

WOA SOUTH WEST GROUP – RIVER DART MEET AFLOAT 10-16 JUNE 2022

By Bob Walker in SANGELAI

Executive Summary

A Meet Afloat is essentially a stated time period for members in the South West Group (SWG) to come together at a predetermined location and after that it is up to individuals to basically make it up as you go. The River Dart Meet Afloat was no exception and so my report on the event is very much based on my personal experience as are other contributions submitted by other participants in this Meet Afloat.

For SANGELAI, this was a key milestone in the calendar. Firstly because the boat had undergone an extensive re-wiring programme, electric power supply & distribution and a new anchor. All of which needed to be tested at sea if nothing more than to give me confidence that these upgrades can make single handed sailing safer. I do intend to write separate reports at the end of the season on both upgrades.

The Start

My passage plan was to take me from Plymouth to Salcombe on Thu 09 June 22, and then from Salcombe to Dittisham on the River Dart on Friday 10th Jun 22, in time for a prearranged BBQ organised by Chris Taylor at his local sailing club in Dittisham.

During the previous week my electrical upgrade had taken a step back when a new B&G Triton 2 display turned out to be the culprit crippling my NMEA 2000 digital backbone. The time taken to troubleshoot this defect meant that completion of the entire electrical upgrade could not be completed in time to sail on the 09 Jun and so it became a rush to make good all the safety critical items such as the engine, nav lights and instrumentation that would enable me to depart as planned on 09 Jun. Work on these systems finished late on Wednesday 08 Jun. Sailing the next day for Salcombe without a thorough test of the electrical system was going to be a risk but thankfully this was somewhat mitigated by the arrival of Barbara and Lizzy in SARACEN into Plymouth Mayflower Marina just a couple of days earlier and this would allow me to sail in company with SARACEN who I could turn to if my electronics failed.

Barbara was able to secure a berth in Mayflower just a couple of births from my own. Whilst I was naturally preoccupied with making SANGELAI safe to sail, Barbara was focussed on the weather forecast and as it turned out, with good reason.

The forecasted weather for our departure from Plymouth showed a gentle to moderate breeze from the SW (Force 3-4). With what appeared to be ideal weather conditions for a good sail to Salcombe was anything but ideal as it later transpired. It is always a bit lumpy around the Plymouth Eastern Breakwater until eventually rounding the Mew Stone and Yealm Head to then settle on to Easterly run across Bigbury Bay. SANGELAI is a Centaur Ketch and though experience I don't even consider raising the Mizzen sail with the wind behind me and so I was content to be making good 6kts over the ground with just my genoa and main sail. SARACEN I noticed was reefed down but as my main mast is shorter than the standard Centaur because of the mizzen, I consider it to be a good as least

one reef and so it proved as SARACEN (Griffon) and SANGELAI (Centaur Ketch) were matched for speed as we were passing Wembury Bay.



Fig 1; SARACEN leaving Plymouth

Barbara's foreboding of the weather forecast had ensured SARACEN was well reefed from the outset and her early caution was well placed as the sea welling under the starboard quarter seemed to grow in excess of 2 metres as we rounded towards Bigbury Bay. Such was the size of the swell that it seemed that every third wave crashed over my stern quarter with little resistance until it hit me. Now recording speeds of 8kts over the ground I was at least making the sea swell work hard to catch and drench me and while the boat and I were managing, caution took the better of me as I rolled in a good-sized proportion of my genoa.

As we approached Bolt Tail, the weather was to play yet another twist also not forecast; 'Rain.' Visibility dropped to about 100 metres and as well as losing sight of Bolt Head, I also lost sight of SARACEN. I was immediately thankful that under the electrical modification I had completed were the introduction of Lithium Iron batteries and the installation of an instrument pod just forward of the mizzen mast and helm position (wheel). With my electronic chart displaying AIS, I was relatively comfortable with my safety, more so than when the electronic chart was mounted in the cabin and I was confident that I now had ample battery capacity to power my electronics without running the engine. As it turned out, I would use just 2% of my battery capacity during the 4 hours I was sailing with the engine off. Drenched by the sea and the rain I decided to enter Salcombe rather than hang around in poor visibility for SARACEN. A quick radio check with SARACEN indicated that they were about 30 minutes behind me and safe.

