

The Further Adventures of Skipper Keith – Maiden Sail

Skipper Keith had chosen Race Training Day on the first weekend in May to take Ramillies out - he was pretty sure he was ready. There had been plenty preparation for sure, good stock of food, a few beers, new sleeping bags, radio fitted and plenty Diesel for the monster engine.

At 5.5 tonne and 34 ft Skipper Keith was a bit concerned about a couple of issues.

Issue 1: having a plan should the engine not restart for any reason.

Issue 2: mooring.

In relation to the former, rules were simple and made clear by Pop Up Phil. No entering the mooring areas under sail, it's dangerous and must be done under power. This is all very well but what if the engine just doesn't want to play.

Skipper Keith now likes to have contingency plans in place having learned some hard lessons last season when he preferred flying, or sailing, by the seat of his pants.

One of his tasks on crane in weekend had been to secure the visitors buoy outside the main harbour, clearly this was plan B if such a circumstance occurred at, or near, the FCC. Picking up the swinging mooring was not a great problem; tricky under sail he was sure, but possible even if it took a few attempts. But how would he and any crew get from the yacht to land? Towing or carrying the tender wasn't realistic. Skipper Keith's solution was to take onboard and stash away an inflatable canoe. Plan B in place....issue one covered off ...tick.

The second issue was one that had been on his mind since acquiring Ramillies, and generally bothered him - full stop - no matter what yacht he had. Dropping and picking up the mooring was particularly straight forward no matter the yacht. Ramillies was however twice the size and 6 or 7 times the weight of the Leisure 17 he started with this time last year.

Mooring had been a bit of a challenge for a few as crane in day had shown. A few skippers had berthing issues on crane in day, a few ropes got in the way and engines stalling. It wasn't all plain sailing. It seldom is. Anyway 'Secure the Bow line first, that's the tricky bit and the rest will come together' was the advice of Pop Up Phil.

Having replaced the non sinking running lines and double checking all the lines were all on the outside of any shrouds (a mistake made early last season having cast off only to be held and spun on the running line still inside one of the shrouds ..oops) Skipper Keith started up the mighty engine and let it warm up as he removed the sail covers and prepared to head out.

Roger H owner of Moon Shadow was planning to go out and would wisely be off mooring ahead of Ramillies just in case of any take off mishaps. No need for a repeat of last week's near miss.

The plan was to join the few yachts that had gone out to practise their racing starts and turns before the first race. A call from Pop Up Phil was received by Skipper Keith and some last minute advice given about dropping the stern lines first and letting Ramillies drift away from the lines that could get tangled in the propeller and pointing the bow to windward before a final check and casting off. That indeed was his plan so good it met with Pop up Phil's advice. And so it happened with no great issue, well just a tiny one, but this was quickly resolved, and out into the Forth she powered to join the others.

Sadly this was to be quite a short trip, in fact a very short trip. Having footered about with and eventually raised the mainsail whilst trying to keep the yacht pointing bow to wind, an issue arose. Of course it did I hear you say.

Just when ready to set sail Skipper Keith switched the big engine into neutral and turned to catch the wind to see how Ramillies reacted. It was by then quite breezy and the mainsail should really have been reefed. She was fine and Skipper Keith

wisely decided not to run with the foresail; so now to kill the engine and enjoy the silence....ignition off...the engine still growled away. Strange Skipper Keith had planned for a failure to start the engine but not a failure to stop it.

He could sail with the engine in neutral but this was bothering Skipper Keith and he didn't see it as a good omen. Additionally he could see Moon Shadow appeared to be heeling over quite a bit and thus decided he wasn't pushing his luck. This season was caution first; bad decision making second.

His decision was made, return to the mooring and check from a position of safety and security, and it was really getting a bit choppy as he found out when the wind caught the mainsail on a moment of lapsed concentration and reminding him swiftly of its power.

