

LUKE POWELL

Working Sail

A LIFE IN WOODEN BOATS

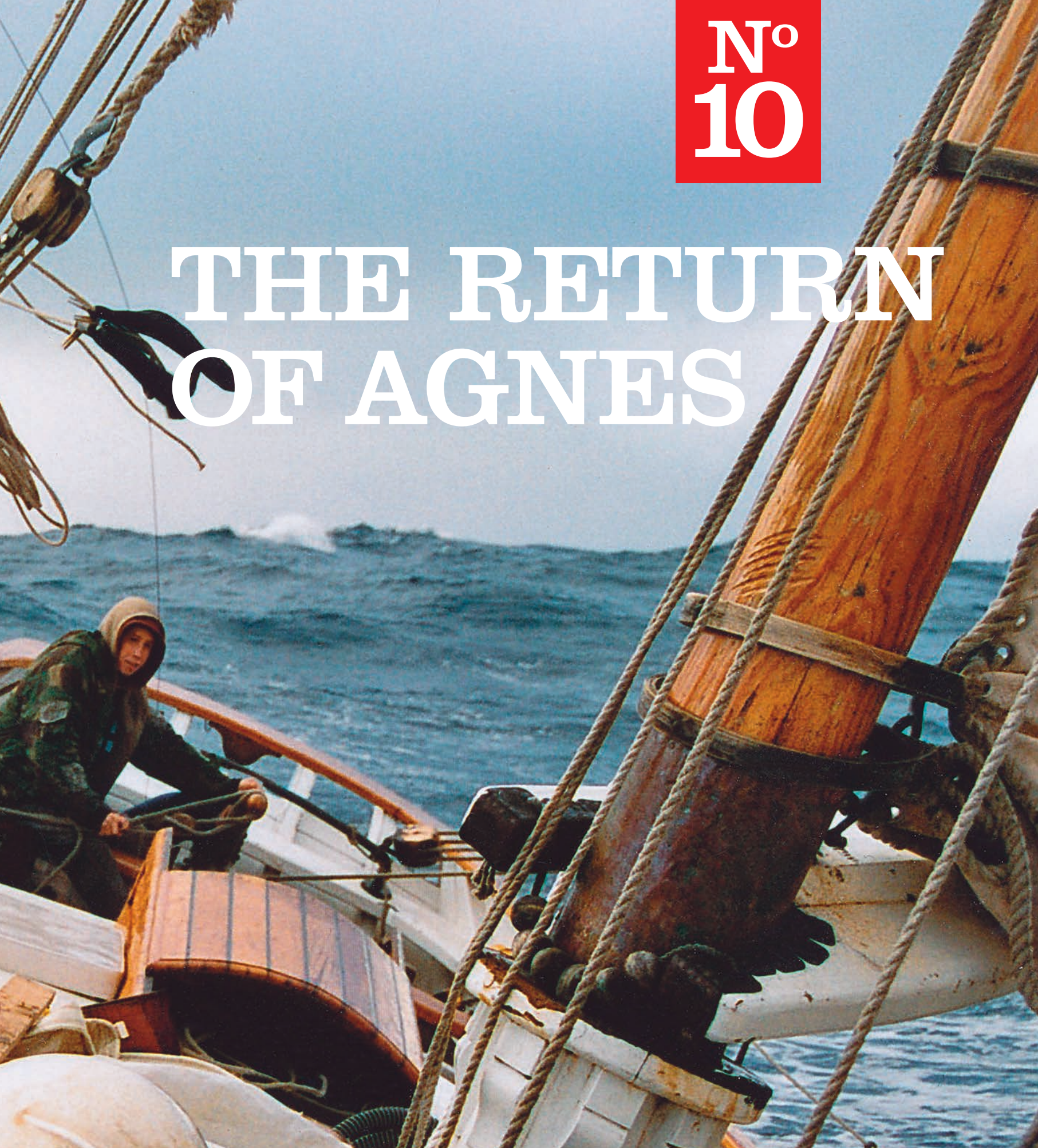


Day after day of empty sea, grey sky and constant wind. The north Atlantic in late September, it's the morning watch and my son Dylan takes his turn at the helm.



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THE RETURN OF AGNES



Some days we sailed in thick fog as the wind blew at gale force. *Agnes* charged forward, ploughing her way across an invisible fog-bound ocean, us unable to see beyond the next wave. Some days the wind in the rigging was so strong it beat us back and I feared something might break.



Whilst building *Ezra I* received news from Gill Johnson, an American friend of Shel's, that *Agnes* needed saving. Shel's original intention had been to start an adventure school in Norwalk, Connecticut, just north of Long Island on the eastern seaboard, taking kids out to sea, gaining life-building experience. It was a noble idea and Shel, a teacher and good with children, was the man for the job. Unfortunately, *Agnes's* arrival in the States coincided with the economic downturn, which in turn affected Shel's ability to get the sponsorship he needed for the project to work.

