

LA JOIE DE NAVIGUER ~ **The Transatlantic Journey of Wumpus in 1978** **Angela Langley**

(This qualifying passage for the Ocean Cruising Club was undertaken a long time ago! I was invited to join the club at the time, but declined due to changing personal circumstances which resulted in my going to live and work in Switzerland and later to Australia. While out in Australia life went full circle and I started sailing again, but that's another story.

My thanks to Liz Hammick for locating and lending her photographs.)

I had about five years of motor-boating experience in the Channel Islands and adjacent coasts of France before I ever started sailing. I motor-boated summer and winter alike, in almost all weathers, so I was quite a seasoned sailor by the time I bought my first sailing boat and did my RYA Yachtmaster studies, Offshore Navigation, and then Ocean Navigation certificates. What I wanted to do was choose a suitable yacht in which to sail away in search of a new life.

Choosing a cruising boat that was suitable and affordable in which to plan a voyage to Australia, and then getting her up to scratch for the voyage, took a full year. As is almost always the case, what one would like to buy and what is actually affordable and suitable is a dilemma. What I chose was a 1964 (so 14 years old) 9 ton Hillyard – a 32ft, double-ended, centre-cockpit sloop. She was a wooden vessel with a long keel from the well-respected yacht builders Hillyard of Littlehampton. *Wumpus* was in very original condition, and had been well loved and looked after by the original and only owners.

Angie sanding Wumpus on the foreshore at St Helier, Jersey





The final coat of gloss goes on

There was a lot of work to do to prepare Wumpus for extended passage-making. The canvas-covered decks were re-covered

in marine ply and glassed over. The original galvanised steel rigging was replaced by stainless steel, and the wooden mast was opened, re-glued and put back as good as new. The original boom with its worm-gear reefing was also retained, but jiffy reefing was added to the mainsail when it was serviced, and a boom gallows made for the after end of the cockpit in which to rest the long boom when not sailing or in storms. An alloy spinnaker pole was added, to hold out the genoa for downwind sailing. The boat was stripped inside and out, revarnished and repainted, the keel sandblasted and sealed, all the keel bolts renewed (they were amazingly wasted), the seacocks checked and replaced as necessary, with new hoses throughout, and so on and so forth until finally the jobs list was whittled away.

Wumpus was powered by a Perkins 4108 diesel, which was in good condition. A new, large-capacity alternator was fitted together with new batteries, and all the wiring checked and renewed as necessary. A tricolour light was added to the masthead. The paraffin anchor light was polished up and given a bracket in the saloon when not in use. The saloon also had a small gimballled paraffin lamp, for atmosphere

Re-stepping the wooden mast after it had been opened and re-glued



and to conserve electricity on night passages. The old stove and gas pipes were removed and a paraffin stove replaced it. There was no refrigeration, but *Wumpus* had a well-insulated ice box – okay while the ice lasted and good storage afterwards.

Remember, this was 1978. There was no GPS, HF radio communication was very expensive and power-hungry, there was no solar anything, and no wind generators. On board *Wumpus* it was very basic. There was no autopilot, but I added a Hydrovane windvane self-steering and, with her long keel and the sails balanced, *Wumpus* was very steady on the helm, which could be lashed. The only emergency radio was a 2182HF portable transmitter, for use *in extremis*. There was a short-wave receiver for the BBC time signal, needed for accurate time-keeping for celestial navigation, which also received news headlines and the occasional radio programme if propagation allowed. It was our only listening contact with the outside world while offshore.

What about a crew? My role models at the time were Claire Francis and Naomi James, and men like Chay Blythe and Sir Francis Chichester. In the Channel Islands my sailing friends all had their own personal lives, family and work commitments, and I knew no one in the bastions of sailing on the south coast of the UK. I was very much out on a limb. It was a dilemma. Not just anyone would do. I ran an advertisement in *Yachting Monthly* for a female crew to sail double-handed to New Zealand. And it worked. I found Liz Hammick who had been sailing with her family since a young child. Liz had already sailed as crew on a voyage to New Zealand, and had lots of competence and insight into what would be needed when we were *en route*, and indeed at all the planning stages. I was very fortunate in my choice and Liz and I formed a good sailing partnership. I was certainly glad not to shoulder all the responsibility and to have someone to share in the pre-departure preparations. It was good fun and we worked hard every day for three months. Liz came over to Jersey in June, well before our planned departure date of mid September. We made wooden ratlines up to the spreaders (much easier for coral spotting than climbing mast steps) and protected the sails against wear from downwind sailing by adding loads of baggywrinkle to the shrouds. Now *Wumpus* really looked the part ... a ship about to sail away to distant parts of the world.

