

A Capella in the Lakes



Autumn 2006 and Easter 2007

EARLY AUTUMN BREAK

A Capella at Windermere



This was a mid-week break at the end of September, inspired by the Indian Summer and by the opportunity to meet up with Rob Helyar, the Wayfarer sailor and retired airline pilot & navigator who is now becoming well known within our own Class for developing reefing kits, and who had supplied the kit for this boat.

It was an opportunity both to have a sail together and meet socially, and to try out his latest headsail reefing development. This uses his well-established flexible reefing spar but without cutting a slot along its length to insert the sail; instead the flexible spar is sewn permanently into the sail in a larger than usual luff pocket, and the luff wire is passed down the centre of the spar. At the time this was still an experimental rig, and was set up on a new sail that his sailmaker just happened to have lying around which was of approximately the right dimensions, rather than making a sail to measure, and it is cut a little higher and shorter in the foot than a standard GP14 genoa, so it is a midi sail rather than a full-sized genoa, and when reefed the sheeting angle is rather better.

Certainly it sets superbly well, with probably less disturbance to the airflow at the luff than with an external reefing spar, and it looks better, and with no slot cut in the flexible spar it is significantly stiffer. And even in the light winds that we experienced, this slightly smaller sail still gave ample drive for cruising.



The day we met we were greeted by millpond conditions in the morning, so we set up the experimental sail and tried out various ideas, then went for a pub lunch and a walk round Tarn Hows. By the time we had completed that the wind had arrived, so we had a good sail in the second half of the afternoon, and then a very convivial dinner in the evening.

Plus some totally legitimate, albeit unauthorised, Land Rover fun as well. We were to dine at their holiday cottage, but I had first to go via Ambleside to pick up some dog food and some torch batteries, so we travelled separately, and Rob had given me directions and warned me that the final turn-off was “only a track, really”. I duly found what was indeed only a track, going in the right direction, in almost exactly the right place, and with a National Trust name plate that agreed exactly with the name I was looking for, and it had clearly had occasional vehicle use, so in all innocence I took it. By about half a mile later, by which time I was using not merely the four wheel drive that is a permanent feature of the vehicle but also both low ratio and diff lock, and when even so the car was starting to find the going difficult, I decided that this couldn’t be the right track after all, since Rob’s family routinely had access to their cottage with just ordinary cars. My excuse for taking the wrong track was that, unlike my host, I am only an amateur navigator When I eventually met up with them, via their “track” which in the event turned out to be a decently gravelled road, it transpired that Rob had forgotten all about the existence of the previous one, which I had taken, but that it must have been the track over the moor!

This was also an opportunity to try out the boom tent, and sleeping aboard, for the first time in this boat. Although sleeping on the bottom of the boat proved to be not really viable in a Series 2, although it is just about viable in a Series 1 (which has a lower floor), it was nonetheless a very useful evaluation, and I came home with several specific ideas how to arrange matters for future seasons. What seems to be the best of these will involve creating some sort of temporary sleeping surface, possibly a canvas base stretched across the boat at the height of the side benches.



Easter Week - 3-day Break, Windermere

There wasn't a great deal of actual sailing on this trip, because the wind didn't co-operate, but nonetheless it was an enjoyable break.

After a small handful of short sails from late February through to the afternoon of Easter Day, suitably clad in dry-suit (in due deference to the water temperature should one be careless enough to capsize), a spell of gorgeous weather coinciding with a few days' holiday after Easter was sufficient trigger on the spur of the moment to take the boat up to the Lakes on the Thursday afternoon.

Truth to tell, I had intended going away somewhere anyway, but precisely where, and whether with boat or caravan or visiting friends, remained an open question until the time came. By midweek, when I had cleared commitments at home, the weather was superb, so the boat and the Lakes won. And since it was a last minute decision to go, it was another single-handed trip.

It was an opportunity to try out my Mark 2 arrangements for sleeping aboard, while at anchor just off my launching point so that I had the fall-back option of resorting to the fully reclined seats in the Discovery if necessary, and I also had the benefit of having the camp kitchen in the back of the car rather than having to cram everything into the boat. That is perhaps cheating, but for someone who has downsized from offshore cruising yachts, and whose dinghy cruising is normally daysailing with very occasionally camping ashore on longer trips, it was a half-way house to fully camping aboard, and the latter is an option that I want to explore for possible occasional use in the future. So a half-way house now was an opportunity to try out one thing at a time.

