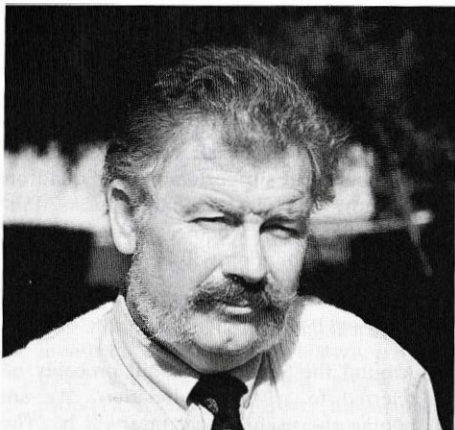


## North Coast Cruise-in-Company 1999



Mark Dwyer

'Coast Guard, American River: They're just a couple of dinghy sailors trying to learn the hard way...' Anthea Cowell, *Morning Hustler*, February 1999.

To some that might seem a degrading statement. For the crew of *The Saint* it is the spirit of Cruising in Company, in not so cruising type weather. Now as it turns out, subsequent to getting ourselves aground off Rouge Point for about an hour and getting ourselves free, we have heard that we were badly holed and even broke up! So this is a tale of our experiences in the 1999 Cruise in Company on the North Coast of Kangaroo Island. It was memorable and enjoyable for the company, coastline and sailing, but a little unforgiving for the inexperienced in heavy weather. It is said that, 'Experience is a hard master,' to which I would offer the comment, 'Only if you are not humble enough to learn.' And learn we did.

*The Saint* is a 9.6 m Loxcen design, which we, Marie and Mark Dwyer bought in December 1997. Some may remember *The Saint* from her earlier days with the Squadron. As we were to find out, it was the 154th time that the Cowells had cruised in this area, but for the crew of *The Saint* it was our first major outing. Marie has no background in sailing, while I had sailed in LW Sharpies, 505s, and in Gwen 12s at Brighton & Seaclyff Yacht Club, but I hasten to add that I

ceased these activities in 1979. Twenty minutes on toe straps would cripple me nowadays. Our collective experience in keelboat sailing might cover a postage stamp. But back to the cruise.

On the warm Sunday of 30 January, six craft set out for the shelter of Troubridge Island: *Morning Hustler*, *Adriana*, *Para*, *Zante*, *Allegro* and *The Saint*. The light SE dropped off in favour of the onshore breeze as the boats slipped along. *Hustler* broke out her kite and held it shy for a faster run. Early evening saw all boats swinging at anchor and facing any which way in the combination of tide and wind. For the crew of *The Saint* (being the last to arrive) it had been a gentle and almost idyllic day, with time to read (thanks to Autohelm) before trying to locate specific beacons and negotiate the shallows about the Island. Time was taken before departure to study and plot courses on the detailed charts. While I found it difficult to identify the port beacon for the run to the anchorage, Marie plucked it out from the setting sun.



The procession through Sultana Passage, led by *Morning Hustler*, opened another gentle day. By late afternoon we lay in the shelter of Knob Point. That night the prevailing stiff offshore SE breeze kept bows facing land in a very slight sea. This wind was to be a constant companion for the next week. An onshore swell made life a tad rolly in the morning, requiring a quick shift by *Para* and *The Saint* for better shelter. The day continued with swimming, fishing, cooking and eating. Marie worked from line to frying pan in water clear enough to watch the fish take the bait.

Some anxiety over the origin of the swell was laid to rest by Jamie, 'who had never been driven from this part of the coast by a northerly at this time of the year.' True to his word, the swell abated and no N wind arrived. Each day produced a quiet anchorage for lunch and an evening destination. Most notable for us was Western River. *The Saint* lay in 5m with *Zante* hanging off the stern while all frolicked in the clear water. *Para* was deeper while Steve Pike & Co snorkelled on the adjacent reef. *Adriana* lay inshore and *Allegro* anchored in 3m. Was it possible to get too much of this? How had this paradise been kept a secret?