There was one fly in the ointment, if one can put it that way. *Wumpus* was not



Angie climbs the mast to attach some more baggywrinkle

owned by me, but by my partner whom I was in the tentative stages of leaving. A scary thought really, but that is how it was. I was sailing off with Liz in a boat owned by my partner of ten years, soon to be my ex. I did not think of it like that at the time, but that is how it was.

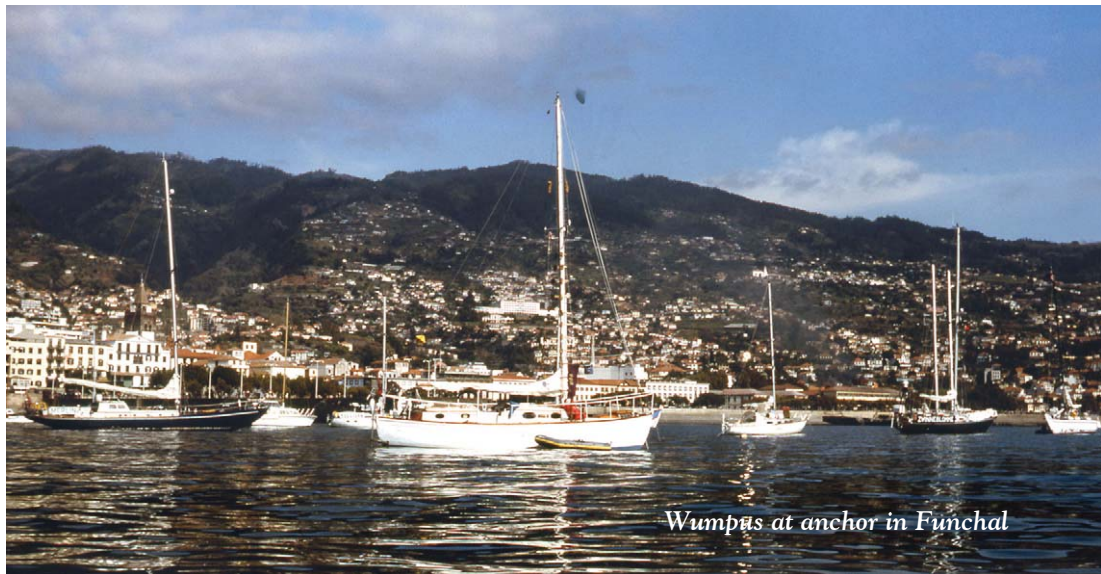
Our departure date in mid September came up on us really quickly, but it gave us a deadline to work towards. We had a lovely final day with the boat all ready to go, stores and personal gear loaded on board, and family and friends down to celebrate the day with a glass or two of wine. We had a very special 'Blessing of the Ship' service conducted by the Coxwain of the Lifeboat, who was also a Lay Preacher. It reinforced the fact that we were about to sail away into the blue yonder, on our own, on a wing and a prayer so to speak. A bit daunting!

Our first test came traversing the Bay of Biscay in a near gale. It was hard going, but we kept well offshore by motor-sailing slowly, well-reefed, into the large waves for 36 hours, until it finally blew itself out and let us sail on to Bayona in northwest Spain. What a joy to arrive! It was beautiful. Warm and sheltered with the anchorage just under the Yacht Club de Bayona. We met several other boats there, also about to do the transatlantic passage, and it was fun to mix with other sailors in the same situation. One bold young man was sailing with his young girlfriend to the Caribbean in a 26ft Folkboat – we were glad it wasn't us! By comparison, *Wumpus* was positively enormous and roomy at 32ft, and loaded with home comforts.

We did not have a shower on board, but then our water capacity was quite limited by today's standards. We had installed a 100 litre flexible tank under the port settee berth, which brought our water capacity to 200 litres, and carried four jerry cans in a cockpit locker. In the locker opposite were two extra diesel cans, plus one of paraffin for the stove and a small petrol can for the Seagull outboard. We had a basin for washing hands and for strip washes in the heads, and on deck we had an agricultural spray canister that you filled with water, pumped up to pressurise, and sprayed yourself down for a shower and shampoo. It was perfectly fine when the weather was warm and sunny.

Bayona to Madeira was our very first long offshore passage using celestial navigation, and took seven days for the 750 mile passage. I took sun sights morning, noon and afternoon, and with the fix duly obtained and plotted we had a pretty good idea how we were going. We also updated our DR position twice daily. It was nevertheless very satisfying to have Porto Santo and then Madeira come up right on target and on time. The ocean passage which I had done previously – the qualifying passage for my Ocean Navigation certificate – had been done with a Yachtmaster Instructor on board. All by yourself it is quite another thing! I was aware that Liz knew nothing about offshore navigation, despite having sailed all the way to Australia, and we agreed to sort that out on our way to Antigua. I impressed on her that it was not difficult to learn how to do basic sun sights and work them out, and anyway, if anything happened to me *en route* she would have the job of getting us to the other side. So I was going to teach her.

