

Forth Cruising Club – Ladies race – Skipper Keith's' reflections

It's been a few seasons since I last blogged on my sailing learning experiences, not that I have suddenly become a great Skipper, quite the contrary, I am still learning some of the lingo for things on my yacht that should have plain English names but don't and also learning their purpose.

But it was the ladies race and its worth commenting on. Last year I had to improvise when my partner chose not to take part on account of it being a little windy. Blustery was ideal for my container of a ship Ramillies so with crewman Graeme in attendance I donned a pretty dress and bonnet and for the day and self-assigned my gender to that of Female. I should have also shaved but thought I was getting away with it. When the race was finished and the handicaps calculated Ramillies actually won the race. Of course it's quite an old club and traditional in its values so I was soon disqualified on account of not being a 'real lady'. I explained the new era of diversity and self-assigned gender but alas they were not having it.

Last weekend we had the ladies race again and in the run up I happened to note that the poster went large on the fact it was for 'Real Ladies' hosting a picture of Little Britain's 'ladies'. Now I am not a sensitive person but I think this was specifically aimed at curbing any attempts to re-enter this year.

As it was, my partner once again elected not to go out to skipper and helm on ladies day. This was on account of the blustery conditions forecast. I decided to force myself upon some of the newer members of the club with limited sailing experience. So it was that I offered my few seasons of experience to Paul and Jane, owners of Brill. How could they say no and indeed they welcomed me to Team Brill.

Now Brill is a lovely wee boat and appropriately named but I am sure both Paul and Jane wouldn't be upset if I said it was not quite racing material. Brill despite its name is not a graceful Swan gliding effortlessly through the water. It's a little bit 'dumpy', more built for comfort really. Sort of like the Fiona out of Shrek, you know after the spell wears off, cute and genuine, not sleek and sexy. Just saying to set the scene and the expectations.

As it was, we agreed to meet at 10 am on race day for an 11 am start - the race was a short one and expected to last an hour. It was indeed a great start. I met Paul and Jane at the car park and Jane, the Skipper and helmswoman for the day, had brought coffee and bacon roles. Great start yes but I have to say from the get go, it sort of slid from there on.

Anyway there was a fourth crew member in young Connor, a delightfully pleasant 17 year old lad with a broad smile. Conner brought bags of dinghy sailing experience with him and like me he was out to win, I liked his attitude.

With safety in mind we got the tender out to Brill in two waves. I noticed Paul had a couple of flares in his hand and did wonder what kind of trouble he was expecting we were going to get into. Anyway Paul was directed to get the engine sorted. Now I have to say dear reader, Paul has a bit of an issue starting the many outboards he has on Brill. Never quite sure how the flow of petrol goes from which tank but he generally gets there. Ok I should qualify that he generally gets there when there is sufficient petrol in the tank! After a feverish few minutes of leaning over the stern pulling his cord as it were we fired up the backup outboard.

On this day we addressed the 'does it actually have petrol in it' right away. Paul directed Jane to the compartment that stored the many and varying size of plastic mixing and pouring containers and these two academics began calculating the appropriate ratio of two stroke to petrol. It was like watching mad professors with a chemistry set. Not wishing pour rain over their calculus parade, I asked Paul why they didn't just add the two stroke straight into the large 5 litre canister of petrol he had brought instead of mixing up little potions. That way there would be no need to mix up some more if it was needed at a critical time (as he needed to do on a previous occasion as we drifted towards the rocks, but that's another story).

Anyway common sense prevailed, 5 litres of petrol mixed with two stroke, engine filled and we were ready to head out. Time was marching on and the race due to start in 15 mins. Everyone was assigned an important job to ensure that when we dropped the strops holding us to the mooring we were good to go and wouldn't foul the prop. I was on the front strop, the last to be let go, lest there be a disaster as the berth is close to the pier wall and there is little room for error. Rear strops were dropped and I walked the front strop back as Paul motored forward, and of course there was the inevitable call 'oh wait we are caught on a rope'. Thankfully I still had control of the front strop but we were now being thrown round towards the nice shiny boat on our port side. Alas Team Brill was forming, with four pairs of hands we managed to sort the strop issue out, didn't tangle it in the prop and pushed Brill safely away from the other boat. We got her facing the right way and with 'good to go' nods all round I dropped the front strop and we were free. Team Brills first challenge in the bag a cohesive team forming I was sure.

