

ONLY BLUE

John and Jennifer Mills wanted their 44 foot long Beneteau yacht moved from Seaview to Auckland. Only Blue was a 1989 version of this popular brand and the main problem I could see was that they wanted the passage to be made in June – and that meant winter, cold and gales.

It was March when they asked for my assistance advising they would have the use of a mooring in the Mahurangi estuary from the start of June. Time passed and April and early May had many days of pleasant conditions but neither the yacht nor the mooring was available at that time. My own schedule restricted availability for the weekend of 25th May but that was of no consequence as the week before and after was a period of strong winds.



There was time for a test run about the harbour and the only thing that seemed strange was that the engines revolutions counter did not show

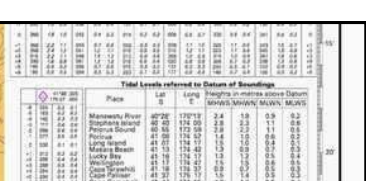
accurate numbers. I was advised that it was often erratic. Much later we found out why.

On Thursday 29th May I warned John that Saturday looked promising. The crew were advised and dry goods put aboard on Friday. I suggested that fresh food waited until first thing Saturday when I could confirm departure. Midday was probable. Saturday morning the forecast indicated that the gales from the northwest were easing in Cook Strait and for the Castlepoint area the winds were expected to be 50 knots easing to 40 knots north of Flat Point. If we left near midday then by the time we covered the 80 miles to Flat Point the prediction was that the wind direction would have moved to southwest and the speed dropped to 25 knots. My thoughts were that it might be bumpy from the harbour entrance to Palliser Bay but the wind would be from astern. After that we should have an easy sea.

Louise delivered Wayne McEwen and I to the marina by 0900 Saturday and David Reece and John arrived soon after with the fresh food. Stores were stowed, running rigging checked, the sail bag for the staysail secured and by 1130 we were motoring out of the marina. The wind at Seaview was about 13 knots from the north but even so we hoisted the mainsail with three reefs tucked in ready for what might become a battle once out of the harbour.

With the mainsail and motor we went rapidly down the harbour. By 1240 we were passing Pencarrow Head and the wind had freshened. I held the course at 196 degrees true for three and a half miles before turning to starboard and did that by tacking rather than gybing in the fresh wind and confused lumpy sea. That brought the wind almost astern and we soon returned to the starboard tack and headed further south. Another mile later we turned onto a course of 135 degrees true for our run down to Cape Palliser. The sea conditions did not improve until we were due south of Turakirae Head. At 1400 the wind eased and switched to the south at about 12 knots, the lumpy sea

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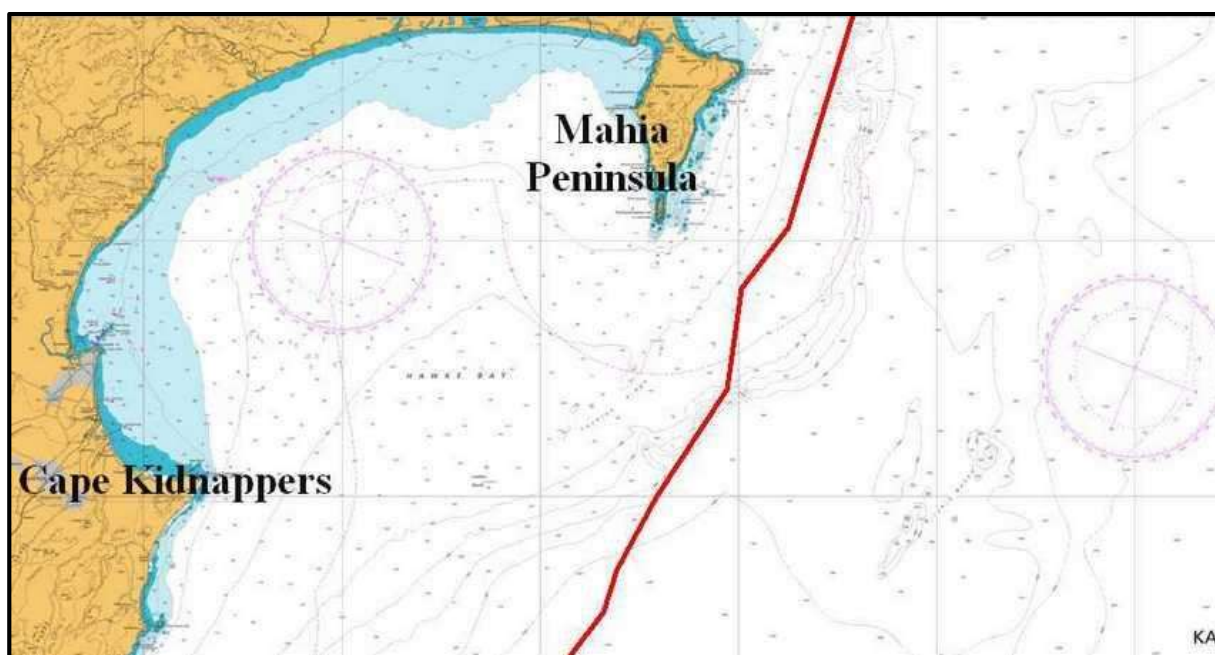
the work until 2100 hours. By then we had rounded Cape Palliser, seen two ships pass five miles to seaward of us, and were southeast of Te Awaiti. The wind had by then returned from the west so the genoa was again set and engine was off for another two hours until the wind speed reduced to below 12 knots. At midnight we were due east of Flat Point and just as hoped from the forecast the wind stayed from the west and remained light for the rest of the night. It was warm and dry on deck, the sea was calm and the Perkins Prima motor purred. The off watch crew were able to be in a bunk or if not feeling the best sit and doze in the cockpit. The first half of the night the sky had been clear with some light from the crescent moon. In the early morning only the stars provided illumination.



