



## **The light on the route to Grenada**

An excerpt from Boat, People and Me,  
Book 2. of Anthony Howarth's up coming  
9-volume autobiography – Re-Offending

### **The Route to Grenada**

For years my obsession had been a 30 ft., Maurice Griffiths designed, Waterwitch. Boat, not much of a name I admit, a bit like calling a mutt, Dog or a ginger tom, Cat, was yard-built in Ichenor in the UK in about 1960 of, evidently, very good plywood on sound mahogany frames.

A chance encounter with a report on the BBC World Service in the late 1980s was to change my obsession, if not my allegiance.

By way of preamble, I should say that although People, my partner, and I, thought of ourselves as environmentally aware, we had never been campaigning 'environmentalists'.

As for greenhouse gasses, the ozone layer and global warming? We had been known to leave on lights for no good reason. We also have driven too fast and made unnecessary journeys by car and we had, at the moment in question, already owned two 2-stroke outboard motors in the previous two years. One Seagull and one Mariner. You can't be much more *regular boat-folk* than that.

We were a thousand miles west of the Cape Verde Islands en route for Grenada - in a 30ft/9.1m only one metre (3ft) draught, 25 year old, bilge keeled, plywood Waterwitch? - Of course! It wasn't the road to Damascus but what I experienced could be described as a blinding light!

Looking over the low combing of our cockpit into the trade wind sea, I could see blue fire deep in the ocean. The reflection of the sun refracted and reflected in the changing density of the depths, as from infinity. For the first time, I understood the notion of the blue white flame at the heart of a perfect diamond. Here, in four to five thousand metres of water, there was a depth to the light more profound than that found in any bauble or jewel.



To the north of us was Greenland, over two thousand miles away; to the south, give or take a couple of tiny rock islands, Antarctica, five to six thousand miles distant. And ahead, at a little over one thousand miles, the Windward Islands of the Caribbean.

It is possible to be even more remote on Earth but, at these orders of magnitude, the difference is academic; especially with just 12mm, less than half an inch, of 25 year old marine plywood between one's feet and the dizzying three miles (4.8 km) down to the ocean floor. Best not to think about it.

### **Conversion**

The BBC World Service reporters were prating on about this and that in well mannered accents not too far off what was once called standard BBC English.

I was 'on watch', in so far as one can take that role seriously on a sunny day half way along the trade wind route to the Caribbean. A route abandoned by commercial shipping with the demise of sail on the advent of steam and, later, diesel.

People, as in, "what would I do without people like you?" was in the cabin fixing our position on the chart. Another barely relevant activity at this stage of an Atlantic crossing. The current Admiralty (British) chart, printed from a more than one hundred year old engraving, showed entirely empty ocean.

Suddenly she called out,

"Listen to this!" And she turned up the volume on the SSB (single sideband short wave radio).

It was a brief news item of what was, seen from a UK viewpoint in 1989, an obscure event. But it changed my life, and it stopped me from becoming a three 2-stroke outboard motors in three years man.

There had been a conference, in the Pacific region, prompted by global warming and climate change – yes, back at the end of the 1980s, when Al Gore was still in Pampers, it was already a contentious issue, hotly debated and well documented.



At this conference, the BBC reported, agreements, official treaties no less, had been made between some small Pacific and Indian Ocean island states and their more substantial neighbours. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand and perhaps Japan, had agreed, in advance, to take entire populations of the island nations when the already rising seas inundate their land, rendering their countries not just reduced in area but totally non-existent.

"That's incredible, People," I said. "Surely unprecedented in the history of mankind. To voluntarily make agreements before the crisis occurs, and for the relocation of total populations!"

"To do it at all," I added, "must be unique, unheard of!"

It seemed that from Oceania's point of view, the effects of global warming were already beyond crisis point for whole countries and this fact was recognised and acknowledged by some governments of nations large and small in that region. I repeat, this was November 1989, nearly 20 years ago as I write.

Why hadn't I known of this official recognition of the climate problem? Did many people know of it in England or in Europe or America? Was this momentous news, picked up by chance on short wave, also played on national radio in England?

"Probably not," said People

"What's, 'probably not'?" I asked.

"It's probably not playing in England." She answered; she had been ahead of me as usual.

People's cynicism had some basis in experience. Over the years she had worked with the main international news organisations, American as well as British, French, German and others, covering events throughout the world.

When we started to live aboard Boat in English waters we began listening to the *World Service* on short wave at a time when we also had good reception of domestic BBC medium wave and FM radio stations. Subjects that were headlined on the *World Service*; analysed; torn apart; discussed and dissected, sometimes for a whole hour, on the internationally accessible short wave bands, we found were often not mentioned at all on domestic radio.



People, an Anglophile, is not known to be anti-British or by extension anti-British radio. She is a genetic islander, born in Hawaii, and grandchild to Portuguese immigrants from the Azores and Madeira.

"Remember that the US took the Hawaiian Islands from the British, *annexed* they said, in the last century", she often reminds me of this and points out that feelings remained sufficiently strong that the Hawaiians insisted on keeping the Union Jack on their flag when Hawaii became a US State, as recently as 1960. In 2009, the Union Jack is still on the Hawaiian flag.