We arrived in Funchal Harbour towards the end of the afternoon, well pleased with ourselves. The water is deep, so we duly ran out all our anchor chain while going astern to lay it nicely along the bottom, only to see the bitter end zoom over the bow roller and into the harbour ... oh the ignominy of it all! We had to put our second anchor



down, which was chain and rope, and get a diver to retrieve our primary anchor the next day. One lives and learns, and with boats one never stops learning! We never told anyone about that. Why publicise one's stupidity?

The week in Madeira was absolutely lovely. There was not much to do on board, except for the fresh vegetables, fruit and meat shopping the day before we left, so we had time to explore Funchal and do some walking out of town. My partner came down to visit for five days, during which time I am sure Liz made friends on the other boats. She was very organised about victualling, and we had detailed lists of what we had, would need and where it would be stored. The Funchal markets were wonderful and our day of shopping and loading everything aboard was exhausting. Vegetables and fruit were all washed and dried in the sun – we did not want an infestation of cockroaches! All the eggs were vaselined to keep the air out, then stored in plastic egg boxes under a bunk in the cool. No packaging came on board. We had refuelled and topped up the water tanks the previous day – heavy work ferrying jerry cans back to the boat in the dinghy. There were no yacht facilities in Funchal in those days – everyone was at anchor inside the main harbour, subject to wind and swell and dragging in the soft mud bottom if a southerly wind came through.

We left on the morning of 14 November 1978. It does not take long to get out of sight of land, even a high island like Madeira, and by the following morning we were alone again. I gave Liz my plastic (spare) sextant, and from day one we both did all the sun sights together and then tackled the sight calculations and plotting. With the aid of Mary Blewitt's *Celestial Navigation for Yachtsmen*, using the pro-forma sun sight page and the Air Navigation Tables, Liz soon got the hang of it. Down in the near-tropics the sun is almost invariably shining and after a few days we were both accurate and quick, comparing results each time. However in big ocean swells it was not so easy, and we had to stay clipped on with our harnesses on short strops to keep our hands free. We obviously had days when our sights were far from perfect, but on balance it worked out and our daily fix slowly made its way across the ocean chart.

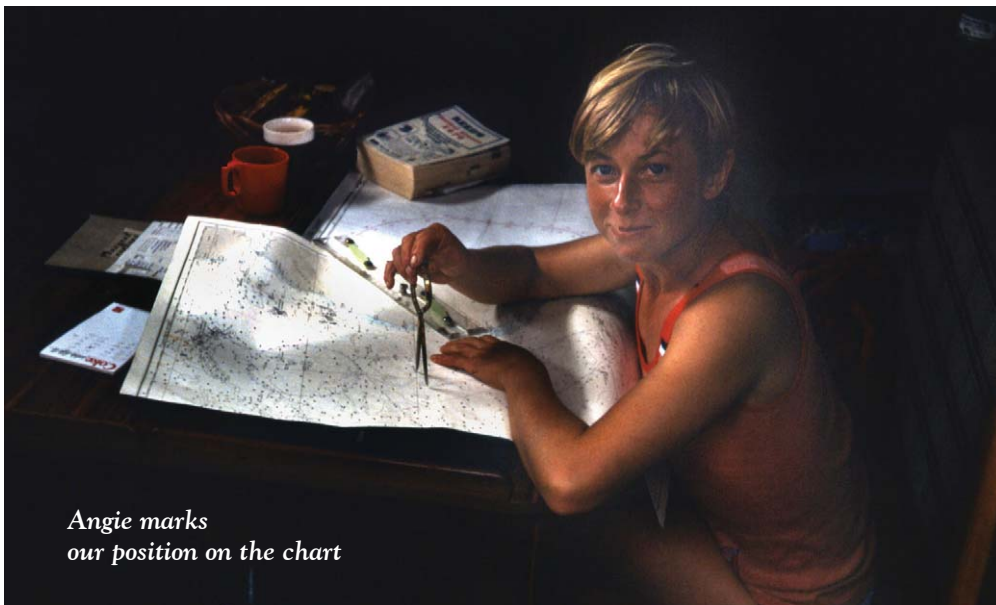


Liz takes a sun sight

We did three-hour watches during the night, rotating the first watch nightly, so that one got a dawn one day and a sunset the following day. During the daytime we were more flexible, and spent most of the afternoons sitting on the sole of the centre cockpit, where one was well-sheltered, doing our tapestries and playing Scrabble when the weather was gentle. I did a lovely modern tapestry of flamingos by a water pool, which my mother still has hanging in her bedroom, and afternoon Scrabble is a habit that has survived on our boat to this day. When the weather was more boisterous we would have our hands full, catnapping down below and maybe playing music or listening to talking-book cassettes. Food preparation was also an amusement, making bread, baking cakes, preparing meals, and being inventive with staples like pasta and rice. We ate good, normal food just as if we were at home, except for eating the fresh things first, then going on to food that kept longer, and finally dried food and tins. We used Sainsbury's powdered milk, in pint bottles – just add water and shake. It was excellent, as was their tinned butter. We made our own simple

*In light weather we
enjoyed doing our tapestries
and playing Scrabble*





*Angie marks
our position on the chart*

cheese from leftover milk, adding dried herbs and garlic and hanging the mix up in an old hanky to drain and set. Liz had learned that sort of thing on her previous long voyage. She was a good cook and it was lovely for me – a real treat – to be catered for on alternate days, as I trust it was for Liz also.