Sunday at 0600 the sky lightened and the wind increased to 12 knots from the west. The genoa was unrolled, the engine thanked and silenced and Only Blue surged forwards. By 0900 we were passing Cape Turnagain, and then continued up the coast slowly increasing the distance from the shore. The sea was a bit lumpy but not

troubling Only Blue. At 1130, when we were 24 hours out of Seaview marina, we had covered an impressive 175 nautical miles.

By 1622 the wind faltered so the engine was back on as we approached Hawke Bay. Only Blue was 34 miles to the east of Cape Kidnappers so of course that was not visible. Cloud covered the sky, the wind decreased to almost zero and the sea became progressively calmer. The east side of Mahia Peninsula was without its usual uncomfortable sea and it became a magic night with a glassy sea, no moon and at times some mist. A couple of pleasure boats passed us going south and it was not until 0700 Monday that we had enough wind to set the genoa and stop the engine. The mainsail was lowered because it was preventing the genoa from filling.



Monday became warm, the sky cleared and we were bathed in sunshine. There were a few boats at sea adjacent to Gisborne, but apart from that our horizon was empty. By midday the wind again vanished as we crossed Waipiro Bay.

It was an opportune time to top up the fuel tank. Three 20 litre containers of diesel were taken out of the starboard cockpit locker and

poured into the main tank. John was uncertain if the fuel gauge worked properly but after accepting 60 litres it showed half full.

