

National Swallow National Championships, Bembridge 11-12 June 2011

Vernon Trophy (Friday, 10 June)

The competitors gathered on the ISC lawn at 11.30am for the Vernon Trophy briefing, with Nigel Pattison as Race Officer announcing all green buoys to port on the way out of harbour, to keep us away from the Winner Bank, plus two poles to starboard in the channel.

As the fleet congregated for the start just off Park, *Marengo* and *Skua* were absent – *Marengo* because Carolyn was sprinting from her day job to join the fun, and *Skua* for whom pre-racing activities involved Harry dancing on their bent mast at Haynes for over an hour (apparently doing a routine that by all accounts wouldn't have been out of place in a plate-smashing taverna).

Various boats jostled for the lead to the Harbour entrance / exit where nearly all of the fleet went right along the Hayling Island shore apart from *Solitude* which struck out southbound looking for wind on her own. The forecast was a pleasant 4-5 southwesterly, veering westerly then backing southwesterly but as the boats wallowed in the bar swell, one might have been forgiven for thinking that Bembridge was as far away as France.

And it was *Solitude* on her southerly course that found the breeze first. She could tack on the shifts but found that any progress to the west seemed to die on the breeze. And so, true to her name, her lonely southeasterly trek continued. Meanwhile, *Gwaihir* decided that inshore going west, carefully avoiding the East Winner Bank, was the best plan – and off Langstone she finally found the forecast 4-5 westerly.

A long starboard tack towards Bembridge found *Gwaihir* a few boat lengths behind *Solitude* just a quarter of a mile from the finish. However *Gwaihir's* speed from Points Week was in evidence and she saw off *Solitude* to win the Vernon Trophy by 20 seconds, in a race which took nearly 3½ hours.

Curlaw, *Avocet*, *Archon* and *Marengo* arrived in the next 10-15 minutes, while *Harlequin*, a boat rarely mentioned in the last four or five years and sailed solo by Stewart Reed, was a notable finisher, just behind *Blue Tit* and ahead of *Merlin*. Thus the Swallows arrived, bar *Skua* who sailed over in time for the indoor BBQ supper.

Championships Day 1 (Saturday, 11 June) Three back-to-back races – Windward / Leeward courses

Forecast: northwesterly 4-5 backing southwesterly 5-6 with showers.

Race 1: The line was laid with the usual pin-end bias but with the tide flowing from west to east and the wind lightening as the first start was signalled at 10.30am, a log-jam of boats appeared struggling to cross the line at the pin end on starboard.

Solitude having been too early was forced to gybe round and take the sterns of the fleet – lucky as it happened because, as the *melée* developed, she escaped on port.

In amongst the shouting at the pin end, a voice squeaked and as the boats cleared the starting line, *Gwaihir* was to be seen doing turns. The two events likely connected! As things turned out, the crew on *Gwaihir* were performing expensive turns that may ultimately have cost them overall victory.

Solitude arrived at the windward mark followed at a reasonable distance by *Marengo* and *Archon* – and that order was reproduced two rounds later at the finish of the first race, albeit with the distances between the three boats much reduced.

Race 2: The most eventful of the weekend. The starting line was laid this time with a bias at the committee vessel end, with the inevitable general recall resulting from the first start attempt. The second attempt had the wind shifting 90 degrees in the final seconds before the hooter, with the fleet discovering that the windward mark could be reached easily on port and the excellent PRO Jonathan Peel swiftly abandoning the race.

Attempt three was made after the windward mark was moved into a southeasterly position in the direction of the Bembridge Lifeboat slip, but following the start an enormous hole in the wind appeared, along with a little rain to keep everyone refreshed. The wind reappeared and disappeared over the coming legs with everyone arriving at the first leeward mark at the same time and plaintiff cries of 'Mark Room' and 'No Water' being heard and ignored.

Most of the fleet went left – those that stayed left (*Skua*, *Marengo* and *Blue Tit*) doing best, with *Solitude* going right in the hopes that a new breeze would appear under the clouds. It didn't and thus the finishing order of Race 2 was *Skua*, *Marengo* and *Blue Tit*.

Between Races 2 and 3 the unhappiest event of the weekend was to unfold, as *Archon* and *Marengo* came together while both crews were preoccupied by other matters. *Archon's* jib clew was torn from the sail and other damage incurred as well. In a very sporting gesture, Carolyn and Christine Graves swapped with Malcolm and Richard Keane on the basis that *Archon* would need to be sailed straight back to Itchenor as a result of the damage. Happily this turned out not to be required as the Bembridge sailmaker came to rescue.

