



# A man in three boats

Gilbert Park has a white knuckle experience saving three boats from Storm Eunice

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gilbert Park has been a keen sailor for the past 45 years. Before retirement he was an Intensive Care Consultant in London, and

a Director of Intensive Care. He held many other positions including non-executive director of the organisation's Organ Donation and Transplantation, and was also in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

**S**torm Eunice hit the UK on 18 February with the highest winds ever recorded in England at 122mph (note that the Beaufort scale stops at 12 with a maximum speed of 83mph) at the Needles, Isle of Wight.

I live at the top of Chichester Harbour right on the water's edge. The highest windspeed (F11 at Chichester Bar) occurred about lunchtime, at the same time as a spring tide.

The slip at the end of my road was being blasted by high waves and winds. The wall where many boats are moored are

around a corner. Although still blasted by the wind the waves were not as violent. The storm was well forecasted and there was plenty of time to prepare.

Indeed, the day before had been windy (Storm Dudley had just passed through) and a small rowing boat broke away from its mooring. I had been watching this boat for many months filling with water or ripping its rubbing strakes off, it seemed nobody cared for it. Fortunately, as it broke I was thinking about taking my rowing boat round to the slip so I had oars and a lifejacket ready. Off I went to try and get it. At the time it was blowing a F6 at Chimet.

### Bailing water

I picked the itinerant boat up and as there were no ropes attached anywhere I put a rope through the rowlock. I couldn't tow it because of the wind, position of the tow

## I thought the boat was going to sink with me in it!

rope and also 60% full of water. I managed to get the boat to a ladder and tie it up while I tried to row my boat around the corner to the slip. I couldn't safely get round the corner so I gave up and took the boat back home.

Then it was back to the small boat and I started to bail it out, as I did more water came in. My weight plus that of the water already in the boat meant a hole near the transom went below the water line, more water poured in and started coming over the gunwales. I thought the boat was going to sink with me in it! Fortunately, I

## STORM WARNING PREPARATIONS

- Protect mooring ropes from chafe.
- Put on additional ropes. My boat moored on the wall has two lines going up to pulleys then going down with weights attached to keep her against the wall. There are also bow and stern lines made of 20mm rope attached to strong points to stop her from breaking away. A dangerous situation should only develop if two of the ropes break.
- Make sure that any canopies are either removed or firmly attached with all the elastics, press studs and zips done up.

could get back onto the ladder and think again! This time I went into the bow and succeeded in bailing the boat out. I didn't even try to take it around to the slip, it too went back to my home mooring.

Eunice day arrived and during the morning the wind picked up. I met a neighbour in the street who told me a Hunter Liberty yacht had broken loose at the stern from one of the wall moorings and could I help?

This mooring is unusual as it is a "horse". Two upright, squared piles have been driven into the mud and secured to the wall. A board (that has polystyrene attached to it so it floats) is secured around the piles so as to slide up and down. Attached to the board are rings to which mooring ropes are attached. It's a bit like a floating pontoon in a marina.

### Hat-trick

The board had snapped as the wind blew the stern out. The fractured board was still attached to the horse by a fender rope and as the Hunter was blown towards

Violent waves breaking at the slip at the end of Gilbert's road





The Liberty with the stern part of the plank fractured and jamming between the boat and the remains of the horse



The fractured bit of wood from the horse. The rope through the fender is the one that needed cutting

the wall it was jamming between the wall and the stern of the boat with such force there was a risk of hull puncture.

As it was now high water it was straight forward to step onto the top of the pile from the gate to the mooring. From there it was easy and safe to step onto the bow of the boat, as the wind was pushing the stern out and the bow in. Once on board ropes were attached to the stern to make the boat secure and additional ropes to the bow to reinforce the existing warp. Fortunately, I had a team of sailors to help and they were invaluable.

Further on another boat, a Laundau 21, was in trouble. Again a stern rope had failed. This time the boat in trouble was moored to an old, German Fire Boat with a steel hull. The bow was bashing against the fire boat hull making an awful clanging sound - the bell of destruction. The owner, who was relatively new to boating, had decided, quite wisely, that it was better to

## Do not put yourself in danger, you're worth more than any boat

let the boat be damaged than risk drowning or injury. I offered to help if I could, but as the mooring was more exposed than the wall moorings if it was at all risky I would abandon it.

Stepping onto the fireboat I could see that getting onto the bow of the Laundau was straightforward as the wind was again pushing the bow against the hull. One of the handrails was buckled outwards where a fender rope had become a midship line and luckily stopped the boat from repeatedly, swinging through 180° and hitting the wall.

The difficult and more dangerous bit was going along the narrow deck with the risk

of falling off and being trapped between the two boats. I crossed over and as I moved along the deck there was an enormous gust. It was very much a white knuckle grip with both hands onto the cabin top rail until it abated. Once in the cockpit of the Laundau I was safe and able to get two stern ropes on and a spring. Some of the cockpit cover had come undone and with the force of the wind I couldn't redo it so I secured it to

allow rescue later on.

Why had the stern line parted? When I looked it was clear the line had chafed where it went over the edge of the fireboat.

The rowing boat and Liberty didn't suffer any damage apart from a few minor scratches. The Laundau did have a badly scratched area around the port bow and one of the handrails was buckled outwards. Compared to what happened elsewhere the boats had got off lightly. **PBO**

## LESSONS LEARNED

**1 STAY ALIVE** If you are inexperienced or the weather conditions are too bad, especially the sea state, do not get on a boat. At the end of the day your insurance company will hopefully pay up, and even if they don't you are worth more than any boat.

**2 LIFEJACKET** If you are planning get on a boat in these conditions wear a life jacket in case you do fall in. Wet side decks and a sudden gust of wind are all it takes to catch you off balance. I should have worn one on the Liberty, I asked for one but there wasn't one available. I should have gone and got mine. On both of the others I did wear one.

**3 HOLD ON** Be very careful crossing from the land to a boat or from boat to boat. You do not want to fall between boats and be crushed. Fortunately, there were no big waves where these boats were despite the high wind. Had there been, securing the boats would have

been much riskier and perhaps not possible.

**4 TOOLS** Before you start, think about what you will need. For the Liberty I required several lengths of rope and a serrated knife to cut through wet ropes holding the fractured bit of plank to remain connected to the rest of the horse.

**5 DRESS APPROPRIATELY** Make sure you have the right clothing - it wasn't raining and the temperature was about 9°C I still got cold with the wind chill.

**6 BACK UP** Always have at least one person on land who can help you or call for help in case something does go wrong.

**7 TETHER** Thinking about the three incidents afterwards made me also consider using a short lifeline while clambering around in these difficult conditions, just in case I slipped off a side deck.

\*Send us your boating experience story and if it's published you'll receive the original Dick Everitt-signed watercolour which is printed with the article. You'll find PBO's contact details on page 5.