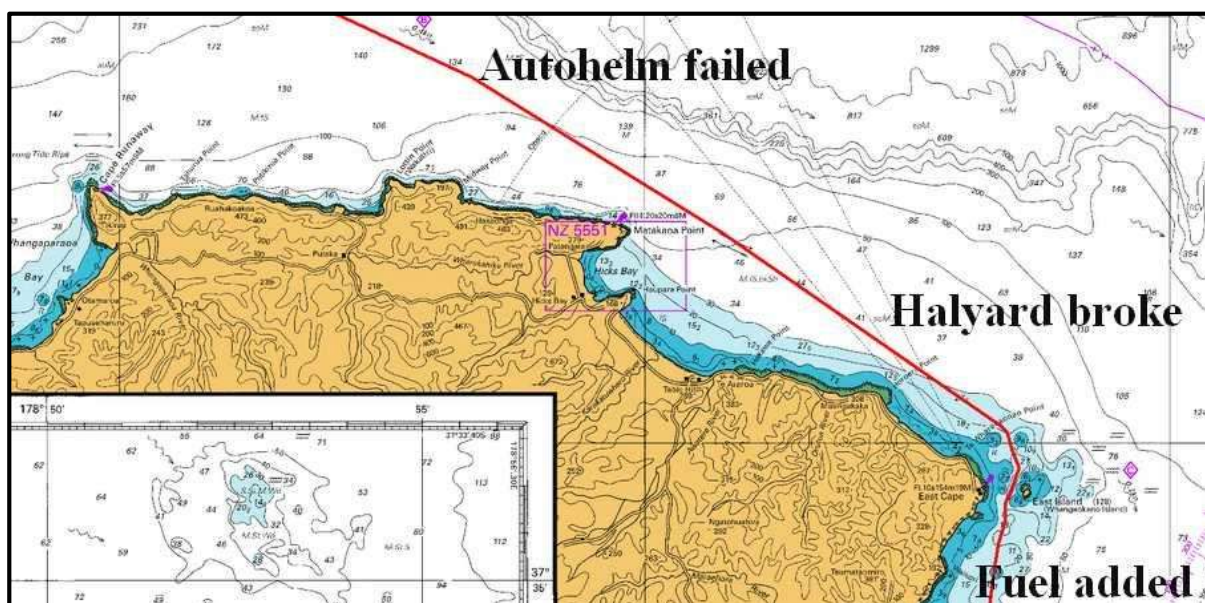


We could see East Cape ahead and I was not in a hurry as on the north side of the Cape would be a head wind. The wind there was predicted to ease and turn southwest after 1700 hours. Thus under sail we moved at about 5 knots for two hours and were at the Cape at 1500 hours. The motor was turned on just before we entered the passage and I was puzzled that we were making slow progress.

“There must be some tide against us,” I said. The speed over the ground dropped further and I went to the stern and looked over and saw there was no propeller wash. I brought the throttle back to neutral and heard the gear box disconnect button pop out. I then pushed the lever forward and was rewarded by a rush of water at the stern and the speed returning to six knots. While David was steering

he had asked what the button did and must have experimentally pushed it inwards where it had stayed.

Once clear of the East Cape passage the wind came back from the southeast at 5 knots so it was time to hoist some more of the mainsail. The yacht had a lofty mast and until then the triple reefed mainsail and genoa had provided more than enough power. The reefing line and mainsheet was eased, the halyard eased to release the luff from the horn at the forward end of the boom and power applied to the halyard winch. When the rope groaned the winch was stopped and I tried to set the sail that looked very baggy. The reefing lines were all loose, the slides were not jammed but the sail needed to go another two metres up the mast. Then my tired eye spotted the problem. At the halyard's exit box on the mast there was another rope sticking out jammed against the halyard. I eased the halyard, then realised that it was an electrical cable that was poking out in a loop that had jammed the halyard. I pushed the wire back into the mast and wondered why the wires were loose inside the mast when usually they are corralled inside a tube.



Back at the winch the sail climbed another metre and then became reluctant. There was a bang as the bolt holding the shackle for the

halyard turning block at the mast base snapped clear of the moulding. The mainsail was lowered completely, the turning block moved to an adjacent shackle and finally the mainsail was properly set with the second reef in place.

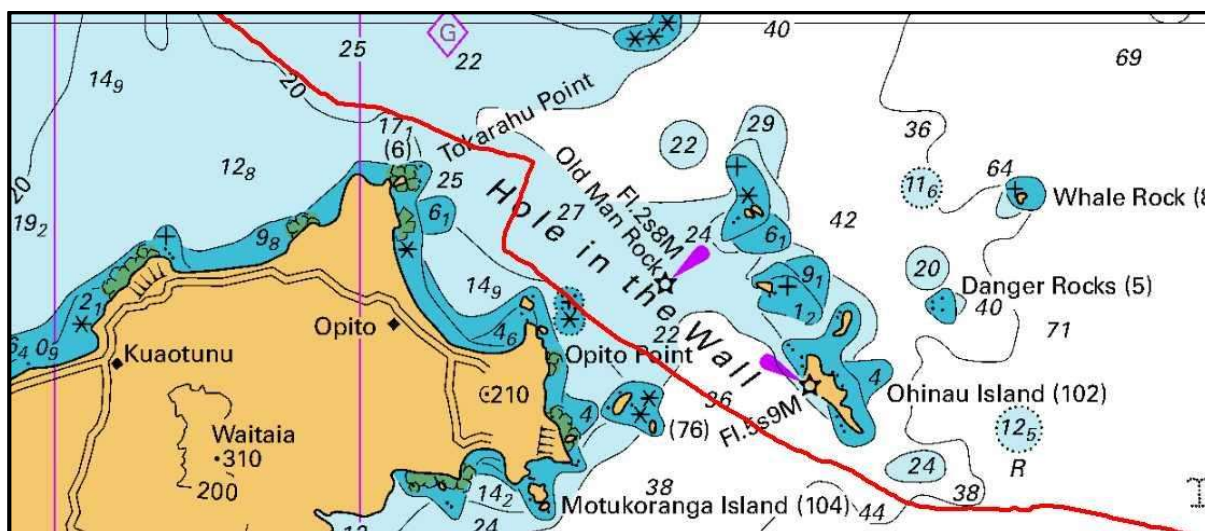
To start with the wind was from 230 degrees but there was a left over head sea. Thus the motor pushed while the mainsail tried and the headsail if set refused to fill properly. The genoa was rolled away and with main and motor(with a firm throttle) we crossed the Bay of Plenty. By 1800 hours on Monday we were due east of Hicks Bay, at 2000 due north of Midway Point and two hours later 8 miles due north of Cape Runaway. The head sea was a bit bumpy and at times Only Blue would leap in the air and land with a resounding crash all of which was robbing her of speed. It also meant that the foredeck was often swept with spray that then found its way through the two deck hatches. That was making the forepeak damp.