The waterfront team in Salcombe Harbour escorted me to a private berth in the Bag and then returned with SARACEN to raft outboard of me. Both boats had taken quite a beating from the sea, my saloon said it all with cushions cupboard contents strewn across the deck. With the weather

forecast showing the same Force 3-4 meaning F-5 for the next couple of days, Barbara and I came to a very easy decision to remain in the secluded safety of Salcombe at least for the next couple of days.



Fig 2: SARACEN and SANGELAI in The Bag at SALCOMBE

Salcombe 09-12 June 2022

The weather in Salcombe improved on Friday 10 Jun with hot and sunny days ahead but the forecast of F3-4 meaning F-5 stubbornly awaited us at Prawle Point and so we used the time to help acquaint Barbara with her new electronic chart and Radar system and in return she teasingly berated me for not putting in my single slab reefing on my new sail and so I duly did what I was told with Barbara's help. The occasional foray into town for lunch and fresh supplies along with the odd Gin and tonic made it very easy to stay and await a drop in the wind and sea height.

Regular messages on the WhatsApp Group kept us up to date with events on the Dart. The BBQ on Friday had gone well and walks around Dittisham had been arranged. SARACEN and SANGELAI were referred to as the Salcombe Ss and it was via WhatsApp just before we slipped from our berth on Sunday 12 Jun, that we received news of injuries to Phil and Sally onboard SENYOL when a large heavy instrument cover fell on them in the middle of the night. For ease of access to medical supplies, SENYOL relocated to Deep Water #3 (DW3) in Dartmouth and it was here that the Ss headed for. After an uneventful passage to the River Dart the Ss briefly berthed on DW3 to find Phil and Sally in good spirits despite the shock and minor injuries from the previous night. After a cup of tea and Barbara cake and assured that Phil and Sally were OK, we slipped from DW3 and headed for Dittisham.

Dittisham 12-13 June 2022

The plan was to rendezvous with Paul Moorhouse in FIREBIRD OF FINGEST at anchor in the entrance of Bow Creek with an outside hope of picking up a visitors mooring at Stoke Gabriel. As the Salcombe Ss rounded the bend at Dittisham we spotted BROCK and HECATE on separate visitor buoys and as time had slipped by, we changed the plan with SARACEN rafting to BROCK and SANGELAI rafted with HECATE.



Fig 3: Dittisham



Fig 4: HECATE and SANGELAI

Monday morning 13 Jun was another fine day and FIREBIRD briefly stopped by in Dittisham before heading for home. A short while after the departure of FIREBIRD, BROCK also departed and headed back to their home berth closer to Dartmouth. For the three remaining boats the obvious plan was to head for the pub and make a plan. The Ferry Boat Inn at Dittisham was just the venue to make the plan and to my surprise I found myself agreeing to follow HECATE all the way up Bow Creek to tie up alongside the wall by the Maltsters Arms in Tuckenhay. We just had to wait for the flood tide just in case we ran aground.



Fig 5: The Ferry Boat Inn (Dittisham)

2 hours before high tide, SANGELAI, SARACEN and HECATE slipped our moorings and slowly headed upriver with HECATE taking the lead. My not so cunning plan was to give HECATE plenty of room to go aground allowing me the space to go about and get out. As it turned out, HECATE successfully navigated all the way to the Maltsters Arms and rafted outboard of two other yachts already secured against the wall. This left a 9-meter space against the wall astern of the three rafted yachts in which to get my 8.5-meter boat into. With no tide and no wind, manoeuvring into the small space was surprisingly easy. SARACEN meanwhile anchored in the entrance to Bow Creek as was DRONGO who we passed as HECATE and SANGELAI gingerly weaved our way into the Creek. DRONGO is local to the area, and I sensed rather than saw the raised eyebrows of Andy as he probably guessed at what were about to attempt.



Fig 6: In Bow Creek following HECATE at a distance



Fig 7: Tributary off Bow Creek



Fig 8: In but only just



Fig 9: View from the Maltsters Arms

Bow Creek 13-15 June 2022

Sarah and Peter from BROCK had very kindly booked a table in the Maltsters Arms from 1800, and so there was little time to secure HECATE and SANGELAI. We were close to Spring Tides and so I was in that cautious state of mind to allow sufficient slack in my mooring lines that would allow SANGELAI to drop and sit on the bottom at low tide, but not too much slack that would allow her to touch the yachts just 50 cm off her bowsprit. HECATE on the other hand would take to the ground with the yachts rafted inboard of her. Caution got the better of me and I decided to check the mooring lines every 30 minutes as the tide ebbed.