So we pushed out of Limekilns harbour to join the other boats which were already out with sail and hovering about the start line. We only had 7

mins to go and had to cut engines at 4 mins to start, them's the rules. Luckily we were heading into winds that let us get the main sail up.

With the permission of Skipper Jane I allocated jobs. Jane had to take the helm throughout the race, Paul was on the main sail and Connor and myself were on the foresail. This was all very well but actually four adults in Brills cockpit is a bit 'cosy' which is fine when things are nice and calm.

Now I will admit to a few bads of my own. At a critical time when pulling the mainsail up I was so keen to get the sail tight that I used the winch but didn't notice that I had crossed the rope. Having winched it so tight I couldn't release it, it was stuck and we would be scuppered if I wouldn't release it as we needed the winches for the foresail. Paul had a moment of academic inspiration and suggested we attach the rope to the opposite winch and crank it, great idea and it worked too. That was my first bad, my second is that less than ten seconds later I did exactly the same thing again, unforgiveable and what a dumbass!!!. Luckily we had just tested the solution for such an occurrence, it worked the second time also.

Just in time and slightly flustered we got the massive foresail deployed and had to cut the engine at the 4 mins mark but we were still quite a bit away from the start line. It was then that it dawned on me that we had no idea of the course selected as we hadn't got close enough to the starters hut to see it. 'Worry not' said I "its not as though we will be leading anyway", making the understatement of the day. We could get that sorted when the race was under way.

Now in racing a good start is essential - some in the club can judge it to near perfection, but not I. And a good start is exactly what we didn't get. We were still faffing about with the foresail and main sail trying to get Brill on a proper sailing line towards the start line when the race started and the rest were across the line heading towards the first marker and clearly the first turn.

This is where we had a little learning note, too many things happening at once, and this is where four in the cockpit being 'cosy' turned into 'chaotic'. Trying to find the right course and turn to the start line suddenly we went off course and the main sail gibed and with it being a little gusty I am certain that from a distance we looked like four fish having been dropped into a boiling chip pan, we were all arms legs and ropes. But not to panic we eventually regained our collective composure with everyone getting back to their task. We picked up a little speed and soon, well soonish, we were across the start line and the race had started proper....when I say 'soonish' this referred to the fact that the others had already rounded the marker point.

Having regained some calm and Skipper Jane confident that we were pointing generally in the right direction I turned my thoughts to the race as we had no idea of the course selected. I asked Paul if he had a set of binoculars so I could pick out the course on the starter hut. Yes he had, they were in the house!!!!. Hmm thought I, Plan B was to phone Phil, no reply from him, way too busy taking his task from his own Skipper of the day. No matter, I told Team Brill that we would just follow the rest - it wasn't like we were going to get ahead of many... actually any.

A couple of practice tacks and we rounded the first marker and headed for the second before the long close hauled port tack away down to the next mark. Now this is where a couple of things became apparent.

Thing 1: 'Paul, where is your windex?' 'My whatex?' 'The thing on the top of your mast that shows wind direction, it's kind of handy when sailing'...'Don't have one'.

Thing 2: 'Paul, where is your speed gauge?'...'Yeah I am going to get one of them... is there an App?'

Thing 3: 'Paul, there is something not right with the main sail... where is your kicker?'...'My whatter?'...'It's the system that allows you to pull your boom down and get proper shape in the sail?'...'My what?'...'It's the rope thing that goes between these two pullies that's isn't there'...'Oh yeah I think we had one of them'.

Thing 4: 'Paul, the foot of your main sail isn't far enough back towards the end of the boom' 'The what foot?' 'Its ok I will tie it back, we can look at it later.'

So we improvised and found some rope and fixed the things we could and the main sail took a better shape and we were sailing. I said it was a bit blustery and occasionally it definitely blustery and I could see Jane fighting with the tiller with loads of weather helm going on. I shouted across that if it was getting too difficult to hold course in the gusts and was getting a little scary she should tell Paul when she felt she needed to 'dump', the main sail and Paul was in charge of that.