Poor *Agnes*. At times she seemed doomed. One day leaving harbour she went the wrong side of the channel markers, running aground on iron piles. As the tide fell these drove up through her bottom planking, sinking her. It took a diver to plug the holes before she could be refloated. Then heavy snow during the winter that followed left her covered in a white blanket. An electric heater was put aboard to dry her out, but the extension wire used was English and not meant for the higher ampage of the American system. It overheated and caught fire, setting the saloon seats ablaze. With no one aboard the fire soon took hold, spreading fast. Soon the matchboarding of the bulkheads, locker fronts and shelves were ablaze. The heat became intense, cracking the glass in the skylight. Luckily, being laminated, it held, confining the flames to inside the boat. Having consumed all the oxygen, the fire filled *Agnes* with thick acrid smoke. Due to her being covered with snow the fire was unable to draw fresh air in from outside and so suffocated itself. Incredibly it went out, but must have smouldered for days.

Some weeks later, Shel came down to the boat and noticed traces of soot in the snow. He raked it back from the companionway, opened the hatch, and found himself confronting an *Agnes* thick with soot and as black as coal. Ironically, it was a miracle that no one noticed the fire when it was alight. If the hatch had been opened in an attempt to put it out, the air rushing in would have exploded in a potentially catastrophic fireball. Amazingly, *Agnes* survived. The saloon needed rebuilding, but there was no damage to the hull except some charred deck planking and a few deck beams.

The combination of a sinking followed by the fire unsurprisingly left Shel disillusioned with the boat, so he turned to Gill for help. Gill's intention was to use *Agnes* for chartering in the Caribbean. This came to nothing, and finally *Agnes* was laid up in a small backwater near Annapolis on the Chesapeake. A year later, amidst the tangle of my divorce from Sara, Gill contacted



Facing page: *The tiller was lashed for days while crossing the Atlantic.*

Above: *At last the sun is out and times are good, rafted up at Douarnenez.*

me with news of *Agnes's* plight. Desperately short of money, but aware that this might be my last chance to own a boat of my own, Shel and I began negotiations that ended up with my buying *Agnes*.

In late August 2005, having taken a break from work on *Ezra* and allowing myself six weeks to sail *Agnes* back home to Falmouth, I gathered a crew together. There was Big Nick, the ever faithful rope puller, young Jim Bob our enthusiastic sailing carpenter, and my son Dylan, who, at fourteen was strong and in need of adventure. As we flew over the North Atlantic I pressed my face to the porthole and peered down at the vast empty sea, wondering at the size of the waves. It looked cold and uninviting; a little ship down there seemed lost in that immeasurable emptiness.

It was night when we landed at Washington. As we left the airplane the hot and humid air of Virginia engulfed us. Taking a cab out into the darkness, not quite sure where we were going, I brandished a piece of paper with the address of a small boatyard up some creek. Once out of the cab, we found ourselves in the quiet sticky night walking down a wooden dock through lines of white plastic angling boats. On their aft decks were what looked like dentists' chairs - great padded fighting chairs festooned with an array of rod holders, weird fetish chairs for the American male ego to pit himself against innocent fish.

Then there was *Agnes*, strangely out of place, with the only wooden mast and looking much bigger than I expected. She rested gently, alone in a sea of moonlit plastic, shunned and

separate from their world. Was this boat really mine? Had I once built it? Opening up the companionway I went below like an excited child, she was cavernous, so much bigger than I remembered. Once back on deck we opened an ice chest full of cold beer and in the warmth of the night we toasted *Agnes* and the adventures to come.

Next morning I came on deck to the din of endless traffic on the freeway flyover that stood high above us. In the sharp sunlight *Agnes's* attractions quickly waned. Paint was peeling and the varnish bleached. There were scrapes, chafes and war wounds. Not a paintbrush had been near her since she had been launched. Above water everything was tinder dry from the baking hot sun, below her hull was thick with weed.

'Hey there guys!' It was Gill, a man most at ease in a darkened bar with a bourbon on the rocks in his hand. He grasped my hand warmly. 'Great to see you.' He was friendly and generous in the way only Americans can be, running me to and fro in his car and helping us gather food, drink, some charts and spare rope. In two days we were fuelled up and away down the Chesapeake. But even with the sails up and the engine running, *Agnes* was so badly fouled with weed that she

could hardly move. Our first priority was to get her slipped before putting to sea.

