

“PRUNELLA” .. the LADY who was taken out of hiding ...

The story of how Mark Wightman and Stefaan Persoons became joint owners of “Prunella”, a 1938 veteran motor yacht, and their many ensuing adventures. In Part Two of this series we find them in danger of sinking(Continued from Boater 144)



Prunella

St. Olaves and Lowestoft to Burnham ... and that “sinking feeling” ...

As the winter of 2020/2021 was slowly making way for spring 2021 and it looked more and more that the Henley TTBF was on for this year, the pressure was slowly building to get *Prunella* ready for the show. So, we had to come up with a plan because a lot of work still had to be done. Despite the fact that four years had passed by now, there was still important and big work to be done because it couldn't be done too early before the show. Stripping and painting the hull was the biggest job on that list. So, we had to head back to Burnham-on-Crouch because she had to come back out of the water again and be put in the dry shed. Little did we know at the time of our “planning” for the 2021 TTBF that this also would be the start of a 2021 season full of “unplanned” adventures, outside of the TTBF, with *Prunella*.

Passage planning took place and the weather looked good so on the 3rd of July, the day we were planning to head out to sea, around the coast and up the river

Crouch, we moved *Prunella* to Lowestoft. Once in Lowestoft we had to make three trips back and forth with diesel canisters to the local car petrol station because the fueling dock on the broads just down from St. Olaves was

closed as it was not accessible because there was a large barge temporarily stuck in front of it. We had, however, siphoned enough diesel from *Vanessa* to make sure we could make it safely from S. Olaves to Lowestoft.

The tides that day worked out perfectly well for a smooth and rapid crossing with the tide taking us down south along the coast and the tide would turn just in time to take us up the river Crouch by the time we were planning to get around the wind farm by Whitaker at the entrance of the Crouch estuary. We booked the Lowestoft lock and bridge to head out to sea and with one last stop on the seaside of the bridge to put the mast up, we were on our way ... albeit a little later than planned to make full use of the tides perfectly matching our planned progress but still within the right times for the right tides ...

Once out at sea, we noticed that the weather was not exactly as the forecast had predicted with a sea slightly less calm than predicted.

By adjusting the throttles to balance the left and right propulsion with the now

nicely filled sail, *Prunella* sat happily and steadily leaning on her port side at first and her starboard side later as we continued to turn in towards the west. With the steadying sail up, not only was *Prunella* instantaneously a lot more comfortable but so were both of her crew.

We knew by now that we would not make it to Burnham before night time so we made our preparations: checked all the navigation lights, prepared night time headlamps for map reading and plotting from the GPS onto the paper chart, did a full walk around to check the entire outside of the boat before darkness would set in as well as the inside, including the bilges, and left the taking down of the sail till last because she seemed happy and steady so we didn't want to "rock the boat" by taking away her "steady hand" when she seemed very happy with it.

Part of the hourly checklist throughout the journey was also to check the bilges,

as we had also just done in preparation for nightfall. As darkness was slowly approaching and there was still the sail to be taken down before total darkness, I decided to go through the checklist about 20' earlier than the scheduled "hour" whilst Mark was still at the helm. As I took up the small inspection hatch in the floor board of the saloon to check the bilges, I got a big surprise: I noticed that the water was only about a foot below the boards. That was not good! We were clearly taking on water somewhere and obviously more than the bilge pumps could cope with.

We slowed *Prunella* down a bit and quickly went to check on the batteries as that was our main concern. How safe were the batteries? Water over the batteries and we're in real trouble. The engines would obviously continue to run. For a while at least. Until the header tank would require filling from the main tanks



← To Burnham-on-Crouch harbour

Arrow shows approx. position of "Prunella"



Showing where the hull plank ends have parted from the stem allowing water ingress

but we would not have the battery power for the header tank pump to do so. But we were OK on the batteries. They were (still) well above the water level.

