 strokes of the pump under sail every hour but slowed as soon as we stopped.

The weather forecasts were talking



The castle at Bayona with (right) a replica of Columbus's ship *Pinta* moored in front



about very strong winds, but I had enough time to make some progress up the coast, so I filled up my fuel and water tanks and set sail.

Breathtaking

Again, the morning was calm, but the scenery was breathtaking as we motored slowly inside the islands of San Martiño and do Faro, part of the Cíes archipelago, which was declared a nature reserve in 1980. Then on past the stunning Spanish coastline until 10 hours later we arrived opposite Muros, where there looked to be good shelter from the strong winds that were forecast.

I anchored in 5.3m, about half tide, and put out 100ft of chain. At 0200 the wind was screaming, and the canvas flapping. I didn't bother getting dressed, as any clothing would just have got drenched in the torrential rain. Skin is much easier to dry.

The jib started to unfurl itself so I had to drop it and get a sail tie around it before it did some real damage. Once everything was secured I experienced the euphoria of being close to nature when she was flexing her muscles and showing what she could do. The tranquil bay I had anchored in was now replaced with a seething maelstrom of white water. Our anchor was holding though, and if it did drag, we had room to leeward for me to set another. I was in control and strangely happy. I felt sorry for people who were sleeping through this awesome night.

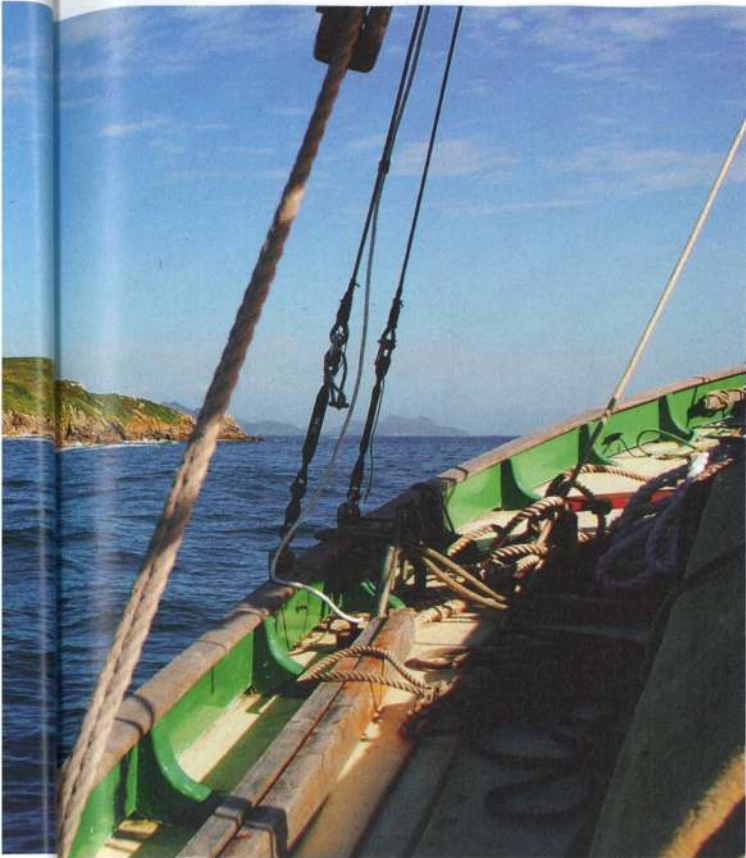
In the morning the wind had died, but it was quite cold. I had little reason to leave

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LEFT Ile de San Martiño
ABOVE Early evening and a gig racing crew training near Muros
RIGHT Lots of dolphins for company in Biscay



as the Bay of Biscay was getting a good dose of wild weather and would be for the next week, so I stayed at anchor and did some maintenance. I took photos of one of the local gig racing teams that flew around the bay in a most energetic way.

Still concerned about the heat exchanger I resolved to do something about it. I needed a marina berth, because if it dropped to bits on me, I wanted to be someplace where I could wait for parts. So I made the short voyage to Camariñas, where I heard there was a friendly marina that was inexpensive.