The line of approach with the strong easterly was bow into the wind and reduce speed approaching the pickup buoy, use the wind to slow Ramillies on the approach and secure that bow line. It went just as planned, stop secured and in the post first time. Now came the tricky bit as the yacht had to turn 180 degrees past the buoy and into the wind to secure the stern lines. With the running line in hand Skipper Keith thought he had it in the bag as he marched towards the stern but Ramillies drifted backwards in the wind and unable to hold the weight it was time for a rethink. This yacht would not be pulled around on its running line it was just too heavy.

Time to use its 50 big sea horses power. In his head this was simple, power on gently to the bow stop until it took the tension, full lock on the wheel and tickety boo the power of the pivot would spin it round and allow the stern lines to be collected and secured. Sadly that wasn't the reality, whether in forward or reverse gear Ramillies just wouldn't spin beyond 45 degrees to allow the stern to come far enough. After about 15 minutes of various manoeuvres Skipper Keith could see Moon Shadow approaching hoping to take up her mooring adjacent but way too worried about the kerfuffle ahead.

After what seemed an age, and for no logical reason, Ramillies eventually spun beyond the 45 degree barrier and the stern manoeuvred to allow the tender line, which was secured to the stern strop, to be grabbed. "...this won't be pretty" thought Skipper Keith but now quite tired he was caring not a jot. Grabbing the tender securing line he reached across the life line and got his hand on a stern strop, then stretching a foot to the throttle he kicked into reverse backing it up into the wind and releasing a little tension on the strop and got it on to the peg. Thank God. Kicking the throttle back into neutral it was the thumbs up for Roger to bring Moon Shadow in.

Well that should have been it really, yacht tidied up, covers on and back home, Alas the strangest or strange things was about to happen.

Time to kill the engine. Skipper Keith turned the ignition key to OFF but the engine continued to growl away. Then he remembered. What a fool - the power is just to start the engine not stop it. The kill switch is in the cabin. Locating the red Kill Switch he pulled it out. Again nothing; the engine growled away. Confused Skipper Keith lifted the casing away from engine to give a better view, the engine growled louder now exposed in its raw form.

Now let's be clear Skipper Keith is as qualified to be a mechanic as he is a Skipper. That's right, he ain't no mechanic but he understands the principal of the internal combustion engines. Power required to start it, fuel mixed with air required to burn and as a result power to the pistons. So thinks he, how do you stop this beast when the kill switch won't. Following the fuel line back towards the tank he located the fuel valve and turned it to the "off" position.....nothing, the engine continued to growl.

This beast was alive; it had experienced life after a long winter and wasn't for dying. Now mightily confused Skipper Keith followed the fuel line from the tank to the fuel filter on the engine. Having ran out of his limited ideas he disconnected fuel line at the engine, surely it must die....but it didn't, it growled with complete indifference at his attempts to take its life.

It has to be said that a few things came to Skipper Keith's mind:

Thing 1: you are a moron and there is something so obvious you haven't done;

Thing 2: this engine is the devil it has its own life;

Thing 3: I am rich; I have solved the world's energy requirements, an engine that runs on air.

Thing 4: this is peculiar but I really need it to stop so I can go home, its cold.

Requiring a second opinion Skipper Keith tried to call John G the former owner, perhaps he could tame the beast. Alas he couldn't be contacted.

Skipper Keith then summoned the assistance of Roger who had put Moon Shadow to bed by this time.

Having explained the situation and actions in detail, both followed the fuel line to the fuel pump where it was disconnected. No fuel was therefore getting into the engine, yet it continued to run despite this. Unless there was some further fuel line or a reserve within the engine they agreed the engine had to be possessed by the devil himself.

If it didn't require diesel to run it, it was in fact the first engine ever to run on fresh air. If so, then surely denying it air had to kill it. Roger placed his hand over the air filter and sure enough, the monster began to choke, they had found its weak spot and eventually expired.

They had to agree it was very, very strange.

Confused and tired it had been a not particularly successful maiden voyage for Skipper Keith but once again, eventful. As he rowed back to land he couldn't help wonder about the engine, what on earth was that all about? How was it possible? It was surely a mystery. What was he to do with the 25 gallons of diesel it clearly didn't require?

Answers on a post card please.

