

Was this really happening? Were we really off, heading for Madeira 1,800 miles to the south? It was a little after 5 pm on Tuesday 24th July, 1973. I was 23, Julie 19.

Excitedly I joined her in the cockpit. She was steering, and perhaps more nervous than I, she looked down at the compass. 'What course shall I steer?' she asked.

What course? What course? No need to look that up. I'd worked it out months ago. I reeled off the figures to take us north-west across the Minch to the Butt of Lewis, the northern tip of the Outer Hebrides, our turning point into the North Atlantic proper. As Julie brought the boat onto the course, I trimmed the sails and we started to reach across the wind, soon making good speed. I put Bob's log over the stern, and the long line paid out before tightening on its deck cleat. In the clear water astern, I saw it start to spin the miles away.

As we pulled away from the coast, the yellow streak of Sandwood Bay appeared far off to the north-east. Astern, the ridge of Foinaven grew to dominate the skyline, while the Old Man of Stoer stood out from the cliffs to the south. I took sights on all three with our hand-bearing compass and then plotted our position on our chart. Excitedly I called to Julie, 'Since leaving Handa, we've averaged five knots. If we keep this up, we'll make the Butt of Lewis in eight hours.'

Julie, on the helm and beginning to feel seasick, was unimpressed.

With the excitement of leaving over, we both needed a cup of tea. I 'went below' to put the kettle on. Except I was on *The Aegre*, so I just sat down on the cockpit floor, legs in the cabin, cooker by my left elbow. Our cooker hung in the swinging pail was proving ideal. The hot drink gave us renewed energy, and while Julie continued to steer, I prepared the boat for the open sea, lashing our big Danforth anchor down just aft of the mast and bringing the anchor lines below. Our tiny cabin seemed very disorganised. We had never got around to building anything inside except the bunk and a bookshelf. I could never decide on the best way to arrange it and eventually decided that practical experience on the first passage would show the best arrangement. We just had to live with the chaos below till Madeira. We'd never have left if we had waited until we were completely ready.