In the early hours of Tuesday the throttle was eased while Only Blue behaved like a rabbit. There is a consolation from these conditions in the Bay of Plenty. The further you go the smaller becomes the sea and the better the progress. At 0600 our speed over the ground had increased to just below six knots and daylight showed that there was heavy cloud cover. For 90 minutes after 0900 we set some of the genoa. The wind then veered and stayed resolutely from the west when our required course was about 290 degrees. Thus the 20 degree wind angle to the yacht was too narrow to allow us to sail unless we wanted to be well off course. I wanted to be around Cape Colville by midnight to miss a predicted storm for Wednesday, so we motor sailed onwards.

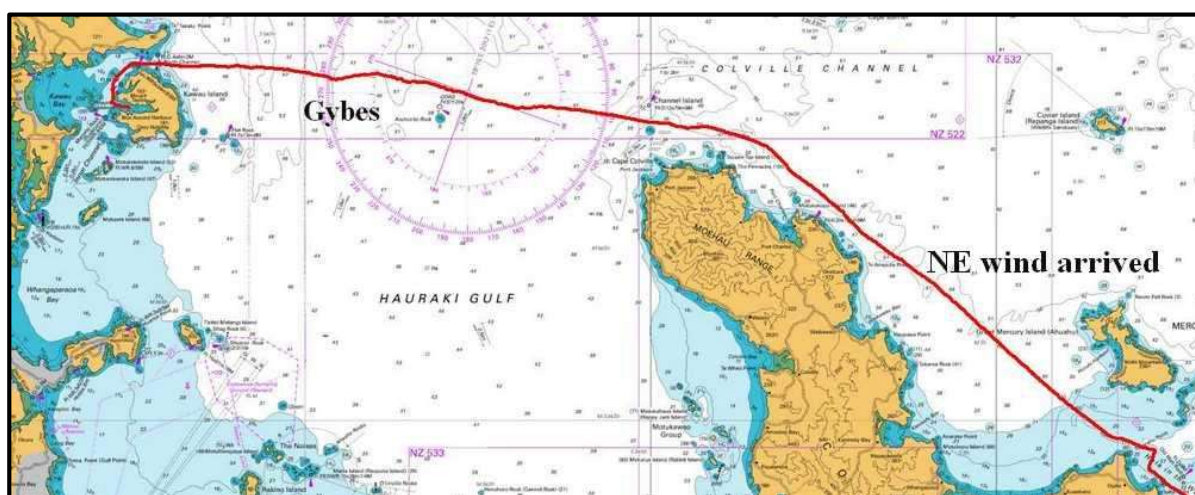
We had been having trouble with the autohelm since Sunday evening. Every now and then it would go onto Standby. Unless the helmsman was watching the yacht would then veer off to either port or starboard. When the wheel was used to bring the boat back on course the Auto

button could be re engaged. Wayne and I found that easy, but David and John, with less experience, tended not to notice the course change, especially at night. Just before dark on Monday the autohelm refused to re-engage with a displayed a message saying low battery. The meter for the battery banks seemed to indicate that all was well but I puzzled over why the voltage for both banks was only 13.2 rather than 13.8 or more. Not having an answer to that we were left having to steer by hand. The watch times were reduced.