Past Snug Cove, which looked all too snug, lay De Mole River. The anchorage is surrounded on two sides by high cliffs, and on the small beach between was four feet of breaking surf. The swell had returned, but the dominant offshore wind held the boats bow to shore. *Zante* arrived with *Hustler* in tow; *Adriana* and *Allegro* opted for a quieter anchorage further East; while *Para*, *Hustler* and *The Saint* rode the swell. We laid an

Admiralty anchor with 10m of chain, followed by 20 to 25 m of rode, and the echo sounder showed 7-8 m under us. We had paddled our Zodiac to *Para* for coffee when *Zante* and *Hustler* arrived.

Having helped to hold *Hustler* off *Para* while a quick repair was made to her alternator, we paddled back to *The Saint* for dinner. This was upset (quite literally!) when a glass of white wine was flung across the saloon. This was no domestic argument. We anchored with the swell across the stern, but the sudden movement signalled that we were beam on to it. Leaping up the companionway, I saw that we had dragged our anchor, we were at least half a mile out to sea, and we were still on the move! It was physically difficult to retrieve the rode and anchor, and would have been easier if I had been intelligent enough to motor towards it. (It would take another 24 hours for that fact to rise to the surface!) *Hustler* came out and we motored in to set the anchor again. I laid out enough chain to put the anchor on the bottom and then a bit more. Marie put the engine astern, but the anchor would not bite. Yet another retrieval. At the third try it bit hard. With 40m of rode out, *The Saint* hung out to starboard or port, until a swift tug pulled her bow into the wind. She had lain this way earlier, so I was reluctant to believe that she would stay that way all night.

For hours Marie and I lay in the peak, watching the same pattern of stars wandering to and fro across the forehatch, until cloud obscured them. For many hours after that, I sat in the cockpit, wrapped in a blanket, watching the lights of *Para* and *Hustler*.

### BESWICK'S BOATYARD & MARINE

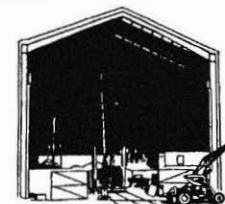
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And *The Saint* stayed put!

With morning came the opportunity for yet another retrieval of the anchor, and thence further west to Cape Borda. Initially we motored in a light breeze, which freshened and sails were set for a quick reach into rising swell. Was this our first taste of swell of the open sea? Abeam Cape Borda with the light above us, *Para* turned to port and accelerated as she broke out her sails. Now surfing, *Hustler* and *The Saint* caught her quickly and moved ahead. The SE wind freshened and was particularly stronger off gullies. But, as on other days, it lightened, and by lunch time at the Mare's Tail it was all but gone. Evening found us again at Knob Point.

The morning forecast from Coast Guard Lincoln was not very encouraging — well, not to novices. 'Strong wind warnings for SW winds for Far West, West Coast Gulf, South Central and South East Coasts.' After motoring up the rode (I'm learning) we set sail for American River. We planned to run up the coast about a mile offshore, then by standing an equal distance off Point Marsden come on to our pre-plotted course to avoid the low water off the Bay of Shoals. The wind freshened and the swell rose. I chose to tack down wind, surfing off the waves even when I couldn't see their bases from the cockpit. Only one broke on to the transom, and only once did we broach, while watching seabirds seemingly unconcerned by the rising wind. The joy of running free took over thoughts of when I should shorten sail, for

the wind was now whistling in the rigging. Rigged with jackets and harnesses, we lashed down the washboard and hatch.

We rounded Point Marsden, and so did the wind! It was now more southerly. My thoughts of lower seas in the lee of the Point were but a pious hope. Added to the seas and the wind whistling in the rigging came the rain and visibility of less than 1/4 mile.

Bump, bump... A little free movement, then bump, Stop! Wallowing to port, we were aground. Marie radioed *Para* as I lowered our sails. She was well ahead of us and came into the wind, some six miles away and holding station. A quick swing out on the boom did nothing. The wind and rain continued. After 25 minutes it was apparent we were well stuck. We agreed that we ought to seek assistance.