DRONGO and SARACEN arrived for dinner at the Maltsters Arms by their respective tenders with BROCK and AURORA arriving by bicycle and car respectively. My frequent checks on the mooring lines were a little surreal in that the shore bollards are in the pub car park. At high tide I mused that the boats appeared to be parked in the car park. One such foray to the car park drew the attention of several locals as I was in the process of adjusting the lines, two of who own and live aboard the yachts HECATE was rafted with. Friendly as they were, it was clear that their prime entertainment was watching visiting yachts not quite making it out of the Creek following a quick stop at high tide for a meal and refreshment. I assured them that they should take an early night as neither HECATE nor I would attempt a departure until high tide the following morning. Such banter paid-off because I noticed on a later check of the lines that they had been slackened for me, but the local guys probably did get the last laugh as SANGELAI took on a crazy list to Port with the starboard keel on a firm ledge next to the wall and the port keel sinking in soft mud. That night I slept half on the mattress and half on the port side storage lockers.



Fig 10: Arriving for dinner



Fig 11; Dinner in the Maltsters Arms at Tuckenhay

0600 on 14 Jun and it was eerily quiet as HECATE and SANGELAI prepared for departure. The boats were well afloat and still not quite at the top of the tide. A few hundred meters ahead of our position was a ghostly mist sitting on the water with the first rays of sunlight beginning to break through the tree tops. It was a scene that only those who dared to venture up the creek would ever experience. HECATE slowly moved out, her mast just visible above the sea of mist. Again, with no tide or wind at the head of Bow Creek, I gingerly pushed SANGELAI's stern away from the wall and for the first time she did what she should do as I went slow astern. Following HECATE out in flat calm water and with the bows gently pushing the mist aside it was not long before we reached the entrance to the Creek. Julian in HECATE bade his farewell as he would push on to Salcombe where he would prepare the boat for passage to the Isles of Scilly. Nobody had stirred on DRONGO or SARACEN as they lay at anchor and so I spent a short time contour mapping the area before choosing my location to anchor. This was the baptism for my new anchor and chain.



Fig 12: Dawn breaks over Bow Creek as HECATE leads the way out

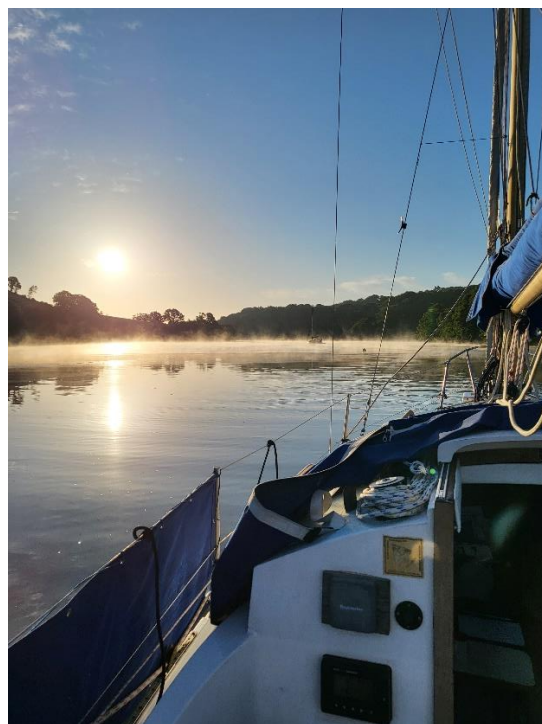


Fig 13: HECATE in a sea of mist

A little while later, DRONGO weighed anchor and bid their farewells as they headed the short distance for home. Barbara, Lizzy in SARACEN and myself were keen to explore Stoke Gabriel and hence we rendezvoused with Peter & Sarah from BROCK who had kayaked down from Totness. Peter and Sarah had lived in Stoke Gabriel and they provide the VIP tour which also involved following the mystical tradition of walking backwards seven times around a 956 year old yew tree. The River Shack was an excellent choice for lunch and walk afterwards to ease the calorie count culminated in a fine day for all and I thank Peter & Sarah for their time and hospitality.



