

Collecting Seaweed

Down in the Bay it blew hard and cold. Milky grey-green waves battered the ever-shifting shingle shore. On the tight line of the southern horizon giant boats punched their way out to the Atlantic shipping lanes, stark against the December sky.

I walked the beach for driftwood and sponges hidden in the wrack. Wishing I'd worn a coat. By the three cove boats that still fished the Bay a bent man gathered seaweed. Squat and powerful, cap pulled tight on his head, he worked the tideline with bare hands, filling sacks stacked at the car park's muddy edge.

I sidled towards him, Black-headed gulls lifting from the rusting promenade rail. 'You're a man after my own heart,' I said. 'Collecting seaweed'. We talked about seaweed, gardens, asparagus beds, salt, rot and the hungry chalk soil.

He'd bought a bit of land behind his house in Dover. Had a big garden on it. And shed. Spent a lot of time there. With a brew. Out from under the wife's feet. Said 'got' was a word banished. No one would tell him what to do again. He'd had a life of it. Working on the ferries.

As a lad he cycled the four miles to St Margaret's to collect whelks from the wave-cut platform beneath the undercliff. Hot and dazzled, the sun bouncing off the water and the 300 foot-high walls of chalk. In late afternoon he'd strap the 40-pint sack to his bike and heave it up the hill. Once on the Reach Road he freewheeled the valley past the castle and headed home. To boil up his catch and take them round Dover pubs for a penny a jar.

He'd started work on ferries that in those days displaced a mere three hundred gross tons. 'These new boats,' he said and pointed at the Spirit of France entering Dover port, 'are over 49,000.' He'd lived through the shift from manual operations to auto-pilots, bow thrusters and stabilisers. Said that now most of the time the ships plotted their own course, that it was computers that calculated how and where to avoid the intense shipping in the Dover Strait.

'Now, your modern cruise ship captain knows very little about running a ship,' he said, 'but he's good at PR and schmoozing the passengers.' He'd 'gone up the ladder' as he put it, and progressed his way onto the bridge through hard experience, shift on shift, not book-learning.

Then he spoke of weather. Seas he'd known. Captains begging for help. Getting them out of another fix. And the storm of '87. The one that came out of the blue, that foxed the weatherman, that felled 15 million trees and changed the landscape of Southern England for a generation.

That day in 1987, the 15th of October, was a quiet time of year and a late night crossing. Short of a full load he told the loaders to put all the lorries and cars

on the lower deck. Maintenance started on the mezzanine on the 16th. An empty deck would give the men at Dover a chance to make a quick start in the morning.

Of course, he had had no idea of what weather was coming. No-one did. It was warm and still and strangely so for mid-October. But it was a lucky call. Just one car on the upper deck could have made the difference. Later. Like the Currach men in Ireland, tongues kept in the middle of their mouths to stop their delicate boats from capsizing.

When all was loaded they set out on the 21-mile crossing to Dover. There were ninety passengers on board.

The ship left Calais after midnight. Lorries and cars chained down. Just in case. Force 10 winds were forecast. A good Channel blow but not out of the ordinary for the time of year.

Outside Calais port the weather changed. The glass falling like a stone. It reached a Nadir pressure that night of 953 milibars. The temperature rose like sunrise on a midsummer day: 7° C in an hour. But this was at night, with a last quarter moon faint in the skudding sky.

At 1.40 a.m. a special gale warning came through on the radio for sea areas Dover, Wight, Portland, Plymouth: Violent Storm Force 11 Imminent. But imminent had already arrived. Bowling up the English Channel. The *St Christopher* was out amongst it: the hellhounds from Biscay baying.

The seas rose like tumult on speed. The short waves, the chops of Channel, turned deadly. Backing the engines to preserve the ship. The wind rising still. To shrieking, continuous, ear-splitting, awful. The sea a tornado of massive waves, no sense or rhyme of regular swell. Each wave the seventh wave. The rogue one familiar. Cross seas cutting cross seas cutting wind-driven cascades, cut through and dashed against metal and man. The ship plunging and yawing, shuddering and smashing into one stuttered, juddering wall after another. No let-up, respite. No lull. Pitching and rolling. The implacable, unfeeling, immortal, Godless sea.

From Violent Storm 11 to Hurricane Force 12 and then beyond the measure of anemometer and Beaufort scale. Captain turns to Charlie in the bridge's pallid, fragile light. Says quietly, 'We're in God's hands now.' Other ferries that night recording 135 knots (155 mph).