The next step was to quickly go around the boat to check where we were taking on water and we were very lucky in our unlucky situation as we found the source rather quickly. I took the helm and Mark immediately went to the front of the boat because we had just taken out the old heads right up in the bow in the front cabin and although we had obviously closed the Blakes sea cocks AND put a wooden bung in, it was the first possibility of water leakage that came to mind.

As Mark was bending down to check the sea cocks he received a shower of sea water over his head. Well, that's not

supposed to happen.... It became clear very quickly that we had sprung a few planks on the hull from the stem on the bow. Luckily again in our unlucky situation the entire area seemed to be above the waterline but each time *Prunella* took a little dive into a wave (and we were now, because of our progress slower than planned, pushing into tide and so not only still making slow progress but also tapping into the waves) we took on about five to ten liters of water. That was not a good situation but at least we knew where the problem was.

We had to move fast because we had a lot to do to stem the flow of water coming in and to get the water, that was already in, out of the boat. Whilst we went very methodically and quickly about dealing with the situation we also both realised that our back up plan, if we “really” got into trouble, was the “Whitaker Spit” sand bank on our port side to go and beach ourselves (particularly with an outgoing tide) or the sand bank of the wind farm to our starboard side albeit that that was rather close to the windmills.

So, the tasks to be done: firstly we now slowed *Prunella* right down to stop her taking on any more water by no longer diving into the waves at all and we quickly got on with digging up and ripping some smaller pieces from the underlay of the carpets to bung into the bow between the stem and the planks to stem the flow of water coming in albeit that we couldn't press too hard because that would only push the planks further

away from the stem and make the problem worse. Secondly, we had to wire up a spare (and larger than the pumps already fixed on the bottom of the bilges) bilge pump.

We very quickly and efficiently got on with the repurposing and all worked wonderfully and a steady big stream of water coming from the larger bilge pump was quickly squirting out of the side of *Prunella*.

However, despite our cleaning out of the bilges of the “old” rubbish during the summer of 2016, there was now quite a bit of “new” rubbish from the renovation down in the bilges and which we had not yet entirely and properly cleaned out. That “new” rubbish was now getting sucked against all the bilge pumps and, by doing so, reducing their capacities. But, with no more water coming in and some water still going out, the balance was now in favour of water going out. Slowly, admittedly, but nevertheless going OUT.

During our crisis management we also had not noticed any particular worsening of *Prunella*'s rolling which might have made our efforts more difficult. Nevertheless, it was time to bring the sail down. With Mark at the helm and it being dark by now, I double checked that my life jacket was properly strapped on, clipped one end of a safety line to my jacket and reached outside the wheelhouse to clip the other end on a strong point on *Prunella* before heading out towards the mast at the front of the wheelhouse to bring down the sail. Then it was time to move to the rear of the wheelhouse, to tidy up and secure as

much as possible in the dark the sail which was now chaotically lying on the roof of the wheelhouse.

By methodically changing over the safety line several times, I made my way to the rear of the wheelhouse, tidied up and secured the sail as much as possible and methodically made my way back inside the wheelhouse, and with Mark still at the helm, immediately went down to check the bilges again. All seemed well and stabilised if not slightly improved.

As calmness (and relief) had returned we took stock and evaluated our predicament and did realise that despite us seemingly having stabilized the situation we were still not guaranteed to be out of trouble entirely. So, whilst our situation did not warrant a PAN PAN (we were still in control of *Prunella* and we had the use of both her engines and all her systems and our batteries were still ok, we discussed our situation and agreed to call the Coast Guard to inform them of our position and our predicament. Not a PAN PAN; not a MAY DAY. A simple call for passing information on our position and situation and “forewarn” that we “possibly” MAY need help if the situation worsened again.

The lady at the other end of the radio could not have been more friendly, calm, professional and helpful and we were told that she would call us back soon. We confirmed “Dover Coast Guard; *Prunella* standing by”. After only a couple of minutes, and during which time we also informed, (via telephone, so as to keep the radio free) our contacts on



land: Lizzy and Leo from Leeds Lane Marina in St. Olaves where we had left from the day before.