Norfolk, Virginia, at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay seemed a good place to get the boat ashore. This was the land of the famous Skip Jacks, the sailing oyster boats, but those we saw seemed to be crumbling to pieces in the crippling humid heat. How could any wooden boat survive this intense humidity? Thank heavens we were taking *Agnes* north before she too ended up like the Skip Jacks, disintegrating with dry rot in the corner of a boatyard, boats whose days were passed.

The weather was overbearing, thick and soft with humidity. We were in the middle of the hurricane season. Sitting in a bar, sipping beer to cool down, the overhead TV showed hurricane Katrina wreaking havoc away to the south of us in New Orleans. It was time to head north away from this oppressive heat before another hurricane tracked up the eastern seaboard.

Agnes was antifouled and back in the water. Although the parched deck and open topsides desperately needed recaulking, we would just have to make the best of it. Victualled up and with new rope in the rig, we were ready to go. Despite our fears, we happily had an easy passage up the coast with genial warm

Below: Big Nick takes his watch with renewed vigour. **Centre:** White water over the lee rails was a common occurrence.



beam winds. I now could see how the great American seven-masters, slab-sided schooners, had so successfully plied up and down the Eastern Seaboard, taking advantage of fair seasonal winds. Loaded high with deck cargos of lumber, they were well suited to these conditions.

An invisible coast lay beneath the horizon. We sailed on peacefully, only occasionally disturbed by the drone of engines as an angling boat charged out of the mist, its fighting chair and khaki-clad men at the ready. They were as quickly gone, leaving only a wake as they headed out for the distant fishing grounds to do battle.

Arriving in Martha's Vineyard, a small sandy low-lying island off Massachusetts, we entered a bay sheltering a simple little town built of wood that seemed to rise from the beach, with streets of sand. Away went the anchor and *Agnes* came round to the wind not far from a fabulous large schooner named *Alabama*. Behind us, also coming in to the bay to anchor was the even bigger *Shenandoah*, over 100 feet long, engineless and splendid, built and sailed by the redoubtable Bob Douglas. She looked fantastic, a black giant ghosting in under square topsails, with great wooden-stocked fisherman's anchors at the cat-heads,

ready to drop. I was humbled at such greatness. Why can't we in England build wooden ships like this? Why are we so limp wristed? We do nothing to add a new page to our fine seafaring history. As Napoleon said, we are a nation of shopkeepers - and I might add, a nation of self-appointed health and safety officers. Hopefully one day we will have a renewed sense of adventure, enough to build a new *Cutty Sark*, make men of ourselves and inspire our children by sailing under full canvas through the Western Approaches.

Splash went the great anchors of the *Shenandoah* and splash went our dinghy. Over the side we jumped, rowing ashore in search of a bar - only to discover it was a teetotal town of Quakers. How was Big Nick to quench his thirst? After a short chat with some locals he was away, striding off over the hills, six miles to a bar that brewed its own beer. Having taken a liking to us as drinking partners, Gill arrived on the ferry. Excited by our shambolic adventure he had decided to come along for the ride. It would be good to have an extra man aboard, at least for the watches, and he was also handy with a spanner.

Our next port of call was Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. It was misty when we rounded the bleak headland that guarded the

Below right: *We drive on ever further over empty seas. All is wet, our bunks and our clothes. Nothing will dry.*



entrance. Impaled on a rock, like a dead man on a gibbet, a warning to all sailors, were the bleached bones of a large fishing boat. What had happened to this place? Only a few years before Lunenburg had been a bustling fishing port. Now its quay was deserted. Not a ship was left save a few derelicts at the fish-piers and a couple of tired old Grand Banks schooners tied up in tribute to the memory of the men who had served on them. The whole town was strangely quiet, as if life had moved on. The fishermen may have been out of work but at the one bar still open, 'The Not Inn', they sure drank their fill and for three crazy nights we were swept madly along with them.

It was now September, the peak of the hurricane season. Despite the forebodings of our new friends, we put down our glasses, reluctantly made our farewells and were away out into the Atlantic. Out past St John's and across the legendary Grand Banks into the deep where the winds blew and the storms thrashed. *Agnes* buried herself under a mountain of sea, which poured in through every seam. She would surely take up in time but our bunks were now soaked. We were wet through, our clothes as well as our bedding. We gave up shaving and slept in our oilskins. Only Jim maintained a semblance of normality, miraculously appearing on deck every morning cheerful and beaming with a fresh face and clean dry clothes. How did he do it? Someone must have packed him the mother of all bags!

We drove on, sailing over where the *Titanic* lay deep beneath us. The sea looked cold and inhospitable. The sky was dark and brooding, a menacing squall approached. Hoping to keep ahead of it, Gill put the engine on, when bang! The shaft coupling sheared and in the process bent the prop-shaft, throwing it back and jamming the propeller against the rudder.