At around 2000 hours on Tuesday I was at the helm and the rest of the crew were below. We were approaching the Hole in the Wall in calm conditions with a ghost of some wind. The yacht was motoring at a steady six knots when the engine revolutions smoothly died away to naught. The night was silent except for exclamations from the crew. Out came the final two twenty litre containers and the fuel they contained went into the tank. The fuel gauge then showed under a half. The engine only needed the hand pump to get the fuel to the lift pump and a couple of tries with the starter motor had it again running. I then did mental distance calculations and a review of the wind forecast. By 2300 hours a light northeast wind was due. We would need a bit over two hours of motoring to get up to Port Charles and from there should be able to sail. A final hour of motoring would be needed to get to anchor at Kawau Island. Forty litres of fuel should be more than enough. We set the genoa and sailed through the Hole in the Wall but once clear the genoa failed to set so was rolled away.



David took over the helm from Wayne and me. I retired to the aft cabin and slept for about two hours. A decrease in engine noise woke me and on deck I saw that the predicted northeast wind had arrived. David and I unrolled the genoa and soon stopped the motor. We glided by another yacht moving in the opposite direction. By 0100 on Wednesday we were in the Colville Channel north of Square Top. The yacht was moving well and we were easily able to make our required course of 290 degrees. There were 24 miles to cover to get to North Channel of Kawau Island where we would find shelter.



At first there was little sea and a fine sailing wind. John came out into the cockpit to experience our swift passage. David was enjoying being at the helm and I was keeping a careful watch. The further we went the more the wind and sea increased but the wind direction

stayed about the same. Only Blue was on a beam reach and doing her best. John and I progressively rolled up the genoa to reduce the pressure on the helm. With the wind on the beam it seemed unlikely we would need to worry about a gybe. The sky was cloud covered, night black and for the first part of the passage the only visible lighthouse was on Channel Island behind the yacht

With six miles to go the wind and sea zipped up a notch and David was struggling to keep on a steady course. The plotter despite being at a low light level was blinding and there were no visible lights ahead. It was raining. I yelled a warning as I realised the yacht was yawing to leeward. By the time David had wrestled the helm to starboard it was too late. With a crash the mainsail gybed.

“Go to port and we can tack back on course,” I cried but by the time David had processed that thought, Only Blue had veered back to starboard and with another crash the mainsail again gybed and then again. Wayne came out to help while I took over the helm. The main halyard jammer was released, motor started and the headsail rolled away. I headed the yacht into the wind and lumpy sea. Wayne went forward to bring the sail down but found that the slides were jamming in the track. With the headboard about two metres above the boom I called him back to the cockpit. The sail area had been hugely reduced as its bulk was down to the boom and being held by the lazyjacks. The boom looked rather too low but as I was battling with the helm to counteract the sea and poor visibility it was not a problem which I needed to deal with, just then.

It seemed a very long hour to get into North Channel. The wind and rain persisted; visibility was almost zero so we trusted the plotter and my notebook computer for our course. For a long time I could not see the lights that mark the channel.

Around 0530 we found close ahead, the light on Kawati Point and the light on Maori Rock. Wayne was steering while I was in the

companionway where I could see the track on my notebook. We swept into the calm waters nicely in the middle of North Channel and then turned to port for the run down to Bon Accord Harbour. The sea was calm but the wind still fresh. We were anchored by 0640 and after tidying the mainsail and securing the boom it was time to retire out of the wet and put our heads on a pillow.

I was awake and moving an hour later. I needed food first and then looked at the damage. The mainsheet traveller was a mess and the gooseneck fitting at the front end of the boom had been shattered so that the boom was no longer attached to the mast. I disconnected the main halyard and fixed that around the front of the boom and took the weight using the winch. That got the boom up to its normal position and relieved the lazyjacks of the weight.

The traveller had stops at each end with one thick bolt holding them down to the I beam. The stops contained the pulleys and cam cleats for the control lines. On the port side one of the cam cleats had been missing before departure. The traveller had been positioned with both lines tight about 75% of the way to port. The port side control rope had pulled loosed so on the third gybe the force of the traveller moving had snapped the bolt holding the starboard side stop in place but the rest of the traveller was not damaged. No other parts of the yacht were damaged.