The friendly Dover Coast Guard lady called us back quickly and informed us that they had discussed and evaluated our situation with the RNLI station in Burnham, also taking into account factors such as the fact that it was night time (it must have been just around midnight by that time) and that by now we also had a strong tide against us and so we were going to make little progress for the next few hours until the tide turned again,

leading to increasing levels of fatigue for us as we still had a few hours ahead of us and which was not going to be helpful if we did hit trouble again and so it had been decided that an RNLI rescue boat was to be launched (as a matter of fact already had been launched) from Burnham and they were already, as we were speaking, on their way.

After about 15-20 minutes, we spotted the RNLI rescue boat in the distance with their flashing blue emergency light and fast approaching *Prunella*. To make it a little easier for them to spot us in the dark, despite our working navigation and steaming lights, we quickly and briefly switched on *Prunella*'s LED deck's floodlights.

So it was that they quickly found us, came nicely alongside in what were by now, luckily, relatively flat waters and we soon had two RNLI crew aboard *Prunella*. They got a quick situation update from us and then quickly assessed the situation for themselves by diving down into the saloon take a good look.

A rather large case with a powerful petrol pump inside it was hoisted from the RNLI rescue boat onto *Prunella* and taken down the saloon. As it appeared that the pump did not want to start easily, a quick check of the petrol tank revealed very little petrol and a spare petrol canister was brought on board from the RNLI rescue vessel. The pump was successfully started and got to do its work and the water level went down quickly to a more comfortable level.

So, it was time for tea and biscuits all around as we settled in for the next three

hours to Burnham with two RNLI people on board *Prunella* and two more on the RNLI rescue vessel which escorted us all the way to Burnham, which was very comfortable.

It meant that we could relax about the “navigating and plotting in the dark” part of the last part of our journey, which was rather nice because despite the fact that adrenaline had clearly been keeping us going strong until then, subconscious fatigue must have been creeping in slowly leaving us exposed to potentially making mistakes should our emergency situation get worse again. We felt safe with the RNLI both on board and as our escort.

Under our RNLI escort, we made it safely to Burnham at around 3am on the morning of the 4th of July.

We moored up along the fuelling dock in Burnham where the Coast Guard and the police were waiting for us. Following a quick check by the Coast Guard on board *Prunella* and feedback to them from the RNLI, It was quickly established that this really was an unforeseen and unforeseeable emergency and that no blame could be laid upon either of us, in fact we were commended for our handling of the situation and were told that we seemingly did everything right and that no one could have done anything different or better than we had done with the means we had on board.