Break in Camariñas

I took my laundry to Maria's Laundry Service and agreed to pick it up later. Then I went to a hardware store and bought the closest thing to epoxy putty I could buy. Back at the boat I stripped out the front of the heat exchanger and dug out the corroded area. As expected, my finger went right through!

I was left with quite a big hole. Once all

was cleaned up with acetone, I used the two-part putty to rebuild the area. Then I used Sikaflex to make it all watertight when I bolted down the endcap. I then set up a fan heater to warm the area up while it set. Some hours later I put everything back and started up the engine. There was a small leak, but in a different place.

The next morning I repeated the exercise, and this time as the sun was out, I left the job longer to harden off and went for a walk.

The countryside was beautiful. The plants were waking up after a long winter and bees buzzed loudly while they went about their business of collecting nectar. I found a beach sheltered from the strong north-easterly, so I could swim and sleep in the sun. Some hours later I made it back to the boat. Resisting temptation, I left the repair to really harden off and had dinner and a long, hot shower.

The next morning, I started the engine and this time the repair held. I looked at the weather forecast. A calm period was

coming up once the northerly wind veered east, then later a high-pressure system would centre over the UK and give light easterly winds for perhaps four days. It was the window I had been hoping for.

I decided to leave the next morning. Although it would still be blowing from the north-east, if I could make some mileage it would all help. The next leg was 370 miles across the Bay of Biscay. I dreaded getting to the Brittany end where the continental shelf rises up and getting clobbered by a gale.

So, on 24 May, I paid my marina bill and refilled my fuel tank. It was raining slightly but I was champing at the bit and soon we were out in the bay while I piled on sail.

Out at sea my enthusiasm waned. There was a very large swell left over from the strong winds and not really enough wind to get *Wendy May* moving so the rolling about knocked her speed back and stopped her pointing up any better than a square rigger!

After 12 hard hours our distance made ➔



Finger pressure over the corroded area of the heat exchanger led to a big hole



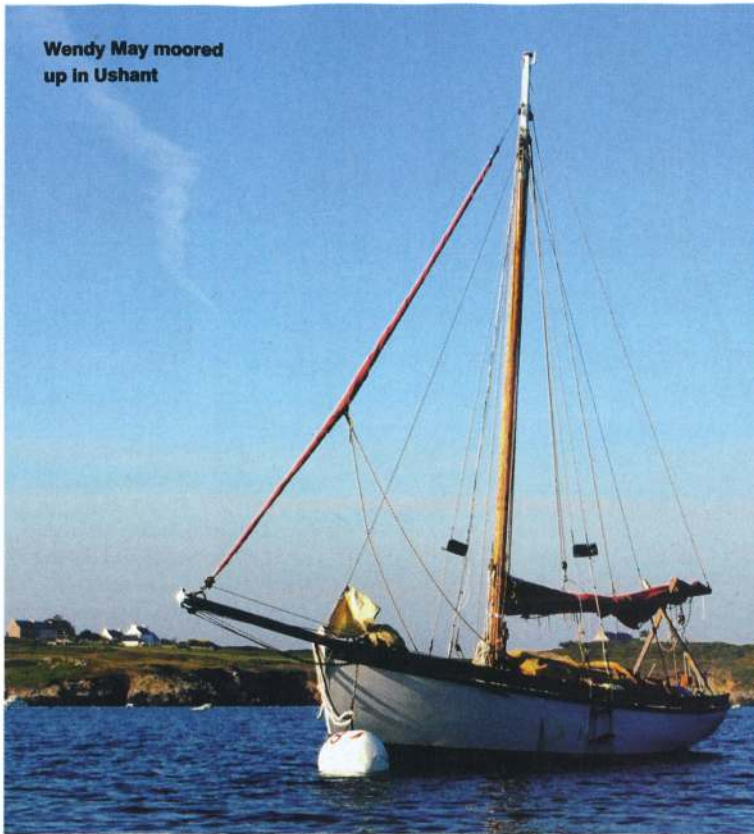
Repairing the hole with two part epoxy putty and Sikaflex at Camarindas



All back together and after plenty of curing time the leak was stopped



TOP
Barbecue
time aboard
this square
rigger at
Lampaul
LEFT La
Jument
lighthouse off
the coast of
Ushant



Wendy May moored
up in Ushant

good towards Ushant was just 17 miles! I turned on the engine, furled away the jib and dropped the staysail. With the autopilot on we started to make proper progress.

