

## **Paradise Regained - Or at least Revisited.**

'IF you can make one heap of all your winnings, And risk it on one turn of pitch and toss, And lose, and start again at your beginnings...' After losing *Dodo's Delight* to fire when wintering alone in the ice in Greenland in 2005 my insurers played straight and I was able to obtain a replacement boat. The search quickly fined down to another Westerly 33 Discus. The Register of British Shipping allowed the transference of the name: *Dodo's Delight* was reborn!

I spent three to four years refurbishing the replacement boat, but at last managing to collect a crew, it was time to get back to Greenland.

This 'meanest of the Atlantic crossings' from Scotland to Greenland afforded the usual tough passage, but not necessarily for the right reasons this time. We were shorthanded for a start; the experienced Mate I was relying on having rolled her car just before and then unwisely gone sailing, was surprised when in St. Kilda 'something went in my back'. We were down to three. The newly promoted Mate for this leg had recently been diagnosed with Aspergers syndrome, which no doubt explained some communication problems owing to the total lack of response. Had the instructions, suggestions or information been received, accepted or even heard? But we worked out a modus vivendi between us after some while, and he was an experienced and skilful sailor, and though not a mountaineer was very strong and fit on the mountains too. Then there was Vicki, a friend from some years of instructing army groups together in Bavaria in downhill and ski mountaineering. Comparatively inexperienced as a sailor, but gutty, keen, capable and quick to learn.

It was hard work, two hours on, four hours off, watch on watch off without a break across the north Atlantic, exacerbated as it was by the fact that this year the windvane self steering chose not to work most of the time, so we were hand steering. And it always intrigues me how difficult it is to persuade those used to coastal and offshore sailing that crossing oceans you don't need to strive, stressing crew and boat, to sail a direct course towards the objective. After all, the next waypoint was 1200 miles away on the other side of the Atlantic, itself a rough cross on the chart just to keep you well away from Kap Farvel, that Cape of Storms. Much better to close reach on whichever is the making tack - better boat speed and more comfortable. Cross track error was also mentioned at some stage. Crossing the huge Atlantic?

The second day of sailing the eye of the halyard at the head of the genoa burst. This entailed the skipper climbing the mast steps, fortunately installed recently, and spending a long time sitting in a climbing harness rigging a jury halyard up there out in the Atlantic. Fortunately it was comparatively calm that day, and it worked, but I felt ill for a whole day afterwards with all the swaying back and forth. We hove-to on three occasions. The first of these was for wind and sea as you would expect, but on two occasions we hove-to or lay a hull because of no wind at all. Strange, in the north Atlantic. We had some pleasant sailing days but had to make up for it with four days strongly on the wind, and as usual in the end the wind determined that we went closer to Kap Farvel than the intended 150 miles off. But here the winds were light and the weather fine and there seventy miles to starboard were 'Greenland's icy mountains'. We were even entertained by whales breaching and blowing on occasion, though on one such a little too close for comfort.

Turning up the west coast past Kap Desolation gave an interesting day. Quite a strong breeze and this was our first experience of weaving past bergy bits and icebergs. We were goose-winged much of the time, and Vicky did find this rather difficult, but after some instruction coped in her usual capable way. We passed a big tabular berg and some other big bergs and wondered where they had come from, as we made our way to Paamiut as our first port of call.

There was my usual trick of not leaving quite enough slack in the mooring lines for the big tides of Greenland and we were hanging off them in the morning. But I had learnt once in Qaqortoq never to put jamming hitches on cleats for mooring lines - we had to cut the rope to escape that time. Leaving Paamiut later that day after replenishing fuel and water was a mistake. Straight out into a strong northerly. We had to tack across Davis Strait towards Baffin and wondered whether a long dark smudge on the horizon could possibly be Baffin. It was a fog bank which soon enveloped us. Next morning we tacked back, but the wind eventually gave out and we resorted to the engine and finally put into Sisimuit for fuel and loo rolls!