Coast Guard American River despatched *Cooinda*. Meantime, with an anchor set and much heaving on the spinnaker pole, *The Saint* came free. In less than ten feet of forward motion we had nearly four metres under her! As we motored to deeper water, *Hustler* arrived, and, having radioed the epigraph of this tale, led the way to American River. She was often invisible in the rain. Cold, tired and having eaten nothing since breakfast, we motored across Western Cove. On one occasion waves and wind lay *The Saint's* mast horizontal. From that point onwards I watched for the higher wave tucked in close behind the common swell, and forgot the swell as I just worked the higher wave.

The entrance to American River was plain awful — bow directly into a short chop of wind against tide, added to which was the siren from the engine panel to warn of high temperature. With Marie at the helm, off came the engine cover. The oil level was well up, but the water flow to the engine would not have sunk the boat in a week! I cleared something by blowing back into the starboard cooling intake, but one heave from the boat almost made me swallow the entire filter housing. Do we continue, or hang off one of the channel markers? ... We pressed on, seeing masts over the sandy outcrop to port as we navigated the channel. *Hustler* anchored in a neat little bay just before Ballast Head, kindly allowing us to take up the Cowells' mooring in American River.

In American River *Para's* dinghy collected us for a hot shower and a hot meal. *Para* and her crew, having received our distress call, realised that she could not return into low water, but nevertheless held station against rough water in Western Cove of Nepean Bay for whatever might eventuate. This to me adds another dimension to Seamanship and Fellowship.

The following day's forecast was poor for a crossing of Backstairs Passage, which gave us time to relax and repair a minor leak in the engine water pump. Jamie and Anthea Cowell came aboard for coffee, and encouraged us for having tried, which to me was in the original spirit of the Olympics — not to have won but to have done our best.

With a forecast of S to SE winds at 10–15 knots and seas temporarily abating, we left American River for the Passage the following day. In fact there was no abatement of wind or sea, but now we handled it well under reefed sails, with the feeling that almost as much water went over us as under the boat.

Now that might seem to be the end, but still there was the query — how did we get so far off course from Point Marsden? As a student light aircraft pilot I have been roasted for being just a few degrees of course. Yet the navigation error here was in excess of 20°. The answer might lie in an observation in the following days: Having lost wind off Aldinga Bay en route to RSAYS, we motored almost into the wind. At the chart table I noted a course of

033°M on the GPS chart plotter. Looking behind I checked the compass course, read from the rear — 182°. Marie must be steering 002°M. Disbelieving the chart plotter, I turned on the second GPS. It substantiated the course from the chart plotter. Alarmed I again turned to the compass, but felt the bearing binoculars hanging on a cleat behind my head. The cleat, one of four, was intended for stout shock cord to hold the wash board in place. And when I move the binoculars to the starboard cleat, the compass came around to 213°! Were the binoculars in use on the day of the grounding? Most definitely, on the way up to Point Marsden. Were the binoculars on the cleat close to the compass? That cannot be confirmed, other than they were hung on one of the companion way cleats. Once the companion way was closed they could not be seen. Was the indicated compass course abnormal during passage up the north coast of KI? That cannot be confirmed because the navigation was purely visual. Was visual navigation alone good seamanship...?

So it is our belief that the compass in the bearing binoculars probably contributed to the grounding. That was a lesson to us, and I hope to those who read this account.

Overall the eleven days aboard *The Saint* were worth the effort. They were relaxing and exciting, gentle and exhausting, but as in all endeavours the rewards are proportional to the effort. Our principal follow-up is in the ground tackle department. Those hanging on an adequate length of chain rode did not wander as we did on a combination of chain and rope. More to the point, we could not determine what length of rode we had out. Anyone who wants to sleep well needs to look very closely before putting to sea at what is the key to holding their pick in the bottom. To put it another way, a long anchor watch is a lousy way to spend a night.

For those who want to lift their spirits — go Cruising-in-Company!

With thanks to the crews in the 1999 Cruise in Company, and particularly to Jamie and Anthea Cowell of *Morning Hustler*. [SQ]

*The North Coast Cruise-in-Company at Knob Point. (Mark Dwyer)*