Big ocean swells and boisterous trade winds were really our biggest problem and caused a few breakages. At the top of the swells *Wumpus* would be romping along on a broad reach or a run, often with the jib poled out and the main well-reefed and held firm by a boom strop and a preventer, holding it forward and flat and averting an accidental gybe. But in the troughs between these very large swells, which seemed at least as high as the masthead, there was no wind and the Hydrovane was unable to hold us on course, and even the person on the helm had difficulty. Then as the following swell overtook us the wind slammed back into the sail. The swells were not dangerous, not breaking or threatening to swamp us – just giant mountainous hills and valleys.

One night the inevitable happened. A squall from under a big cloud caught the back of the mainsail and slammed it over, and *Wumpus* went charging off like a bat out of hell with the boom held up to windward. It was impossible to steer her downwind and through the gybe until the boom strop and the preventer had been released. I was really frightened that the strop would pull the midship cleat out of the deck, so Liz eased that off first and the boom bent like a bow in an alarming arc, looking as though it would snap like a matchstick if we did not let the preventer off really quickly. We had our harnesses on and were naturally clipped on and careful, with the big sea that was running and the pitch black night, but we did manage and all was well, although we were a bit shaken. On another occasion the genoa pole bent in two, and spent the remainder of the voyage lashed to the side deck. That was the end of our poling out the jib.

On the positive side, the passing clouds brought torrential rain. If the sea was relatively quiet, which it often was, Liz and I would have our work cut out catching as much as we possibly could in every receptacle that was empty. We would lift the



A meal in mid ocean

boom with the topping lift, just a bit, so that the rain ran down the sail and poured off the gooseneck, where we had everything lined up for collecting. These showers never lasted more than half an hour, so one had to be quick. Once everything was full we took full advantage with showers and shampoo in the pouring rain. Needless to say we had many amusing moments trying to harness all this free water, and then do our laundry and hang everything out to dry once the sun came out. I don't think we were ever bored, or left wondering what we were going to do with yet another day at sea.

Although our electricity consumption was minimal, we still needed to run the engine once every few days for battery charging. At night we burned the masthead tricolour, but down below used the saloon oil lamp so the on-watch person could see to make a cuppa without disturbing the off-watch sleeper. If the weather was very quiet we could sleep in the aft cabin, but when it was boisterous we used the leeward saloon berth with a lee cloth. It was so quiet there in the saloon, below the waterline. With no refrigeration, no electronic navigation, no immersion heater for water and no radio communication, there was not much electrical drain apart from lights. We used torches to read at night and had a plentiful supply of batteries.

The engine itself gave no problems, but because the alternator needed re-aligning the fan belt wore quite a lot and had to be replaced twice. I never succeeded in lessening the wear, although I tried. Our last fan belt was an adjustable one and we had to keep it for arrival in English Harbour, Antigua. What to do in the meantime? Well, Liz had stuffed one of our saloon cushions with nylon stockings for just such an emergency! We plaited the nylons together to make a strong belt, and then tied

it tightly in place of the fan belt. We got through a few of these nylon replacement belts, but each one worked perfectly well for quite a few hours of motoring, so we could keep our batteries charged. Very thoughtful, Liz!

Slowly our position line crossed the ocean, and eventually the morning came when we hoped to sight Antigua. Oh what excitement, when the bump of land came into view on the horizon just as our celestial navigation had foretold! I do not think there is a more fulfilling moment in all of sailing than seeing that small, dark, distant blob loom into view. Words fail – it is sheer joy! So here we were arriving. Closing the south coast of the island we could not see any sign of the entrance to English Harbour – just green clad cliffs, a solid wall. Liz said it would be obvious when we got there, but I just could not see any sign of an entrance until another yacht, coming up from Guadeloupe, just disappeared into the cliff as if by magic. And so it was, this hidden entrance to the magnificent English Harbour, and the end of our 27 day transatlantic voyage. It was 11 December 1978.

Yes, it was a long time ago, but it was my qualifying passage for the Ocean Cruising Club of which now, finally, I am a member. Life has gone full circle. *La joie de vivre. La joie de Naviguer!*