Race 3 found the weather mark substantially shifted again (to the south) and a strong southwesterly.

This race was to set the tone for the remaining part of the Nationals, with *Skua* and *Gwaihir* match racing each other at the front of the fleet and *Curlew* providing occasional interference – the race finishing *Skua* 1, *Gwaihir* 2, *Curlew* 3.

Ashore, the talk was all about the forecast (heavy winds from the south) for the following day and the depth of water over the Chichester Bar for the fleet's return to ISC.

Championships Day 2 (Sunday, 12 June) Two back-to-back races – Windward / Leeward courses

Forecast: southerly 5-7 with rain later.

Sunday morning dawned with the weather worse than forecast! It was raining at 7am and didn't stop (for the rest of Sunday).

A slightly less-enthusiastic bunch left Bembridge Sailing Club jetty at 9.15am for the moorings. The crew of *Merlin* were the first to capitulate, David Leon declaring that coffee in the clubhouse would provide more enjoyment than the wind and rain. *Avocet* and *Marengo* (her helmswoman now restored) decided that now was the time to head off for home, leaving seven boats to present at the start.

Race 4: The match race between *Skua* and *Gwaihir* continued with *Curlew* as bridesmaid, while *Solitude* and *Harlequin* fought it out in the two-up stakes for fourth and fifth places, and *Archon* and *Blue Tit* were brave also-rans.

As Race 5 loomed, *Archon* also decided that Itchenor was the better course, while *Blue Tit* headed in and parked herself beside *Merlin* on the moorings.

Race 5: And so the final race had only half the fleet competing in winds now gusting at Force 7 or above. *Gwaihir's* successful Sunday continued with her second win followed extremely closely by *Skua*, then *Curlew*, *Solitude* and *Harlequin*.

Overall: In the fair winds of Saturday, *Skua* was able to build an unassailable lead despite finishing second twice to *Gwaihir* on Sunday, with the crew of *Gwaihir* left wondering what might have been had the first race not 'turned' out so badly for them. *Solitude* was a creditable third despite being only two-up for the weekend, with *Curlew* coming fourth (her three third places in the last races not able to compensate for the eighth and sixth places in the first two).

With the sailing so close to where the boats are moored and the open water of the Solent, Bembridge and Seaview vie to be the best venue for Championship sailing. Compared to the long haul out from Itchenor to Bracklesham Bay on two days, the Vernon Trophy is a far more fun way to achieve passage and the opportunity to see how other clubs organise themselves both socially and from a racing perspective make an 'away' Championship a not-to-be-missed event.

For the discerning reader:

1. We must remember to ask the host club if they wouldn't mind turning on the hot water switch for showers on arrival after the Vernon Trophy.
2. When a mixed crew is rooming together, it would seem to the author to be important that everyone brings their own pyjamas with them. Who the crew was I'm not telling (no tales out of school).
3. Mark Chilton reckons that the refusal to accept car lifts should be unanimous amongst a crew.
4. There's no chance of getting a sandy bottom in Bembridge's open Solent waters, so if you're likely to feel deprived, follow *Curlew's* or *Marengo's* example and go aground at the start of the Vernon Trophy.
5. Anthony Lurch was sorely missed following his mugging in Tanzania (probably not as sorely as his broken collar bone hurts).
6. There are few things that would normally prevent *Migrant* from competing but this year they had good reason. We all send congratulations to Richard and Carol on the wedding of the second Thompson daughter, and wish future happiness to the bride and groom.
7. The nanny boat (many thanks to John Cunningham Reid) was a source of comfort for those travelling back on Sunday, Malcolm Green having phoned Bembridge to report an 11ft swell over the Chichester Bar.
8. Special mention to *Harlequin* on her performance (overall joint fifth with *Archon*). Hopefully more to come for the rest of the season.
9. A Big Thank You to Bembridge Sailing Club for hosting the event with such skilful and enthusiastic organisation, with special mentions to Mike and Carrie Samuelson, Jonathan Peel, Tony Spalding, Robin Ebsworth and Charlie Konig. We wish them well for their 125th anniversary Regatta Weekend and hope that the forecast at the time of writing turns out to be wrong!