

Sailing with my three grand-children

Julia Jones signs up as Ship's Granny and tries not to wish she was aboard her own yacht



The role of Ship's Granny means providing nautical as well as emotional support

During 2013, our yacht *Peter Duck* fulfilled various roles. She formed the basis of a primary school outing, was a toddlers' picnic site, a teen hangout, even a Day Skipper exam platform. She was not a cruising yacht.

I expect I'm not the only YM reader who has seen the sun through car windows, watched the wind in garden trees, noted the steadiness of the home barometer – and yearned.

Peter Duck is a 28ft Laurent Giles ketch built in 1947 for Arthur Ransome. Among the many admirably human qualities in Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* stories is a refusal to pretend to be happy when other people are going sailing and you are not. 'Pudding faces,' says Roger in *Secret Water*, when the Swallows' holiday has been cancelled and there are other children skimming through Pin Mill anchorage and disappearing into the cabin of a big yellow cutter. 'They're probably going somewhere, and we're not.'



Misty Gillan Cove was the first stopover on the trip

After a summer of land-lubbering, I knew how Roger felt. But on the last weekend of the school holidays, my son Frank chartered a 35ft Jeanneau in Cornwall. It would be a first-time cruise with his wife Alice and three small children. They needed a Ship's Granny. I kissed my youngest teen an affectionate goodbye and left him to walk the dog, look after his dad, cook and do the washing up. Oh yes to role reversal!

If the RYA ever run out of courses to certify, they should consider Ship's Granny,

which requires skills not covered by any of the current syllabuses. Success is more than a matter of knowing the right moment to pull chocolate from your handbag.

When I arrived on board the gleaming Sun Odyssey in Falmouth marina, I assumed it would be useful if I acted as a second pair of ears to help Frank take in all the information the charterer was giving us.

I pulled a notebook from my granny-bag and jotted down the whereabouts of seacocks, fuel inlet valves, flares, first aid equipment and more. There came a point, however, when I had to ask: 'I'm sorry but how exactly do you hoist her mainsail?'

Being used to *Peter Duck*, sail-handling from the cockpit was something that had simply never come my way. With the cynicism of age, I suspected this could be something that worked more reliably in theory than in practice. As soon as we got out into Falmouth Bay and needed a reef in the mainsail, I was unsurprised to discover that modern boats, with their labelled jammers and colour-coded warps, are almost as liable to get a snarl-up as are the hempen halyards of yesteryear.

We took an overnight mooring in Gillan Cove, a deep water bay at the mouth of Gillan Creek, and the next morning slipped round the corner into the Helford River. It was sheltered, sunny and every bit as lovely as expected. I admired grand-daughter Gwen's newly acquired rowing skills as we waited for sufficient flood to float us onwards as far as Tremayne Quay.

Making our way back to Falmouth later that day, sitting on the side deck with Alice and the grand-children, dangling our feet over the side, I thought of some of the extraordinary grannies of our time, who sail single-handed around the world or swim alone from Florida to Cuba without a shark-cage, and felt no flicker of desire to emulate them. This is the life for me, I thought happily to myself – until the moment the yacht demonstrated her tendency to heel over at the smallest gust.