People said,

"I have known of Global Warming and potential sea rise since the nineteen sixties, even the nineteen fifties. Now whole weather patterns have changed, all over the world. Yet some *people in high places* are still juggling those *paid for by vested interests expert reports*."

"We had better do something about it," she added.

"Us? We? We're already doing more than most. We've only motored on our engine for thirty minutes in the past fourteen days. Anyway, we are insignificant."

"As I've said before," she says again. "American politics teaches one valuable lesson. The only thing you can do is to set an example yourself. Even the industrial military complex is not safe from people power. If, in any year, most Americans decide not to buy a new car GM and most of the others will be bust, bankrupt, it's that simple".

At the time this sounded more theoretical than precisely prophetic.

"You never know who has paid for *the expert report* or *the expert*, for that matter!" She laughs.

"And, we have been running the engine an hour a day for the past two weeks to charge our batteries. You conveniently forgot to mention that! Surely that's fourteen hours too many when the sun is shining and the wind is blowing?"

"As for that outboard and that dreadful de-flatable dinghy, they must go. Even we can make something better than that!"

People was unstoppable.

"And what about the last straw theory? Do you really want to be the person who pulls the starter rope on a 2-stroke outboard and, surprise, it actually starts. Then you discover that you are *the last straw*. You have, in one unlucky coincidence, taken climate change finally past the balance point, the tipping point and oil consumption over the peak. Everything is now irreversible, yours was *the last straw* that broke the planets back".

In 1989 in the middle of the ocean there was time to have conversations like that.



"It's interesting," I said, "that living aboard Boat, isolated in our own little world; we can take our conversations seriously. We have no friends around to say to us: I heard somewhere that forest fires and the flatulence of cattle are more significant than car and power station emissions."

Getting into the act a little late, I added,

"Wouldn't it be easier to cut down on the cars and electricity consumption first and then deal with the excess hamburgers and the tricky problems of stopping cows farting and forests from burning?"

"Surely, we should all do what little we can to help immediately, while considering the wider problems and more sophisticated solutions later?"

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### **Good Intentions:**

Boat was rigged with two foresails. One held out on a pole (of not really appropriate length) to port and the other rigged back to the bare boom, guyed out to starboard for want of a second pole.

A make-shift rig, perhaps, but better than running goose winged with main and genoa, and much safer than leaving the cruising chute up through the night.

Our first eight days out of the Canaries had been slow and circuitous due to messy weather driving us towards the coast of Africa. Now we were making up time at a steady six and a half to seven knots. In an old 30ft wooden boat? Oh, Yes! Our course was straight arrow, directly down wind, and, consistent with the late Maurice Griffiths' legend, with no rhythmic rolling. Truly, none worth mentioning.

Pretty good, Mr Griffiths. There are a few modern designers might like to know how you did that!

It was all so good that we had just made our first sail trim change in over a week. It was an enforced adjustment, a 12 mm diameter sheet (rope) capable of taking several thousand kilograms of load had, after more than a week of riding in the same position, chaffed right through and parted at the pole end! It seems that idleness at sea eventually finds one out.



In these blissful conditions, only disturbed occasionally by the diagonal rogue wave that meanders around the globe looking for small sailboats, we set to with a will to find ways of curtailing our energy related pollution.

First we quantified the problem. We measured our power usage, estimated what it would be at anchor and averaged it out. It came to the equivalent of less than a hundred Watt light bulb left burning continuously, day and night.

Try matching that in White Plains or Pacific Palisades, in Shepherd's Bush or St John's Wood! Not bad for two people living a Western style life; i.e. reading late into the night, running a small refrigerator, listening to power consuming SSB radio and to music and using laptop computers (plural). And with legal navigation lights switched on all night as required.

"Doesn't sound a lot to me." I protest.

People isn't listening, she is already analysing.

"If we expect perhaps 8 hours of useful sunlight a day and not always perfect panel orientation, we need more than a 300 watt solar panel array to be safe. Or, perhaps, 250 Watts allowing for a reasonable contribution from the wind generator." She suggests.

"That's quite a panel array for a small boat and our wind generator desperately needs upgrading. Still it's possible." I agree.

We move on to dinghies and outboards.

"What about a little folding tri-maran with an electric motor, battery and solar panel or two?" She asks, adding. "Even you could build that..."

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There the matter had to rest until we reached that Mecca of the boat refurbishing world, Fort Lauderdale - "The boating capital of the world"- they say.

By then:

Our two *famous name* marine batteries had crashed to less than half their capacity.

The tiny wind generator was only producing useful electricity in winds approaching gale force.

Our second *famous name* outboard in two years had developed various ailments due appalling design and especially to excessive corrosion caused by the inappropriate use of unsympathetic metals.

The *famous name* inflatable, bought new in the Canary Isles that season, had split its seams and was professionally judged improperly made and irreparable.

The message was clear,

"Time to do something radical, time to sort it all out." Said People.

"Yes, ma'am." I said, resisting an impulse to salute.

A second episode of this story will be included in a later press release and posted on our website.