It also enabled the dog to share the holiday, getting his fair share of swims and walks, but guarding the car while I went sailing. Although all my previous dogs have regularly sailed with me, and greatly enjoyed it, that was in yachts, not dinghies; and this one had appeared on the scene during my 15 years ashore after parting with my last yacht and so has never sailed. He is rather too highly strung and too long in the tooth to start him now, and in any case I value my varnish too much.

An unexpected bit of car trouble on the journey north delayed us. Landrovers are designed and built to be able to wade, and the previous Sunday afternoon I had waded it moderately deeply in order to launch (and later recover) a big powerboat for one of our club members, but the starter motor apparently hadn't liked it, and after a stop at a service station to exercise the dog I had to call out the breakdown service. Such is life ...

Initial destination was Ullswater; I had spent several holidays there as a child, with a small rowing boat, and forty-odd years ago as a young adult I had periodically sailed my successive GP14s there, so it was to be a return visit. It is a delightful lake to sail; the question was where to launch.



The picture is more than forty years old, but shows my first GP14, Christabel, sailing on Ullswater, with a couple of young members of my then Scout Troop crewing, in 1966.

I had expected to launch now from Howtown, but nonetheless as I drove up the side of the lake from Pooley Bridge I kept my eyes open for suitable launching sites on the way there.

There are a couple of camp sites at that end of the lake, with launching facilities, but I was dissuaded by prominent notices saying “Couples & Families Only”. I don’t know whether they deliberately intend to exclude a single retired gentleman and his dog, and because of the delay caused by the car it was getting a bit late to disturb people to enquire whether they really meant that, and in any case even if I were allowed in I wasn’t certain that I could leave the dog in the car there while I went sailing, so I drove on past them.

So the public launching facility at Howtown was to be the first stop. Launching here is free, between the jetties used by the Ullswater steamers and the outdoor activities centre, but the nearest parking is a considerable distance away; fine if you have planned for that, but not good if your intention from outset was to split camp between boat and car and if those two sites then perforce turn out to be a mile or more apart. Fortunately the destination on Windermere that I had used last year was an excellent fallback, so after having a good look at Ullswater and walking the dog I went on to Harrowslack, on Windermere.

En route however I checked out the launching facilities on the other side of the lake, and variously admired and deprecated the lines of the four different Ullswater Steamers that were berthed for the night, and finally enjoyed a very good dinner at the Travellers' Rest in Glenridding, lubricated by a rather nice Chilean merlot.



Photo downloaded from Wikipedia

In my childhood, in the early fifties, there were just two Ullswater steamers; the *Lady of the Lake* was in service and the *Raven* was laid up. Both were (even then) historic vessels, with most elegant lines, although strictly fair weather Lakeland steamers; as a mature yachtsman now I am not sure that I would like to have either of them at sea in a gale, but then they were never designed or intended for that role. The steamers, with the service itself dating from the 1850s, were originally working boats, carrying workers and mail and goods up and down the lake, to and from the Greenside lead mine at Glenridding, which closed in 1962. However even by ten years before 1962, when the mine closed, the surviving ones had become the tourist boats that we know today.

The *Raven* was built on the Clyde in 1889 for service on the lake, and transported in sections by rail to Penrith, and then by horse and dray to Pooley Bridge, where she was assembled on the lakeside. She is the comparative youngster of the two; the *Lady of the Lake* dates from 1877. By comparison with the supremely elegant, if not necessarily seaworthy, lines of these two the pair of much more modern (and smaller) boats that have been added to the fleet in more recent years seem perfectly seaworthy but very ordinary indeed.

In passing, I am reminded of Roy Nettlehip's classic reply when asked about twenty years ago how long a GP14 would last; "I don't know; the design's only forty years old." Very fair comment, and some of the very earliest examples (sail numbers in single figures) are still sailing even today and still much loved, but one wonders how many will still be sailing - and looking as good as this - once they also reach age 130 !

Other launching facilities, on the west side of the lake, appear to include Ullswater Marine at Watermillock, Ullswater Caravan Camping and Marine Park, and the Sailing Centre on the spit at Glenridding. The latter charge a rate which depends on the size and type of boat (which is perfectly reasonable), and for a GP14 it would seem to be somewhere around £15 for a day's parking plus one launch and recovery, but the precise charge seems to depend upon whether the GP is regarded as "traditional" or as a "dinghy"; there is a case for saying the design is both!

After the tourist meander past the lake and the exploration on foot, followed by a good dinner in the pub, we went on to Harrowslack, launched, and set the anchor in a position that allowed the boat to swing inshore to just comfortable wading depth. Then I ran a line ashore, marked it with two floating fenders, put the tent up, and turned in for the night.



A Capella anchored for the night at Harrowslack.

(But cheating a little with the photo; it was actually taken in this same anchorage last year.)