Fig 14: At anchor in Bow Creek



Fig 15: Placid waters



Fig 16: Sarah from BROCK reviewing the Bow Creek Fleet by canoe. Picture courtesy of Peter.

Readers may question leaving a boat unattended at anchor especially a boat with a new anchor and they would be right to question my wisdom, more so that I have been on record saying that an anchored boat must never be left unattended. Well, for a small one-off purchase, I downloaded an app on my mobile phone called 'Anchor Pro'. It required me to leave my Samsung Galaxy Tablet on and in the boat receiving GPS. I had put 25 metres of chain out in a maximum of 5 metre depth of water, a ratio of 5:1 which was the optimal midpoint between 3:1 absolute minimum for short stays and 7:1 recommended for long/overnight stays. Frankly there was not room for 7:1 so I chose 5:1. Taking into account the catenary and that I had seen the boats swing 180 degrees due to the tide, I estimated that SANGELAI would stay within 30 metres of the original GPS position, and this is what I set my alert to on the app. Several sightings of the boat from the shore confirmed her position.

Heading For Home 15-16 June 2022

Since leaving Plymouth on 09 Jun 22, the weather had continued to improve. The problem SANGELAI and SARACEN now faced was a lack of wind, although the good news was that what little wind there was had swung round to be an Easterly wind. With low sea states and light winds Start Point should not cause any difficulties, however, we had chosen to leave at 1000 hrs meaning the tide will be in our favour around Start Point and perhaps give us a boost towards our next destination Salcombe.

At this point I need to go back to the beginning of the report and recall that as part of SANGELAI's modernisation programme, I had swapped out my lead acid batteries for 200 A/hrs of Lithium Iron batteries but retained a single lead acid battery for my engine start. All good so far, but here is a warning here for anybody else who might be considering a similar upgrade. I will write a detailed technical report in due course but for now here is a brief summary.

From first entering Salcombe on 09 Jun, I had been aware that my alternator belt had been slipping. The belt also drives the water impeller and I had noticed a reduction in the cooling water discharge. Despite tightening the belt at each stop, the problem persisted. On my return to Salcombe after leaving the River Dart, the engine overheated and cut out. Furthermore, I was struggling to get my battery capacity back to 100% despite over 4 hours of running the engine, my estimate was that it would take 7 hours in total which is not acceptable by any standards. As we closed on Salcombe the wind had reduced to 4 kts and I was barely making 2 kts as I nursed the engine and now it was smoking profusely which it never does. Barbara in SARACEN stayed close which I am immensely thankful for and over the radio we decided that as we passed Prawle Point, SARACEN should push on ahead to secure a berth and I would raft on SARACEN as and when I got there. As I entered the harbour passing Black Stone, a harbour boat was waiting for me and kindly towed me to the visitor pontoon in the bag overtaking SARACEN in the process. Barbara had kindly informed Salcombe Harbour that I had a poorly engine and they had duly come to help me.

A quick call to my engine mechanic pointed me in the direction of the engine air intake which when opened confirmed that it was choked with rubber dust particles from the alternator belt. With the air intake blocked the engine was running with rich fuel and with reduced water cooling the combined effect was a smoking exhaust and overheating.



Fig 17: Clogged air filter

Cleaning the filter in warm soapy water and cleaning out the engine bay removed the rubber dust particles. The source of the rubber dust was the belt and I changed this for a spare. The engine performance was restored to normal and there was no significant degradation after 5 hours of motor sailing back to Plymouth.

The source of the problem is the Lithium Iron batteries, they simply demand a higher current from the alternator which it was never designed to do. 50 years ago, the Westerly designers only considered the engine start battery but in more recent years we have added electrical loads to the leisure battery typically through electronic charts, AIS and other Nav aids. My 25 amp alternator was under maximum load which introduced excessive drag and was being transferred into the drive belt causing it to slip. I have now upgraded my alternator to a 55 amp substitute which I purchased off the shelf at Starter Motors & Alternator Co Ltd here in Plymouth. Time will tell if this solves the problem?

Acknowledgements

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And to everyone who participated in the event.