There were shouts from above. 'I can't steer her!'

Quickly, from a deep sleep, I sprang from my bunk, diving into the engine room as Nick shouted down that we were about to broach. With all my might I dragged the shaft forward, freeing the rudder, but the bent shaft was beyond use. The engine was out of action and we had a long way to go. Out into an empty world where no ship or man lived. All was dark grey, sea and sky, night and day.

On we went, for days on end, reefed down and beating our way against damnable easterly gales. *Agnes* rode the Atlantic swell admirably. Where most boats would stall, she forged through without faltering, shouldering the seas apart. Some days we sailed in thick fog as the wind blew at gale force.

Agnes charged forward, ploughing her way across an invisible fog-bound ocean, us unable to see beyond the next wave. Some days the wind in the rigging was so strong it beat us back and I feared something might break. We then hove-to, giving us a respite from the ordeal. We caught up on much needed sleep, or just relaxed and played cards whilst *Agnes* lay calmly, staysail backed, helm lashed over, hull to the wind, riding the sea with the composure of a carthorse grazing after a day's toil.

When the weather eased a smidgen we went on, always to windward. But all the time we were slowly being pushed north, unable to make our true course. For two weeks I feared that we were not going to make it, but would instead be driven back to St John's or even further north to Greenland. Finally we managed to get south of the latest cyclone and miraculously, after nearly giving up hope, the wind veered to the south and then the next day to the west, moderating to a mild seven or eight. We were free! The reefs were shaken out, the sheets eased, and *Agnes* drove headlong, on course for home.

Back at Falmouth there was news of unusually violent *Atlantic* storms. No one had heard from us for three weeks. Our families and friends began to worry and fear the worst, thinking us lost at sea. The winds were still strong and life didn't get any easier but we were in good humour now and settled into the routine of life at sea. Dylan, a young teenager, slept and ate most of the time, but part of the deal was that he did school work in the mornings and took a stint at the helm in the afternoon. I enjoyed having him there – that good father and son thing – sharing the night watch and talking about life.

I drove *Agnes* hard, every rope and timber straining. We were making good progress, chewing off the miles in the daily log. The seas were still void of any ships but we were rarely alone. Pilot whales followed us by day and night. We saw turtles, dolphins, and the odd sperm whale. We nearly ran over one as it slept, only sparing it a rude awakening by swift action on the tiller. The great leviathan passed down our lee rail, scraping the boom end as it slid by. It was much bigger than *Agnes*, and god knows what would have happened if we had actually hit it stem on. Sometimes at night we could smell their breath on the wind, as t'was said of Moby Dick, 'When ye smell land, where no land be, then there he be'.

I whiled away my night watches pondering what to do once we were home. Sara wanted to sell *Agnes*. I on the other hand,



I just love it when the rain drives, the wind is foul and we have several days and nights to go!

having moved out of our large family home into a small terraced two up two down and having lost *Lizzie May*, found it difficult to come to terms with the situation. I could not afford to keep *Agnes* yet I loved this boat too much. Even out in the Atlantic, far from land, alone with her, a witness to how she courageously fought the seas, keeping us safe, I still could not see a solution. Then one night the stars came out for the first time in weeks and I had an epiphany. I would give the house to Sara. All I wanted was to keep *Agnes* and build boats. It was so simple. To live an ordinary life in a little terraced house or to live on a fantastic boat and have a life of adventure.

There was no choice. My heart sang. Why had it taken so long to work this out? I was happier than I had been in years. Life was suddenly fantastic. Out in mid ocean sailing *Agnes* with my son, all the troubles of land seemed petty and far away.

In time we closed towards the southern end of Ireland. The seas piled up as we crossed the continental shelf. For the first

time in weeks we saw a distant ship. A fishing boat passed, hull lost in the turmoil, but still no land. Then one morning on the horizon we spied far off something tall, thin and black. Gradually it gained in height and girth and then turned into a lighthouse – surely not, but yes it must be the Bishop Rock! The Isles of Scilly! We were home. With beaming smiles we watched the island of St Agnes slowly appear out of the sea. ‘Land Ho!’ Twenty-three days from Lunenburg and we came round the point into sheltered waters. Down went the hook into the calm waters of Porthcongla, just off the ‘Turks Head’. No sooner did we have the sails down than Big Nick leapt fully clothed into the sea to swim ashore, heading for the pub. After launching the dinghy, we were not far behind.

The next morning after the first full night’s sleep for nearly a month we woke to the wind blowing hard into the bay. Without an engine we were trapped. It would have been ironic if after having travelled so far we were to be wrecked not twenty yards from where the original pilot cutter *Agnes* was stationed some