As we were coming out of Sisimuit there coming up the channel was a wee sailing boat. Could that be ...'Assent, Assent, this is Dodo's Delight' 'Dodo's Delight, this IS Assent, how are you, Bob?' It was Willy Ker, the grand old man of Greenlandic sailing, also editor of the Pilot book. So we had a mini-meet there at sea outside Sisimiut as Assent came alongside and Willy came on board for a wee dram. 'So you have whisky on board?' 'Yes, Willy, it probably dates from when you were last on board....' Later when we had reached Aasiaat and Willy had also arrived we met up with Cristina and Giovanni on *Billy Budd* and were all invited to a slap up dinner on their super yacht. It was rather nice that there were three Tilman Medal holders present together on that occasion. I met another on board Dagmar Aalen at Qaanaq later on. A busy summer in the Arctic!

At Aasiaat Vicky had to leave us, and Thomas, an experienced sailor, and then Tom, a climber and ski instructor, joined us. We made our way round the west side of Disko Island and then northwards across Uummaanaq Fjord to Ingia Fjord and the Akuliarusinguaq Peninsular. There was a lot of ice at the top of Ingia Fjord and to reach our objective we first wended our way through gaps and leads and then entered nilas, large sheets or floes of thin ice, and one occasion had to rev the engine harder to break the plate open and make progress. Fortunately there was more open water on the other side of the fjord when we got through and we were able to reach Puartdlarsivik and drop our anchor on the silt fan as in previous years.

We were not altogether successful with our initial climbing aims here, owing to a huge long ice fall guarding the glacier leading to our intended summit, and the sheer distances involved in this big country. But we were successful in adding a classic cirque in the south west corner of this peninsular where we had not been before, and which gave us ten virgin summits.

There was the usual huge amount of icebergs borne on the westerly current as we rounded Svartenhuk, and we had something of an adventure reaching Upernavik Kujalleq (Sondre Upernavik) to the north. It looked as if we would run out of diesel at any minute, and I had visions of having to go six miles in the dinghy to collect fuel in a container and then trying to find my way back to the boat with GPS and VHF in the thick mist. But just then a soft breeze came in from astern and we were able to gently broad reach and goosewing, before putting the engine back on to reach the jetty with its friendly extending diesel hose.

A magnificent day adding a new 200 metre rockclimb in the Sortehul on good rock, in the sun, with the swell whispering seductively on the beach below, led us around to Upernavik and greeting old friends from my wintering here. From there it was the usual four days to the far north. Lots of ice by Kap York. We put our nose into the intriguing anchorage of Parker Snow Bugt to renew acquaintance and refill the diesel tank from spare containers, took photos passing the wide Pituffik glacier, rested overnight behind Wolstenholme Island to avoid the short sharp chop of a fresh westerly breeze, dodged ice to gain Kap Parker and eventually anchored off the abandoned Inuit settlement of Upernavigssuaq on the southern side of Northumberland Island in thick mist. Newly acquired chart plotters can be useful in such conditions!

As we had a day or two before we were due to pick up crew at Qaanaq we took the opportunity of circumnavigating Northumberland Island to look for possible anchorages, and this proved useful later. We duly picked up Andy from the plane at Qaanaq and set about climbing the unclimbed peaks of Northumberland. Tom and Andy completed a brilliant and technically difficult ski traverse of most of the spine of the island, with steep descents and big crevasses, which took in six summits; the old man with crew clambered up two more, and the youngsters accounted for another – twice, by different routes.

Unfortunately I had to reprimand my Asperger crew member over one of these. He had gone ashore for a Sunday afternoon stroll in welly boots, no jacket and no equipment. Six hours later we began to worry. ‘Shall we go and see whether we can spot him?’ An hour later Tom and Andy phoned on the VHF to say they could see him. He later claimed to have climbed Pt 930 (metres). No mean feat in welly boots and with no gear, but I did feel the incident was somewhat irresponsible all the same in the midst of a challenging expedition.