John had intended to go the Scotts Landing to unload before leaving Only Blue on an adjacent mooring. The yacht's draft was 2.4 metres and it was doubtful we could get alongside Scott's Landing even at high water. I suggested he needed workmen for repairs and walk on access from Sandspit marina or failing that Gulf Harbour. Sandspit advised our draft was too great, Gulf Harbour had a vacant berth but did we have enough fuel to get there? The fuel gauge showed about an eighth and that worried me. A water taxi from Sandspit could result in filling several containers but was expensive. We had tried

calling the Kawau Yacht club to ask if diesel was available but there was no reply. I was standing in the cockpit and gazing at the yacht club wharf, 400 metres to the east of our anchorage and had a thought.

“David, what does it look like is on that wharf?” I asked.

“Fuel pumps,” was his instant reply.

“Then they will surely be card operated,” was my thought. I looked with the binoculars and then handed them to David’s younger eyes. He confirmed they were pumps. Wayne and John launched the dinghy, Wayne clambered down to it secured the oars, and then brought it around to the stern where John and I used the crane to lower the outboard motor.

“Is the tank full of petrol,” I asked and received a positive answer. Two empty diesel containers were lowered into the dinghy and John and Wayne motored to the wharf. Sometime later they set out in return with John crouching low in the bow and Wayne sitting on the fuel containers and rowing. The seat had been missing for some time and the containers had filled the need. The outboard’s fuel tank had not been full.

The diesel went into the main tank, the outboard and dinghy were stowed, the mainsail zipped into its sail catcher and we then relaxed over a late lunch. The wind outside the harbour was still strong and it was raining, but by 1500 we had to move to make use of the daylight. There were 18 miles to cover and we would manage the rough part in daylight. The final approach would be in the dark but I had entered the marina previously.

The anchor winch made slow hard work of lifting the anchor. The chain also jammed under the winch, but after a while it was free and the anchor was aboard. No one had enthusiasm to play with the sails so the motor purred as we went south. I steered as far as Motuora Island and Wayne steered until almost at Gulf Harbour. We soon

found pier D and I made an accurate guess that berth 10 was on the north side. A slow approach was made along the fairway, then backing up because we could not see an empty berth, a phone call to security assured us it was three berths from the end(it was five). I tried again, found the berth and gingerly nosed into the narrow gap between the finger and the pile. There was about 200mm to spare each side. Only Blue was soon secured.

While Wayne prepared dinner I went ashore in search of facilities. The door code I was given did not work and I needed Wayne to come and open the gate so I could return to the pier. We found out in the morning that the requirement was to enter the number and then press an arrow key below the number pad.

We had a fine dinner and assisted it with tots of Rum from a bottle that Matt Nolan thought he was owed. As he had not managed to make the journey we used it for him. Everyone was tired so it was early to bed.



The morning was greeted after a good night's sleep. I headed off to the showers and soon found that shutting my eyes while washing my hair was dangerous. My reflexes were automatically adjusting for a

moving deck. One hand on the wall and one for rubbing my scalp was required.

The journey to Kawau Island had taken us 92 hours and for 67 of those the motor had been running. Despite that on Thursday morning the domestic battery bank was empty. I started the engine and it was clear that neither the starting nor the domestic the alternators were charging. The power to activate the alternator usually comes from the wire connected to the ignition circuits. If that wire is loose or missing the alternator does not start charging and there are no pulses for the tachometer to count. That then provided the reason why the tachometer for the engine had fluctuated in the past and died completely as we started across the Bay of Plenty. It also explained why the Autohelm stopped working. The windmill and solar panels had not been enough for the self-steering's hungry needs. It was found that at the back of the alternator the wires were loose and had shorted with another. I also deduced that only the alternator for the starting battery had been working when we left Seaview. A VSR must have let it do duty for both batteries.

It had been a reasonable journey and we had missed the most extreme weather that had been about. The yacht's hull shape did not make it easy to steer downwind or on a reach. With no moon, heavy cloud cover and rain, the way ahead was complete blackness so hand steering was hard. The plotter did tell you where the yacht was pointing but only after the event. Thus instinct and no extraneous lights were needed for the helmsman to steer a reasonable course. Having the plotter directly in front of the helmsman blinded him to the direction the yacht veered. I preferred the plotter to be horizontal and dim but could understand why John and David thought that having the screen facing them was better.