We motored slowly all through the 25th, the 26th and during the small hours of the 27th until the wind came up from the east. The moon was bright enough to read by, and dolphins played alongside us.

The sea was flat and the first reef, the working jib and the staysail were all that was needed to get *Wendy* sailing a straight line towards her destination. She made 2.7 knots at first, but this gradually became 4.5 to 5 knots – and some of the most beautiful sailing a sailor could wish for.

Hour after hour, steering was taken care of by sheet to tiller and then later by just pegging the tiller slightly to windward. I had a huge appetite that night so made a pressure cooker full of chorizo, potatoes, peas, peppers, tomatoes, onions and garlic. It was superb.

Our fine wind deserted us the next morning at 0630 but we'd had 36 hours of bliss so I put the engine back on. We were now only 150 miles from Ushant. I took advantage of the calm conditions to climb the mast and knock the pin back into the throat halyard upper block.

Arrival in Ushant

Eventually we arrived at the Ushant port of Lampaul. The wind was forecast to blow hard out of the north east the next day and this harbour looked like it would give us better shelter than Port du Stiff. A big square rigger was moored nearby, and there was a barbecue going. The people

were enjoying themselves, and a kid was jumping off the rail into the sea. It was great to see such happy people. Lampaul looked gorgeous in the fading evening light. I picked up one of the many free moorings, put the boat to bed, ate and went to sleep.

There was only three gallons of fuel left in the tank when I dipped it the next morning so I rowed ashore with two jerry cans. The tide was dropping, and it took me a couple of goes to find a safe spot for my boat. Once done I started the blissful walk to the petrol station. Past granite cottages, bent with age, cats sleeping in the sun and gardens rammed with bright flowers. It didn't take long to get there, but I had forgotten it was Sunday and they

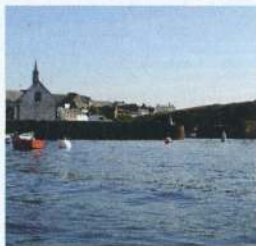
were shut. I carried the cans back to the dinghy then went food shopping.

I went into the lovely church and listened to the mass, and singing, thinking about my recently departed mother. She would have liked the church and the atmosphere. I walked outside and into the graveyard. A corner has been set aside as the last resting place for British war dead, some with no names. It's possible that a great uncle of mine might lie there, as he never made it home like so many others.

I returned to my dinghy while it was just afloat and spent the rest of the day resting and passage planning. It was a bit tricky. I needed to go to Plymouth to get my leak attended to. In an ideal world I'd have left about 0300, punched the last of the tide



Anchored to wait out a foul tide in Poutreou, Ushant



TOP The little harbour at Lampaul

ABOVE Looking towards Lampaul harbour entrance



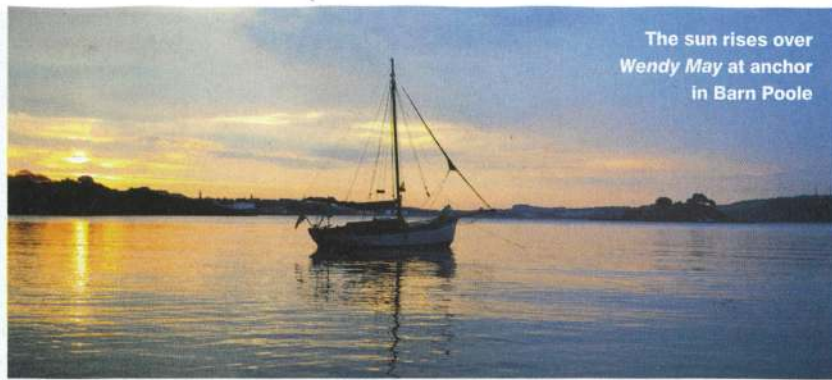
then had a good boost from it and been well clear of the separation zone off Ushant and the French coast when it went foul. I then might have had help from a slight easterly breeze. However, I needed fuel, so I could not do that. I would have to leave while the tide was foul and getting stronger, but even if I could only make a few miles it would help.

