

“Experience, the name men give to their mistakes”

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

Sailing, such a relaxing Hobby

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In Antrim where I lived in the seventies, there is a dinghy sailing club with the initials ABC, Antrim Boat Club. It is hidden down a private road, located in Antrim Bay on the shoreline of Lough Neagh, the biggest lake in the British Isles. Lough Neagh is almost a rectangle 20 miles wide and over 30 miles long. I managed to get taken out one evening in an 18ft National and I was hooked as it was a calm evening and sunny as well.

Back in the clubhouse later, with a beer in hand and a bit of chat, I decided to join the ABC. The following week I bought a very old wooden Scorpion 14-foot racing dinghy on a road trailer for not much money. However it was like buying granny a sports car.

A pal called Eddie knew more about rigging than I did; well, anybody knew more about rigging than I did so Eddie came along as my crewman. That's the person who works the smaller jib sail in front and acts as moving ballast in a lightweight two-man boat such as this. I was the helmsman with hardly any knowledge. Eddie knew a bit more but made up for it being 18 stone ballast.

We towed the dinghy on its trailer to the ABC, rigged it with some advice and set off from the slipway at a brisk pace in a stiffening wind. Because it was race night, there were many other dinghies on the water also rescue boats deployed. We were permitted to be out there as long as we stayed clear of the racing sailors but we also had the benefit of rescue should we need it and by Jove, we did!

Some time before the race was due to start, boats were skimming around getting the feel of wind strength and direction so we followed suit. With twenty minutes to go to the gun, I decided to sail around the first marker buoy, which was floating not far away. The wind strength was steadily rising so it was exhilarating to say the least: I'd not felt anything like this before!

As we fast approached the marker buoy on bumpy water the boat was well heeled over and I shouted the newly-learned command to my crewman: “Prepare to Gybe!” I paused, then shouted: “Gybe Hoo” and pulled in the tiller towards me, which was the correct thing to do. Immediately there were terrifying noises and sickening feelings as the fast moving boat rolled from leaning well-over in one direction to slamming completely over on to its opposite side. I was chucked into the Lough looking through splashing waves at Eddie in the water on the other side of the hull.

Fortunately one thing we had both been taught was how to “right an upturned boat” so we did with a great struggle with so many ropes, sheets, sails in a mess. We quickly took off at speed again and still in a muddle our second attempt proved that there was still something wrong with our technique. This time the rescue boat came over as the occupants could tell we were getting exhausted. There were “white horses” on the water by now and other rescue boats were getting more business from far more experienced sailors so we were ordered ashore.

Back in the bar we discussed our problem without resolving it until the racers came in. The weather had cut the racing short as dinghies and/or crew have difficulty coping with wind strength above Force 6. The solution was simple but neither of us had learned that, in order to gybe a sailing dinghy, the centreboard had to be fully retracted otherwise the boat “trips over” it.

Now we knew how to gybe, we could go out again and find out what else there was to learn.

Gybe - change direction in a sailing boat with the wind behind. Tack – with the wind from the front.

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