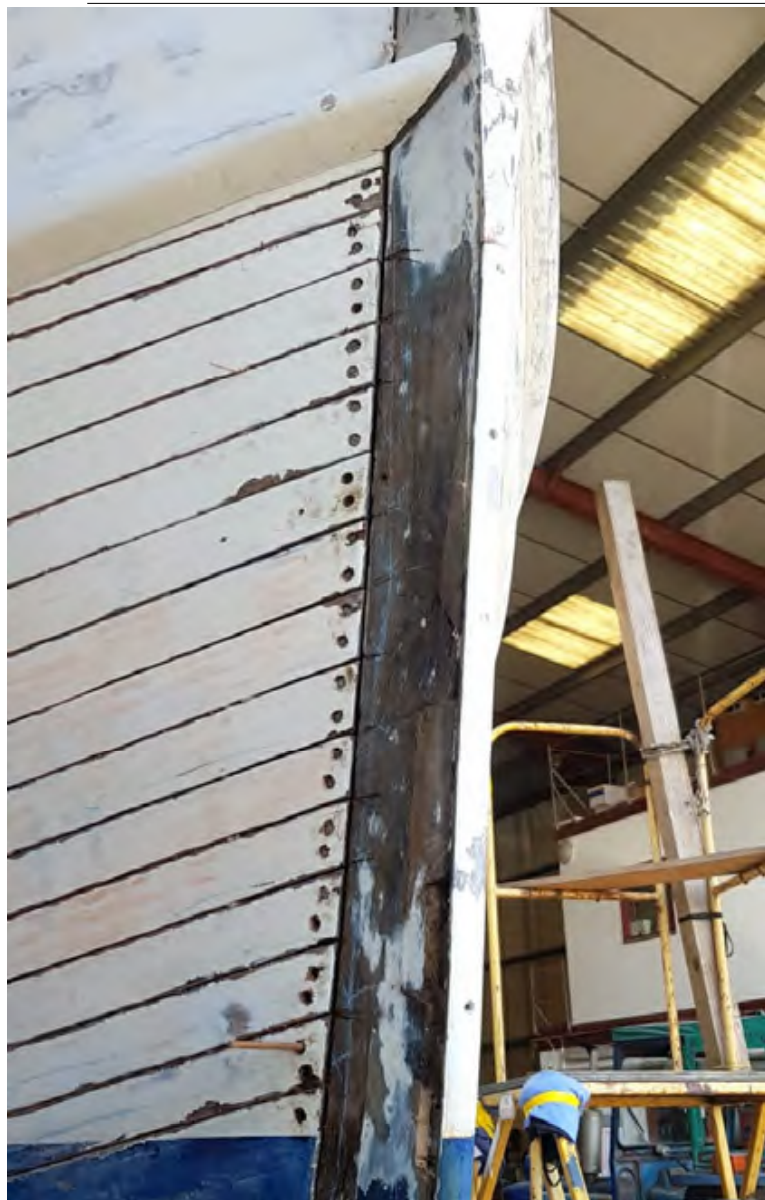
So, all was good in the end and the Coast Guard and the police were satisfied that they had not been called out (of bed) for an unnecessary or avoidable reason. No reports were or had to be filed and no charges were pressed.

Some of you readers may now wonder: what about preparing the life raft, as part of your task list as soon as you noticed the problem? Well, as this was a coastal passage at the height of summer and with a planned arrival time still during daylight, we did not have a life raft on board. Was that a mistake? Possibly. Probably. We did, however, have (and wore) our life jackets and we had, shortly after our departure out of Lowestoft, tied about 10 medium to large size fenders together making for a rather important floating device in case of an emergency. We also did have a grab bag with flares and a hand held radio.

On to Henley...

Next morning it was back to work, as there was no time to lose on our initial plan to prepare and finish *Prunella* for Henley. We learned a lot that summer about applying filler, caulking a wooden boat and applying glossy paint without leaving stripes whilst a “proper” shipwright, Ed Norris who came all the way from Henley to help us out and whom Mark had known for many years, saw to properly repairing the sprung planks. Our biggest fear was rot. The good news, however, was that there was no rot, neither on the planks nor on the stem. *Prunella* was made seaworthy again, given a beautiful coat of glossy paint and she looked absolutely magnificent on the day she was going to go back in the water.

This was the big day for *Prunella* to go back in the water. However, things did not go as planned. As she was being lifted



All the original stem screws, probably destroyed by dezincification over many years, have been replaced on both sides, making the boat safe again.

by the slings of the boat crane, the hull seemingly must have twisted a little bit. Nothing noticeable but obviously just enough to cause the filler and brand new paint to crack along the caulking lines. So, we had some extra and unplanned work to do!

Based on our last experience and because we would now be further out at sea, we had also rented a life raft this time. So under yet another glorious sunrise on what promised to be another beautiful sunny day, we slipped our lines

in Burnham at 07:00 local time and made great progress down the Crouch at 9.5 to 10 knots ground speed, turned right after the Whitaker Spit and headed south and then more south west and up the Thames and Tower Bridge here we come. We had not put up the sail on this trip because the sea state was very calm, as predicted, therefore a “steadying” sail was not needed.

Tower Bridge is always a magical moment and we happily kept ticking along and took in the majestic sights of the London skyline from the river. Traffic was now obviously getting busy not only with professional traffic such as the Thames Clipper commuter boats but also with lots of tourist River Cruise boats and working barges. In this busy traffic, keeping well to the right of the river now just came automatic. Just like nobody would be tempted, in traffic, to drive on the wrong side of the road when going from England to the continent or vice versa. The SOD, (“Supervising Officer on Duty” at London VTS) who definitely must have been keeping a very close eye on us, would have been very happy with and impressed by our track.

