

The Fastnet Race 2025

RORC Centenary Edition

This year was the centenary of the founding of the Royal Ocean Racing Club – RORC. It coincided with the Fastnet race which is held every 2 years and the RORC pulled out all the stops to make it a memorable event and indeed such was the demand to partake in this iconic event the entry of 440 yachts filled up within 15 minutes of the entry website opening.

For those who may not be familiar with this sort of thing it is one of the iconic offshore races that starts at the Royal Yacht Squadron's line in Cowes, goes down channel to the Fastnet Rock off southern Ireland and then finishes in Cherbourg in NW France. The rhumb line distance is 695 miles but the actual miles sailed, what with tacking, navigational hiccups, avoiding Traffic Separation Schemes (TSS) and other impediments makes the actual distance longer, sometimes much longer.

This year 5 members of the RNYC did this race in a crew of 8 on a First 47.7, a fairly decent cruiser racer based out of Dartmouth in the South West. These brave souls, aka unknowing idiots were

17 year old Ben Lowrie, Tom Lowrie, Andrew Harris, Finn Robarts and John Williams

Although the start was on 26th July the campaign started much earlier as it is a condition of entry that 2/3rds of the crew must have completed 300 race miles on the boat they are going to do the race on. Six of us therefore sailed the boat 330 miles to Dun Laoghaire just south of Dublin, did the D.L. to Dingle race in the West – 300 miles, had a massive Irish party at the end and then sailed the boat back to Dartmouth, another 320 miles. Job done.

The Start

You just can't fit 400+ yachts into the Solent in one go particularly as the French trimarans are up to 105' long and there were also several 100' monohulls. RORC are pretty well organised for this sort of thing and basically all the faster stuff gets away first of 14 class starts spaced out every 10 minutes. We were in Class 2 which had 'only' 70 boats. Thankfully this time we did not have any collisions.

The weather was reasonable with a 15-18kt Westerley on the nose so all the usual port/starboard fun and games took place for the first 15 miles to get out of the Solent and past the Needles. This was in stark contrast to last time when we had 30+ kt blowing against a 4 kt tide resulting in one third of the fleet retiring in the first 12 hours, 4 dismastings and one boat sunk, but thankfully no deaths.

Shortly after this we went into watches with 4 on each watch and a 3hrs on 3hrs off regime. Breakfast became a do it yourself affair, lunch left to individual watches and we made a bit of an effort to have proper dinner for all. Many thanks to the Lowrie family and owner Steve for bringing along precooked scran that only required heating. These things are critically dependent on the weather and how people are feeling so it is incumbent on everyone to look after each other. It usually takes a good 24 hours for everyone to settle particularly if the weather is not kind.

The First Few Days.

Basically, in the absence of any clever weather routing you flog your way down channel to the Scillies, head for Ireland, round the Rock, sharp left turn and zip back towards France. The reality however is somewhat different.

We were trying out a new weather routing system based upon paying Predictwind quite a lot of money for their AI system to tell us what the weather would be like and which way we should go. I won't bore you with the techy stuff but if you're interested I've appended it to the end.

So we had a 190 mile beat down to Lands End with the routing software saying go South of the Scillies. So what did we do? Yup we went North. No I don't why know either. So we went North. ran out of wind and then it came back, right on the nose – again. So instead of the hoped for fetch we now have another 70 miles of headwinds and it's increasing. The waves are 2-3m and the conditions are, shall we say, not pleasant. It's fair to say this was a low point and Type 2 fun i.e. not fun at all.

Fastnet Rock.

As we approached the Rock, typically bloody Irish. it was raining with viz down to less than 500m. and then suddenly it appeared out of the gloom and everything changed. Those who had not seen it before came on deck, photos taken, handshakes all round and then we bore away downwind for the first time since we left Cowes 3 days previously and boy did things change. A few miles after clearing the TSS to the East the mist cleared, the sun came out and the wind remained firmly behind. So kite up and away we go.

We kept that spinnaker up all the way to the finish until we went through the piers at Cherbourg, some 350 miles away. Our best run was 207 miles in 24 hrs .

One particular highlight was something I had not encountered before as on two occasions, once off Lands End and another further up the Channel we came across a Bluefin tuna feeding frenzy. These were large fish , thrashing about having corralled the bait fish in a circle about 150m across.

So in the early hours of Thursday morning we crossed the finish line at Cherbourg to a breakfast of beers and wine. Lunch was pretty much the same.

So how did we do? Our elapsed time was 4d 17h 6m 52s. We ended up about halfway in Class 2 on corrected time which considering the top end was stuffed with pro crews sailing custom designs our result probably wasn't bad and a big improvement on last time.

Postscript.

In the Notice of Race it says 'the Fastnet is not a race for beginners and as it is a Cat.2 race it also says 'a high degree of self-sufficiency is required of the boat'. To just finish one of these is an achievement to be celebrated.

I have to say, of all the 600+nm races in the RORC calendar a Fastnet is not my favourite. I've been hammered in one, distasted in another and the others have been OK. Would I go again? Probably.

The Techie Stuff (you can ignore this if you want)

Navigation on an offshore raceboat can range from 'just follow everyone else' to full simulation of the boat in the predicted weather patterns using the boats sailing characteristics called 'polars'. We used this last time around using high end software i.e. expensive, from Expedition and TimeZero. This has to run on a PC and does require frequent downloads of 'grib' files which describe the weather over a large area but at a resolution of typically 5km squares or less for both wind and tide. Last Fastnet the system fell apart in the really bad weather as it was so wet down below that although the PC was fully waterproof the charging system wasn't and a lot of the electrics died.

This time we used a different approach which in principle was simpler in that we used a cloud based system operated from a tablet with 5g mobile signal. In this system from PredictWind -Pro version you only need to tell them the type of yacht (they have a library of polars), the start and finish points and the starting time. The whole thing is done by a very powerful computer and you download the results in map form with the suggested 'best' routes based upon 6 different weather forecasts. You also get the detail of the numbers either text or in graphical form and the chosen route file can be exported into other nav. systems on board. As the process is automatic and AI driven it does not rank as third party human intervention which is forbidden under the racing rules.

We found the weather forecasting to be accurate and that it could be relied upon. However some of the routes it came up with seemed a bit counterintuitive at times and we sometimes ignored the suggested routes and did our own thing based on nothing more than gut instinct. One of these decision points occurred when trying to decide whether to go South or North of the Scillies. The program kept saying go South. We ended up going North simply because the boats ahead had gone North but they were in a different wind pattern. After we had committed to tack to the North the next ten boats following us went South!

Such is offshore racing.

Cheers,

John Williams

Cullercoats, August 2025



Ben and Tom Lowrie, Fastnet Rock disappearing in the fog.



The Team in team colours