I was up and swimming by 0630. The water was crystal clear and bracing! After an omelette washed down with good coffee, I rowed ashore. The garage was still not open so I walked for a bit before I could get fuel. It was still as expensive as I remembered it from last time, and I had to part with €36 for 21lt! I made my way back to *Wendy*, hauled the dinghy aboard and refilled the tank. We had a grand total of 7.5 gallons when I dipped it.

We finally set sail at 0940. The sun was out, and it was a beautiful day. At 1200 I could not make any useful progress against the tide, so I motored into a little bay called Poutreou and anchored. It was another beautiful location, with wicked rocks, cormorants, tall cliffs and blue skies.

I stayed at Poutreou until 1530 when the tide slacked off. Finally, I could set a course for Plymouth. That evening I sailed for only three hours, then had to resort to the motor again.

The next day was much the same, then on the afternoon of 1 June I saw the Eddystone lighthouse. I raised my Q flag and looked at my phone. I had a couple of bars, so I called the National Yachtline, which is a requirement when entering from outside the UK. The man was friendly



The sun rises over *Wendy May* at anchor in Barn Poole

and welcomed me back. I called Eva, who was relieved to hear I was safely back, then spoke to my brother who is the manager at Voyager Boatyard in Millbrook. I told him I'd be there the next morning and he said he would haul my boat out just after high water at 1230.

Home sweet home

As I neared the land my past came into view. In the late 1970s I had been a fisherman working out of Plymouth. Indeed, by 1979 I had my first command, a 50ft wooden scalloper, *The Boy Toby* (a boat so leaky she needed a mechanical bilge pump on permanently when at sea!).

The landmarks came into view and I realised how much I missed this beautiful coast. It didn't seem long before we were past Rame Head, bathed in a glorious sunset. Then there was Plymouth and the pain of missing my mother hit me hard. She had lived in a basement flat on Plymouth Hoe and it had become something of a tradition to call her up. She'd come out and greet me or wave me off whenever I was in the Sound. Her frail figure was missing, and I felt the loss grievously.

We were losing the light, so I looked for a good anchorage. Cawsands was out because the wind was from the east, but Barn Pool near Mount Edgcumbe Country Park was quiet, so I put in there. It's a soft mud bottom so I used a spade anchor instead of the usual fishermen's. Not even the beauty of my surroundings

could break me out of my sad mood as I shed some tears for my mother.

I awoke with the dawn, went for my swim and turned around to look at the fine old building of the victualling yard. The sun was rising behind it and painting it golden. I rushed to get my camera and captured the birth of the new day, and quickly launched my dinghy to row ashore so I could get *Wendy* in the photo.

Memories of my mother came flooding back, and times when she took us as kids to Mount Edgcombe Park to watch the deer or catch tadpoles. Once we got caught in the rain and took cover in the Grecian temple folly. It was like she was there, and I realised what a fool I was, instead of being sad about her going I should be celebrating that I had known her, and she had taught me to appreciate all this beauty. A cloud lifted from me, and I felt at ease for the first time in months.

After breakfast, I took a call from my good friend and ex-shipmate Willie. We'd sailed together on a trawler in 1976 and I had not seen him since. He said he would wait for me at the boatyard.

I hauled the anchor and motored past Mashfords yard, past my boyhood fishing spots of Devil's Point and Mountwise, and into the shallow estuary of Millbrook.

I came alongside and Willie took my ropes. Matt, my brother, and his wife, Tatjana, came down to greet me and I knew the voyage was over and that I was truly home.



Home at last and Max Liberson looks on while a leaky *Wendy May* is finally lifted out