Whilst waiting for Tom and Andy we invented a new nautical term. ‘Floe-d out.’ Latterly, huge fields of loose ice floes had appeared stretching right across to Canada. At every anchorage we put into on the north coast sooner or later we were invaded by ice floes brought in by wind or tide; we moved swiftly out, though sometimes with difficulty. Eventually we also invented a new technique – to motor out to sea to a clear patch and then just drift, keeping an ‘anchor’ watch, till it was necessary to find another clear patch. It saved a lot of anchor work.

After we had collected Tom and Andy through the ice floes we were wind bound in a favourite anchorage on the south coast, not being able to land climbers. On the fourth night this turned into a veritable storm. We had a kedge out as well but somebody tidying up had removed the chain hook from the main anchor chain. In winds of 50–60 knots the rope strop holding the main chain parted, the rest of the chain shot out of the winch, and we were at sea. We ran before on bare poles whilst the crew struggled to haul in the trailing kedge. In the dusky clag ‘What is the wind speed reading, Thomas?’ ‘53 knots’. At least we had steerage way past the next iceberg and bergy bit. We then lay-a-hull. But by now the crew were being violently ill down below, so I put the engine on and plugged at about 60° to the wind and seas to try and reach Barden Bugt on the mainland for shelter. It took an age plugging away to come up to a big iceberg on the way, and another age to close the bay. Of course it all cleared away as we got close, crew began to appear, and we found a better anchorage than we had used here in a storm in 2004. We chilled out in calm water and sunshine.

We returned in calm conditions that afternoon to our previous favourite anchorage, and miraculously hooked our anchor chain on the first troll along the bottom with the kedge. I was forced to eat all those thoughts of 'these pedantic fellows watching our veering from side to side on their GPSs'... whilst at anchor in the storm. One of them had the presence of mind to press 'Mark' on his GPS when the chain shot out from the bow. We gratefully pulled in 80 metres of chain, and had to motor forwards over the anchor to break it out from the sand, but we had a bower and chain again.

At the end of August Tom and Andy left us at Qaanaq, and Neil came out as a replacement. Neil had suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after Bosnia, and had then supported others doing the same. He had done some sailing and was a willing and capable hand. We now embarked on an interesting project, one of the main aims of the expedition, which took us up north past Kap Alexander and into Smith Sound and Nares Strait to anchor in the gut between Littleton Island and its smaller subservient island. There was a lot of ice in Nares Strait whilst we were here – one floe measured from space was three kilometres long and one wide moving inexorably southwards – but fortunately there was less ice on our eastern side. We had agreed with the Scottish Association for Marine Sciences and the Danish Space Agency to try and set up an Automatic Weather Station for them on Littleton Island as part of their ongoing research into arctic weather and ice conditions coming down from the Arctic Ocean through this significant Strait. It was quite an undertaking hauling the equipment up to a high point on the island and setting it all up, and we dubbed the anchorage Dodge, the Ice Floe, City. But we were successful and it all worked, transmitting information straightaway, and the scientific bodies were thrilled and have now made the information available to all scientific bodies (and us) on the Internet.

I also took a day searching the island for evidence of an ancient Eskimo longhouse for the National Museum at Nuuk, but without success. I found some stone tent rings but no longhouse. And there was little apparent evidence of the several arctic expeditions who had used the island as a base in passing over the years.

Coming out of Foulkes Sound for the return on a fine calm morning I was tempted to turn north to improve 'our furthest north of a production yacht in Greenland' of 2004. I am glad we didn't, as we had not gone far south before a nasty depression caught up with us, the wind went to a strong northerly with clag, and having set out for Upernavik we made it to ... Northumberland Island. We enjoyed a sabbath rest here the next day in a favourite anchorage on the north west corner and set out again that evening. We crossed the band of icebergs that move west on the current across the top of Melville Bay from Kap York to Canada and then enjoyed three days of following northerly winds sailing on mainsail alone towards Upernavik.