The Met Office was keelhauled for failing to mark the ferocity of the storm. Budget cuts had scrapped Atlantic weather ships and silenced data feeds to forecast models. But Atlantic storms are unpredictable. The immense energy mixing warm air from Hurricane Floyd and the unseasonal waters of Biscay and freezing air moving south from Iceland. A huge heat pump feeding of temperature gradients, mixing hot and cold. A mad, malevolent, insensate Mr Whippy. Strange, unstoppable fury.

Mariners that night sailed blind into the worst storm in the Dover Strait since the Great Storm of 1703.

Above at 29,000 ft the jet stream had strayed south and blew rampant, driving the storm from Brest to Bergen in record time. It left a trail of destruction though Brittany, Normandy, Southern England, Denmark and Norway. Concarneau, Penmarch, and Guilvinec on the South Brittany coast were smashed: the wind reaching 134 mph, toppling churches. In Oslo, 1,300 miles to the north-east, sea levels rose 70 inches as the storm surge struck.

Charlie, next to the captain on the bridge, thought, 'In God's hands is it? And the passengers?' Dover port an eternity away. Sink or swim, Charlie. Sink or swim. But he had no intention of letting the ship go down.

Dover port was closed and could only deal with 50 knot winds. The seas now too huge to let a ship slip through the gaps. The outer harbour pell-mell with crashing water. Harbour master and crew forced back off the Eastern Arm. *St Chris* on her own.

Crackling through the radio over the wind-howl came the Coastguard at Langdon Bay perched on the cliffs above Dover port. The *St Christ* head on into seas, holding water but losing the battle. Hammer blow after hammer blow.

The crew below decks comforting passengers. The dread and anticipation deep inside each seaman and woman's soul. News coming in that the *MV Hengist* had broken her moorings at Folkestone and been driven onto the beach at The Warren. Things not looking good.

A hundred miles to the north, *The Duke of Yare* running for Yarmouth from the Hook of Holland faced 100 foot waves. An engineer on board later said, 'I never thought the North Sea could scrawl up like that.' At one point the ship was rolling at 45 degrees. 'I thought 'this is it' ... we were just looking at each other and thinking this is really bad.' Giant waves clawing 56-foot containers off the ship like so much deck timber. £6 million quid's worth of cargo gone in a trice.

Back on the *St Christopher* the bridge consulted the coastguard at Langdon Bay. Them up there, secure in their land-locked shelter. Disembodied voices coming through the ether. I remembered Brian from Porthcurno's story of being on the ship-to-shore radio at Land's End: hearing the voice of a ship's captain saying goodbye before his ship disappeared under the Atlantic forever. Left him shaken for years.

The momentous decision taken to make a run for the shelter of the Deal Road lying north behind the bulk of the South Foreland's chalk cliffs. But the ship's heading was south-west and needed an 180° turn to steam north-east. That meant turning beam-on across the sea.¹

Turning the *St Christopher* across the mountainous seas on 16th October 1987 was a desperate measure. Barely able to hold her position bow-on, turning across them would expose the ship to the massive hydraulic force of the onslaught. The ship heeled over and over. A monster wave hit the upper bow door and stoved it in, bending steel like cardboard.

Down below there was an enormous bang and passengers and fittings were thrown across the saloon decks as the ferry listed to 39 degrees. The engines stopped. Total darkness. Somewhere someone started screaming.

And then they heard the restraining chains on the lorries on the lower deck start to snap like so many iron rubber bands. Thirty-ton lorries slipping and tumbling across the wide-open car decks; shifting weight in the ship's hold, accumulating force and gravity.

They got the engines restarted. The lights came back. The lounge looked like a bomb had hit it. Tables and chairs, fixtures and fittings, passengers, all smashed into a heap against the bulkheads. Down on the freight deck it was worse.

Water flooded through the smashed bow door threatening the engine room. Vehicles once free of their restraining chains were smashed to pieces. A VW camper van crushed into a three-foot sedan by a toppling HGV.

Somehow the helmsman managed to get the ship around and end-on to the sea. Charlie rang down 'half ahead' to the engine room and slowly and laboriously the *St Christopher* made her way to the Deal Road.

But on their way to relative shelter the Chief Engineer called up to the bridge. The news was bad. There was an hour's worth of fuel left.

Charlie, who told me all this without ever looking at me, glanced out to the ferry traffic across the Bay and said, 'Because, of course, they never liked to carry a full load of fuel. It's too much weight and slowed the ferry down. It's all about margins and throughput and how to ring the last penny-piece out of boat and crew.'

So there they were, in the worst storm any of them had experienced, a few short nautical miles from safety, heading north-east away from Dover, the fuel gauge running down rapidly, with just an hour to save the ship, to wrest her from God's hands.

