

Ken Falcon's brush with a fishing marker buoy

Please meet Chris Mowlem, professional diver, from Poole, with his good friend Ian, who was enjoying a quiet Saturday morning at home, when, at about 09.00, he received a telephone call from Salterns Marina office asking if he would be prepared to assist a yacht which was hooked up on a lobster pot mark somewhere off Bournemouth. He agreed and so, I was able to get in touch with him.

I was sailing our Moody 376, Tiftie, alone, from Mayflower Marina to Stokes Bay with various intermediate stopovers and spent the previous night at anchor in Studland Bay. It was a fine day with less than 10 knots of warm offshore wind. When conditions are good, I prefer to explore the coastline, rather than just take a rhumb line to my next destination. Modest offshore winds are ideal conditions and, so, starting early, I sailed towards Bournemouth so as to be close in at Hengistbury Head and take the inside channel to Hurst.

Having passed 'inside' virus-immobilised Arcadia, Tiftie was sailing very nicely on autohelm and I was looking out from the companionway. Nothing of relevance in sight. Except that a 12" orange marker buoy with a smaller pick-up buoy attached turned out to be 'relevant'.

There are two characteristics of a fishing marker which couldn't be better 'designed' to foul a yacht. They are:

- 1] buoyant rope, eg polypropylene and
- 2] two buoys attached by short length of line. Of course, in order to keep the ambush complete, it is best not to use a flag.

At the last moment, I was ambushed by a 'two-buoy trap' about 6m ahead with absolutely no chance of changing course. Dispassionately, I watched the two buoys disappear from view beneath the bow, turned and watched for them to re-appear astern. Which they didn't!! Cross fingers and hope that Tiftie's forward motion and momentum would free her. Gradually, we ground to a halt! Oops. Everybody believes that, if a lobster mark is 'hooked', the boat will 'hang' by its stern. It's true. Furling the genoa was quick and easy. Furling the mainsail inside the mast when, running, is difficult. The sail usually creases and takes up too much space as it enters the mast. I was not at all surprised when the last quarter of sail would not furl but remained 'full' of wind. I then dropped anchor so as to prevent any further drift seawards. (We didn't drift but remained pointing essentially downwind.

What to do? Decided to contact Solent Coastguard. I'm in no danger, so no need for a Mayday. All done on Ch37. Usual stuff. How many on board? One. Any injury? No. Do you have a life raft? Yes, four person. Do you have lifejackets? Yes, four. Are you wearing one? Yes, of course. (Who, in their right mind, is likely to say 'No'.) And that was pretty much it. "You'll need to find your own commercial diver". ???

Thank heavens for iPhones, 4G and Google. Rang a Poole diving school. Very helpful, but, sorry, you need a commercial diver. The school suggested Salterns Marina who were flummoxed as to why I called them, but just happened to know a man who might and offered to ring him first. So very helpful.

Chris said that he would be happy to come out to me, but could not make it for about 3 hours. Given that, being in no danger (apart from the danger of running out of wine), I might have been stuck there for days, 3 hours seemed to be a bargain. It was a lovely day and the three hours soon passed. Within about 10 minutes of arriving, Chris was under the boat and, in a flash, we were free and soon, head-to-wind on the anchor.

Chris confirmed, as was expected, that the rope was hooked under Tiftie's feathering prop. He checked and couldn't see any damage. After asking him to stand-by whilst I lifted the anchor, which may well have been dragged over the ground until 'fouled' (you never know), Tiftie was away again. The delay had caused us to miss the tide at Hurst, but, a typical change of cruising plan, a very pleasant night was spent at anchor in Totland Bay.

Thanks again to Chris and Ian.

Ken Falcon