Other boats were now well ahead of us and had already returned from whence we came and were about to round the mark at the far end of the course. Given we still were unaware of the course selected this was going to soon be a problem as it was going to get hard to remember the turns. Worry about that later as it was time to focus as we neared the 'W' marker for our first 180 degree tack. With the permission of the Skipper I gave everyone their instructions, we needed to keep speed and get a quick tack in. On my command 'ready about....Ready....Leeho' Team Brill flew into a flurry of chaos, we wibbled and wobbled and lost all speed and

managed to get a backdraft in the foresail and came to an abrupt halt. OK OK don't panic let's just get ourselves sorted and we are going to have to do that again as we won't make the mark. We got there on the second effort, it wasn't pretty and certainly not text book but the incoming tide did us a favour.

We headed back up to the far away marker and picked up a bit of speed just as the rest were pushing down toward us. We had rocks to miss and took the best line we could so as not to drift too close. At this point I have to confess I was losing the ability to remember the turns taken as the rest were so far ahead. I decided to ask and as we were passed by Wildcat I shouted across and Crewman David grasped our difficulty and I think shouted back its course W7. I asked Paul if he had a copy of the course. He laughed, course he didn't, why should he. Well that's us truly snookered then because my laminated copy is on my own boat. Then I remembered I had taken a picture of it on my phone. Alas I seemed to have forgotten my specs and I cannot read a thing without them. With more faffing about I found the course picture and cropped it larger so it just showed the West races. By poking my eye to make it water a little I could use the tears as a temporary lens and managed to identify the course which we had by then just about completed a third of it. The last third was a repeat of the first so not too difficult to remember.

After the next turn, which was not disastrous, Team Brill was making steady progress I worked out that the rest of the boats were actually on the last leg and were about to finish and we had just passed the halfway point!!!!

Connor and I came out with expectations of winning. Jane and Paul less so. I had to break it to Team Brill that even with a heavy handicap I thought the chances of winning were very slim, and at the current rate of knots (the tide having turned against us) the chances of us actually finishing within the time limits was also dwindling. Were we going to give up? I think not. So we carried on.

Paul and Connor swapped roles and on a long leg against the tide the team managed to catch some laughs, something to eat and drink and ponder on the other things Paul should look at - these included actually having his anchor attached to some chain before he ever used it.

Given that it was a bit gusty we got to thinking about actually setting up the reefing points on his mainsail should he ever need to reef it and a discussion about reducing the size of his proportionally massive foresail by rolling it in a little which might actually have allowed us to pick up speed close hauled. But as everyone else had finished by this time there was little need to bother this time around. Besides we had a final task to consider. Yes our Achilles Heel that 'W' marker. Our third and final

approach to the problem marker, each time we had fluffed the tack, missed it and had to go round again. "My dad has been watching Connor informed us, he will be judging us", Connor was always smiling despite some of our catastrophes. He was either extremely laid back or it wasn't a smile - it was a grimace!!.... Well let's give him something to judge this time Team Brill, this time we are gonna nail IT, so much so we are gonna go past about 50 yds then tack. I briefed the team and they all agreed it appeared a little excessive but as winning was no longer an option this was the one.

With the marker well behind on my mark we tacked, it looked goodish, well better than the earlier ones but we did lose speed. I couldn't quite believe it but as we approached the mark we were drifting with the tide which had turned and I had to give into the fact that we were not actually going to make it at all....MASSIVE FAIL, head hung in shame ...on not the second but the third go we got it. With the tide and wind with us we had a good close haul to the last bar one marker, we took that one well and just had one more marker to take then it was a short dash to the finishing line.

That last 100 yard or so dash should really be quite easy. We were again close hauled but the wind and tide were against us and pushing us closer to the rocks - forward progress was painfully slow. I had hoped we could make it with just one tack but it wasn't to be, it took two. That last 100 yards was like the final mile in a triple marathon (I am now assuming this level of pain having never ran much further than my regular weekend 5K). It was so painful at one point Paul had the audacity to say should we just give up!!!!. Jane thankfully was not in agreement and she was Skipper. Eventually we crossed the line and got our Toot from the starters hut. It was a relief as that 'toot' meant that we had finished the course and had not been disqualified. Jane's reaction was great throwing a victorious punch in the air. Damn you course W7 Team Brill will not be defeated.

So yes no need to check the times we were definitely last in the FCC 2017 ladies race but we took part and against all the odds finished. The big plus is that with the rolling handicaps Brill will have a massive handicap to go into the next race and could win even by coming last. Carp Diem.

Now Paul let's make a list of the things you need to think about fixing on Brill for next time.....