The following morning saw a flat calm and spring sunshine, so a leisurely coffee ensued, then walked the dog along the lakeshore and in the neighbouring woods, gave him a good swim, and took the opportunity to photograph the new onboard sleeping arrangements for a putative article for *Mainsail* and for the website.

Then after a late and leisurely brunch, and a couple of conversations with other boat owners, I was just about to go for another walk when I felt the first touch of wind of the day.



What do you know - we just might have a little wind coming!

This one was genuinely this year's photo!

That was the start of an afternoon's sail - which is what we had come for, after all ... - in light and variable winds for two or three hours, on all points of sailing and including the opportunity for using the spinnaker, always an added interest and a bit of a challenge when single-handing. By the time the wind eventually failed again I had had a good afternoon, and it was not desperately far to row home.

Then re-anchor the boat, and adjourn ashore to give the dog another swim, and another walk, and then open up the camp kitchen in the back of the Discovery to produce a superb rib eye steak with potatoes and ratatouille, washed down with some more of the Chilean merlot, followed by strawberries and cream and then good coffee. Even when camping I still like to dine well.

By the end of dinner the light was starting to fade, so after yet another dog walk (is this a sailing holiday or a dog walking holiday? ...) it was most sensible to turn in. Not exactly "rocked in the cradle of the deep", as the old negro spiritual puts it, more like rocked by the very occasional wash of passing boats in just a few inches depth. But afloat nonetheless.

Saturday had to be my last day, since I was on duty at church the following day, and the intention was to sail in the morning, then have a pub lunch, and recover the boat and drive home after lunch. But ...

The day dawned very similarly to Friday, so yet another very leisurely morning with lots of dog swimming and walking, and chatting to other boatowners, while waiting for wind. Then just as I was about to go for lunch I again felt a breath of wind. So “Blow the pub lunch; let’s go for a sail!”

That again gave an afternoon of light and variable winds, but produced a nice spinnaker run and reach as far as Red Nab Point, where I regularly used to launch in the sixties but where the launching is now blocked off, and then a beat back home. The boat was even moving briskly at times.

Finally the time came to recover the boat, pack up and go home. I needed to refuel the car when convenient, and a quick check on the Autogas atlas (I can’t possibly afford to run it on petrol) showed that I could do so in Newby Bridge. Having refuelled I decided to patronise their café, not least because I had gone without lunch. I expected to get afternoon tea, but was however pleasantly surprised to find that this is not the usual type of garage café, but is a comparatively new venture which has much higher aspirations; they are a high class café by day and a bistro in the evenings, and they pride themselves on very good home-cooked dishes and good service, and I wasn’t disappointed. So instead of my intended late afternoon tea, and then cook a late dinner when I got home, I was more than happy to settle for a very good dinner there.

As well as trying out the new onboard sleeping arrangements, the actual sailing had been an opportunity to try out a modified jib sheet arrangement. *A Capella* has through-deck sheeting, and I have been concerned about the extent to which friction in the system prevents the old working sheet from freeing properly when one tacks. I gather that this is a known problem, and many owners settle for using smaller diameter sheets, which then raises problems of grip and comfort in heavier conditions. Preliminary investigation quickly identified the prime culprit as the turning blocks under the deck, ballbearing blocks (and of the correct size) though they were.

A large part of the problem seems to arise because of the exponential nature of the friction generated where the sheet rubs against any obstruction where it changes direction, including first the weather shroud and then the mast. It is a bit like an incomplete turn round a sheet winch; as soon as you tail the rope it then grips the drum, but with no tail then there is no grip. In this present case it means that the very slightest friction at the end of the old working sheet “tails” the sheet, and so is multiplied enormously as the sheet passes the shroud, and that then produces enough tension to effectively “tail” the sheet as it passes the mast - so increasing the friction still further. Thus it is most vitally important to eliminate friction so far as possible near the end of the sheet.

Another aspect is that blocks are essentially designed to minimise friction when under full load, but here that is not the problem. The more important requirement here is to virtually eliminate friction altogether when the load approaches zero; not the same design brief at all, and blocks aren’t designed to meet it, and don’t do so at all well, but large traditional fairleads often do. However I hadn’t been able to find the particular size and profile of the fairleads that I would have liked to use to replace the turning blocks, so I had settled for downsizing to 8 mm sheets (from 10 mm), running through larger ball bearing blocks (designed to accommodate rope up to 14mm), and now sat up on springs.

The evaluation of these changes was encouraging; the sheets now move across much more freely, but still nothing like as freely as with a good deck-mounted system. So attempts to improve it further will continue.