Many ships have come unstuck on the Kent coast. Even in the hands of experienced Dover pilots. It's easy to run too close to the shore and the currents are fierce and will push a ship onto the chalk reefs that snake out from the cliff base.

In the maelstrom that night their hasty consultations dwindled to one course of action to avoid disaster: they would have to run the *St Christopher* onto to the

shingle beach at Deal. Aground she wouldn't capsize nor risk being blown onto the Goodwins: 'once there's no fuel she's just a cork on the sea'.

As they made the necessary preparations the weather abated a fraction and the winds began to veer north-west. Another consultation, hurried words, time and fuel running out. They decided to make a mad run for Dover.

They got the ship around again and headed into the seas, forcing her ever faster. At Dover they lined her up with the gaps of the southern entrance: tugs standing by to take ship in tow.

Charlie was at the wheel and took aim with his 7,339 ton dart in the raging sea. He urged the *St Christopher* onward, willing its two Crossley-Pielstick diesel motors to keep the twin screws turning. On his approach a tug master came over the radio and said, 'Eh Charlie, are you sure you're not going to hit the Prince of Wales Pier?' And it was easy to do and he had before and not in weather like this. Just a scrape but a black mark against any helmsman.

But this was no place for doubt or second thoughts. They just squeaked in and the tugs came up, like a mother's arms, to hold them close to the quayside.

Charlie looked at me, face set beneath his cap. It had taken 14 hours to make the two-hour crossing. The *St Christopher* finally docked in Dover at 2.15pm. 'It was the passengers I felt sorry for', he said.

It took shore crews three days to wrench the mayhem of jammed and overturned lorries out of the main car deck of the *St Christopher* with cranes and forklift trucks.²

The loss of life (22) of '87J', as it was known in the insurance industry, was remarkably small and attributed to the storm making landfall at night and missing London by some thirty miles. It caused £1.4bn of damage in the UK alone.

Each year as winter sets in I go down to the bay and collect seaweed. Bent into the wind, my hands freezing, I often think of the *St Christopher* passing that night in 1987 making for the Deal Road.

End Note and References

1. The Deal Road forms part of The Downs, a huge natural anchorage between the Deal shore and the deadly Goodwin Sands. The Downs was once the assembly ground for the British Navy in the days of sail when ships of the line could wait weeks for a favourable wind to get through the Dover Strait and into the 'chops of the Channel'. Nelson, himself prone to seasickness, used to lie up at the Royal Hotel (still there) on the Deal shore, waiting out bad weather in a warm lubberly bed.

And while the Goodwin Sands provided shelter for the anchorage they are also a lurking menace to shipping. Submerged at full tide and high and dry at low they stand bang in the middle of the southern approach to the Thames estuary. And despite their sandy name they are hard as rock.

In the great storm of 1703 the British Fleet was sheltering in the Downs, having returned from assisting the Spanish in the War of the Spanish Accession. The storm, the worst in British history, killed between 8,000 and 15,000 people. On that terrifying night Her Majesty's Ships *Stirling Castle*, *Northumberland*, *Mary* and *Resolution* dragged or broke their anchor ropes (the coming of steel chains vastly increased a ship's ability to hold its ground) and were driven onto the Goodwin Sands.

Once aground on the Sands crews faced the awful knowledge that the returning tide would drown them one and all. They'd fire off their cannons in the hope of bringing out one of the thousand boats that lined the beach at Deal but on that night launching a boat into the chaos of surf and caterwauling spindrift was an impossibility, however sturdy the boatmen's hearts of oak. 1,500 seamen were lost.

2. The *St Christopher*, launched from Harland and Wolff's shipyard in Belfast in 1980, stopped running the Dover-Calais route on April 4th 1991. Sold to the Stena Line she ran the Stranraer-Belfast and Newhaven-Dieppe crossings until 1998. She was sold again and renamed *Ibn Batouta* and ran the Tangiers-Algeciras route until 2011.

See link below for photos of damage to the upper deck door on the *St Christopher*.

<http://www.doverferryphotosforums.co.uk/wordpress/mv-st-christopher-past-and-present/>

See also www.bbc.co.uk/kent/content/articles/2007/10/16/1987_st_christopherfeature.shtml

Risk Management Solutions, (2007) *The Great Storm of 1987: 20-year retrospective*.

For a photo of the *MV Hengist* beached at the Warren see this site – right at the end -

<http://www.warrenpress.net/FolkestoneThenNow/FolkestoneFerries.html>

For Duke of Yare quote see

http://www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle/1987_storm_great_yarmouth_sailor_recalls_terrifying_voyage_which_saw_6m_of_cargo_lost_overboard_1_1653212

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