

THE "BLACK BLANCMANGE"

As the years roll by incidents occur from which we learn. Being an optimist I tend not to learn from successes, they are presumed and when they happen are soon forgotten. Mistakes, on the other hand, really do stick in the memory, and so it was with the Black Blancmange.

I own one of the very large and very very old black Avon dinghies. The lads christened it the Black Blancmange because we would pump it up hard ready for a run ashore in the evening, but when we fell out of the pub several hours later - guess what, our leaky boat had become a Blk Blmge!

One glorious summer we were cruising in company with our sailing club in the West Country with our 30' Nicholson. About a dozen of our yachts were in Fowey and the skippers had decided to leave, en masse, at 10 am the following morning. The night before we had been in the yacht club until late and on our return I had not let the dinghy down or stowed it. Next morning dawned bright and sunny, we needed some milk and duly went ashore. The nett effect was that, as usual, all the other boats had left by the agreed time, yet Marksman was hardly ready.

Fowey is a narrow and well-sheltered inlet, especially from winds from the north west as were forecast for this day. It seemed calm as I looked towards the harbour entrance and, against my better judgement, and in haste, (with hangover) decided to tow the rubber boat to Falmouth. We were just two on board and we set off with the dinghy in tow complete with seagull outboard motor on its bracket trailing over the stern. As soon as we were out of the harbour we realised that it was not a good idea to be towing such a large and, by now, very floppy rubber boat.

Nonetheless, if we wanted to keep in touch with the fleet, it was too late to turn back; so we pressed on at full speed to try to catch up - it was a lovely day so why not?

This was my second bad decision of the day and compounded the first.

The wind from the northwest gradually picked up to the forecast force four/five as we drew away from the coast and we were reaching and screaming along under full sail. I was spending most of the time looking over my left shoulder where the dinghy was leaping from crest to crest on our huge quarter wave. This became so precarious that it was now necessary to steer the yacht in whichever direction was most suitable for the dinghy's well being.

Off Dodman Point we ran into a tide race so the sea became confused. At the same time I needed to have a peer at the chart so I called to Jo below and asked her to hold the chart in the companionway where I could see it. Whilst all this was going on I took my other eye off the dinghy and there was a curiously loud gurgle from behind followed immediately by a very loud tearing noise. In an instant the dinghy had inverted and was roaring along upside down cheekily waving its little Seagull propeller at us. Seconds later the bow-towing patch tore off with a thwack and the dinghy was away on its own. All we were towing was the painter complete with the six-inch square bow patch and stainless steel ring.

So what was to be done?

Now we know what should have been done. That was to call the Coastguard, tell them of our loss and request that anyone finding our little boat should give it a decent burial.

What we actually did was to down sails, start the engine and attempt a rescue.

Third bad decision of the day!

I don't know if you have ever tried but an upside down dinghy without a painter is a jolly difficult thing to get hold of in a bit of a popple. Eventually we lassoed the upstanding outboard leg with a warp and drew the dinghy alongside our cockpit. It seemed to resent its loss of freedom because the malicious thing immediately began chewing great chunks of gelcoat out of our topsides with its little propeller. Not to be outdone, and fearful of puncturing the fabric, I managed to get our boathook into the ropes around the outside of the dinghy and, with both of us giving a mammoth heave, we managed to flip it back right side up. At this point it was more than half full of water, exceedingly heavy and, with Marksman bobbing about it was all we could do to just hang on. The

yacht was not under control, both the crew were hanging onto this darned boat and not strong enough to raise one side to let the water run out over the other side. There was even a chance that one or both of us could be pulled overboard.

Clearly heroics were called for. I announced that, at an appropriate moment, I would jump into the dinghy. Jo's voice still rings in my ears today, she said "Please don't leave me alone on this boat".

Notwithstanding her impassioned plea I jumped into the dinghy carrying a bucket and discovered that the jerking of the yacht on the heavily waterlogged dinghy was about to tear it apart, sink it, and tip me over the side to boot. So I set myself adrift from the yacht and bailed out. In due course, Jo picked me up and we attached a rope to the outboard engine and pulled it and the dinghy on board. We undid the bungs, the dinghy deflated and we lashed it across the coachroof where it should have been all along.

I was exhausted, went below and was promptly sick. Unable to continue as skipper, Jo took us to Falmouth where the rest of the fleet were waiting to meet us.

We all laughed about our experience.

I vowed "never again will I tow a dinghy at sea".

All this was ten years ago and yet, this summer, on the way back from Holland, I was sorely tempted to try it again. The weather was calm, the sun shining and all was well with the world. It was very hard to discipline myself to let the new dinghy down, especially as we would need it as soon as we arrived at the next port.

But I remembered the Black Blancmange and Dodman Point all those years ago and this time made the effort to stow the boat.

We live and learn as they say.

Don Alexander - Warsash - April 1999

Lessons learned:-

- By leaving half an hour late and slowed by the dinghy we were bound to meet overfalls at the point. I could have figured this out before leaving.
- Make **all** necessary provisions before going to sea - i.e. the night before.
- **Never** step off the yacht however fit one is and however easy it might seem. Getting back aboard would have been impossible and Jo could not have dragged me from the water if the dinghy had sunk.
- The skipper should **never hazard his own health** lest his experience be really needed when he is incapacitated
- **Never tow a dinghy at sea** (unless prepared to loose it).

We were lucky that time – and are wiser now.