As we approached Richmond, the SOD called us on my phone and enquired about our progress and if everything was well on board *Prunella*. We responded in the affirmative that all was well but that we just had slowed down a little to allow the tide to catch up with us so that we would be within the “two hours either side of high tide” because we were planning to go across

the weir at Richmond lock and moor up for the night the other side.

The SOD advised us that recently the water levels around Richmond lock had been lower than usual due to low water levels of the river upstream from the lock and that we would be well advised to moor up alongside a temporary barge downstream from Richmond.

The next morning, we waited for high water again and made our way across the weir without incident but not before paying our dues to the lock keeper who was now present to be sure to collect our dues.

The following three days we enjoyed cruising up the river taking in the beautiful scenes of the most immaculately manicured typical English gardens and the pretty flower beds to be found at every lock. Lovely reminders of the quintessential old fashioned England kept beautifully maintained and looked after by the lock keepers.

With her relatively big twin screws, *Prunella* is, despite her size of 53ft and her weight of around 35 tons, surprisingly easily to steer, and maneuvering her through the locks proved relatively easy, even without the modern comforts of a bow thruster, (the sounds of which coming from the modern cruisers can be heard left, right and centre before, in and after each lock!) So it was that we managed to arrive in Henley-on-Thames without even as much as a little scratch on our freshly painted hull.

We moored up opposite Temple Island within sight of the moorings and the meadows where the TTBF was about to take place starting in a few days. We wanted to take the opportunity of the nice mooring place to get cracking with the final

preparations before making our grand entry into the TTBF with "*Lady Prunella*" whom we had taken out of her last 18 years of "hiding" on The Broads to restore her to (at least what we believed) was her former "period glory".

Apart from raising the mast, which we obviously had had to bring down to get under all the bridges coming up the river, the rest of the "final preparations" consisted mainly of cosmetics work and tidying up: polishing the brass, scrubbing the deck, touching up the paint (not on the hull, though, as we managed to avoid scratches going through the locks) on the stanchions anchor and anchor winch etc. where we had missed little spots, cleaning chrome and windows, touching up on the varnish, etc. even down to washing and polishing the fenders .. !!

It was now time to move *Prunella* up to our mooring at the Thames Traditional Boat Festival. Our designated mooring place was right next to our good old friends of the Dunkirk Little Ships. So, we immediately felt right at home and the flames of camaraderie were reignited very quickly.

We made final presentation for the judges to come on board the next day and enjoyed a warm evening on *Prunella*'s deck.

We had entered for two categories in the competition: "Engines and Engine Room Restoration" (Piston Trophy) and also for "Overall Amateur Restoration" (Freebody Trophy). So, on the morning of the judging our focus was mostly on making sure that the engine room looked as perfect as possible. The judges coming on board and evaluating what they are there for is pretty



Prunella moored at the TTBF

quick. These are professional people, after all, and they know what to look for immediately.

So, the judges from both the categories for which we had entered came on board, did their thing and went. Now it was the anxious wait to find out about the result. We were pretty happy with the verdicts: First place for “Engines and Engine Room Restoration” (Piston Trophy) and second place for “Overall Amateur Restoration” (Freebody Trophy).

I was mostly happy for Mark because the engine room was his pride and joy and he had put his heart into it and the first place result was well deserved. Well done, Mark.

Once the judging was over we could relax and enjoy the

TTBF for ourselves, although we still had an overwhelmingly large number of people who wanted to visit and have a look around *Prunella* so we had to take turns in showing people around but we, nevertheless, still found the time to get the odd bits and gadgets for *Prunella* at the different boat jumble stalls. Just a question of creating more work by now having to install all the gadgets ... We also found some “period” looking clothing at a few stalls and which fitted perfectly well to wear on *Prunella*.

Mark Wightman & Stefaan Persoons

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