Alice and I crawled back to the

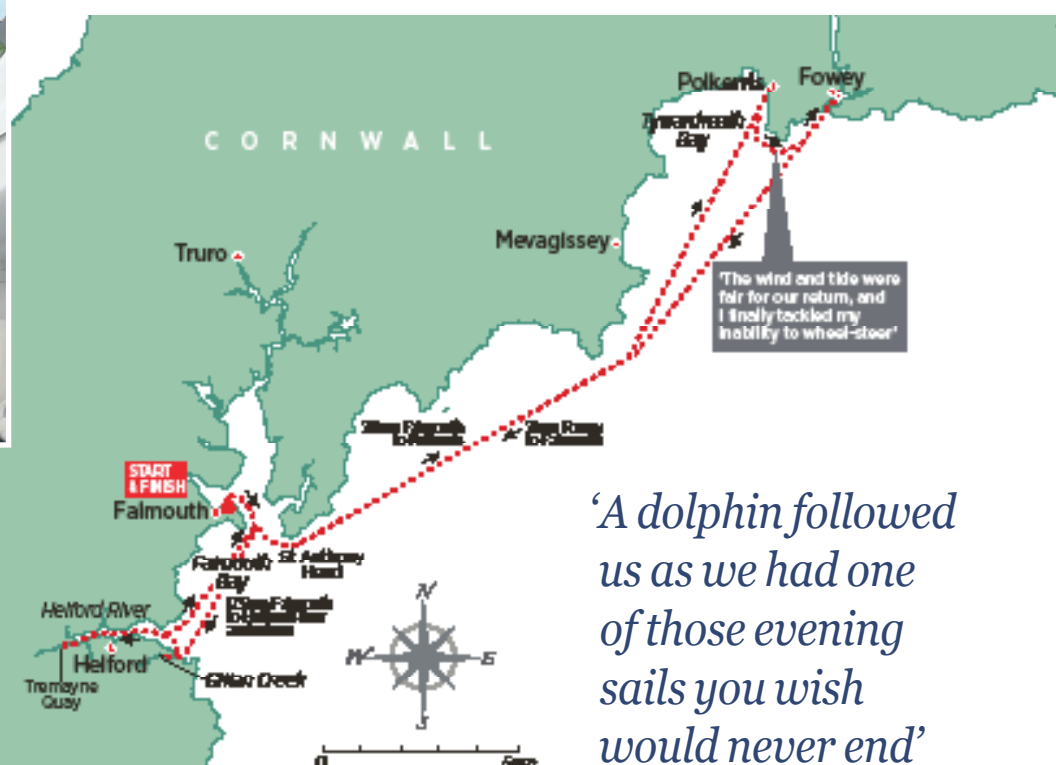


Grand-daughter Gwen shows off her newly acquired rowing skills on the Helford River

CHART: MAXINE HEATH. PHOTOS: COURTESY JULIA JONES



Start them early: Julia's grand-son Kemmel takes the wheel in Gillan Cove



'A dolphin followed us as we had one of those evening sails you wish would never end'



A well-deserved slap up meal in Falmouth: Ship's Granny treats the rest of the yacht's crew – Alice, Frank, Bertie and her three young grand-children – to the best fish and chips in town!



Frank and his mother shared pilotage duties around the West Country coves

cockpit, each of us clinging to a child.

I realised how used we'd become to *Peter Duck's* unobtrusive nannying. Her long, heavy keel and small sail area make her notably stiff and her broad side decks are comfortable in all but the nastiest weather. I struggled not to mention this. As a Ship's Granny, one must never refer longingly to the superior qualities of one's own vessel.

We beat back to Falmouth in a Force 5 and I wished that our charter yacht had snug doghouses in which to tuck the little ones.

'I wish I was in *Peter Duck!*' wailed Hettie, turning pale and clutching her tummy. Alice gave her a comforting hug, and they both moved up in the legacy stakes.

By the time we tied up, we were cheerful, untraumatised and mildly proud of our excellent teamwork. The Ship's Granny stood everyone a celebration high tea at the best fish and chip shop in town.

The rest of the weekend passed by delightfully. We sailed towards Fowey, popping into Polkerris on the eastern side of Tywardreath Bay and rowed ashore for a sandy beach and a pub. A friendly dolphin followed us out as we left and we had one of those wonderful early evening sails that you wish would never end.

Fowey has the literary interest of being *Troy Town* in Sir Arthur Quiller Couch's comic novel as well as being a landmark on the Daphne du Maurier trail.

ABOVE: Approaching Polkerris, an excellent place to anchor, before rowing ashore for a sandy beach and a pub
LEFT: Gwen, Alice, Kemmel and Hettie ensure that they're all well harnessed on



Gwen and Hettie with mum Alice all enjoying their first taste of life afloat

Julia Jones

Julia, 58, learned to sail on the River Deben. Her father, a Waldringfield yacht broker was a *YM* correspondent and he bought *Peter Duck* in 1957. The boat was sold after his death in the 1980s, but Julia and husband Francis When bought her back in 1998 and now keep her on a River Deben mooring.



Ship's Granny was content to provide on-board baby-sitting while the parents checked out the Royal Fowey Yacht Club.

Wind and tide were fair for our return and I finally tackled my inability to wheel-steer. I've only ever used a tiller and it had been hard to strike up a good relationship with the yacht while muttering all the while to myself: 'Pretend you're in a car.'

Finally I succeeded, and could feel her hull thrumming through the water – almost as tunefully as if it were wood. It felt as if the holiday was properly underway.

Unfortunately this was now September. School and work lay ahead. As we re-entered Falmouth for the last time and saw other sailors setting out round St Anthony Head into the golden afternoon I struggled not to call them pudding faces. ▲



The charter yacht's favourite angle made Julia long, quietly, for the stability of *Peter Duck*

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