Only six miles from Upernavik the already strong wind increased suddenly to gale force and we were hit by our 'perfect storm' – well, as perfect as I want to encounter, thank you. I have been in bigger winds and seas, but this one lasted for two nights and a day, and there was darkness now at night, mist and clag – and ice. We turned and ran before on bare poles, with the inner forestay flogging away caught somehow in a terrible fangle of lines around it and unusable. It did rather concentrate the mind when it grew lighter next morning and there was a line of icebergs to starboard roughly where we were drifting. We were lying a hull with the wheel over but adopted a new tactic by pulling out a smidgen of genoa and bringing the wheel back to have some slow steerage way to steer clear. It had the added advantage too of taking us roughly north westward, away from the coast and bergs coming from the Upernavik Isford.

There was an amusing incident on that first night. At some stage when we were going quite fast on bare poles the Mate came up to stream warps. 'Are you sure about this?' 'Oh come on, Bob, this is my life at stake here.' Well, we hadn't quite thought of it like that, but eventually a strange collection of empty gas bottle, kedge anchor, chain and warp went over the stern. It did have the effect of slowing us down a bit, but it also made us less manoeuvrable for ice. After a while he did graciously concede that this was not really working and took it all back in again, not without difficulty. My pushpit will never be the same again.

The next day conditions moderated slightly and we tried to beat back to make up lost ground. We had no engine in all this as air had got into the fuel lines in some way. We got as far as Kingigtortagdlit (an island some twenty miles from Upernavik with rocks all round it), but you cannot sail close to the wind on triple reefed Main and a smidgen of genoa and the wind was directly from where we wanted to go, and increasing. We hove-to on Trysail and a bit of genoa and drifted back nineteen miles again in the night. It was rather disturbing on 'anchor' watch when the huge streaks of foam from breaking waves looked initially just like ice floes ahead, and sometimes we seemed to be sailing across snow fields, of foam.

On the second morning the wind gradually declined and veered, and we set sail towards Upernavik, some forty miles away by now. Then the wind died to almost nothing. Asperger Man did a splendid job bleeding the engine, and finally we just had enough battery power left to turn it over sufficiently to start. The wind generator had burnt out by now and it was a close run thing, but now we motored unashamedly full tilt for Upernavik. Here the chief medical doctor and nurse at the hospital saved our lives. We hardly had a stitch of dry clothing left and the Ebspacher heater had stopped working weeks ago, but they organised people to come in on a Sunday to work the tumble driers and even gave us lunch – all in the cause of preventive medicine to save us from hypothermia! We were tremendously grateful.

There was a request to stop at night now, so we made our way southwards by favourite anchorages, discovering at Svartenhuk that in a strong northerly it was still just possible to gain a toe hold on a river's silt fan close in to the northern shore. We reached Aasiaat, and stopped.

I was disappointed with myself for avoiding the challenge, but winter came early to Greenland this year – it was soon snowing hard in Aasiaat – and October is not noted as a recommended month for crossing the Atlantic by the far northern route. A Frenchman also wintering his bigger steel boat in Aasiaat did it one year and had winds of 73 knots. The skipper made the decision to winter the boat in Aasiaat, which was either pure cowardice or a seaman-like decision. Take your choice!

But it is with heartfelt thanks that we are able to report a full and moderately successful summer, with an Atlantic crossing (my eleventh), a traverse of the whole of the fifteen hundred mile west coast of Greenland from south to north as far as ice would reasonably allow, and half way back again, the first ascent of some nineteen summits, and a thorough investigation of Northumberland Island at around  $77^{\circ} 25'N$ , both inside and out. We managed to survive a couple of challenging storms, and set up an Automatic Weather Station on Littleton Island at  $78^{\circ} 22'N$  on a purely voluntary basis for scientific bodies.. And perhaps supremely we are all still talking to each other!

So another **Tilman type expedition**, at last.