

This is a race not for the faint-hearted, not in-real-life, where it does not exist, nor in virtual reality, where it does.

In real life, it would be bitter cold and icy damp as you'd set out from Aberdeen, and more than likely a gale from the west would either want to speed you on your way, or be about to come through. And if you wouldn't be close-hauled already, after you'd turn for Inverness at Kinnaird Head, you definitely would and you'd be reefing down at some stage or other, only to have to shake it all out again later as the weather system passed through, probably to be followed by another twenty-four hours later. But it doesn't exist.

Online it does exist, but online it is not the weather that troubles competitors, but rather a very acute and tricky rounding of a mark-in-the-sea in the Moray Firth, typically at a time when at least some of the fleet would prefer to be asleep, and, then, after a relatively benign passage north to the top of Gruney, a veritable maize through the north eastern isles of the Shetland archipelago to a finish in the south in Lerwick harbor, which for most every SOLer will require some sleep deprivation to be sure not to go on the rocks.

Three years ago I won this after an intense battle with rumskib, who, alas, we only see out rarely these days. rumskib had won it before, and other things as well, so I was best pleased, as you can glean from the effort I put into my victory report which you can still find in the Archives at:

http://sailonline.org/static/var/sphene/sphwiki/attachment/2016/01/31/UHA16_REP_bonknhoot.pdf

Hirilonde came third in that one as well, and Wolff fourth, so "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose", you'd think.

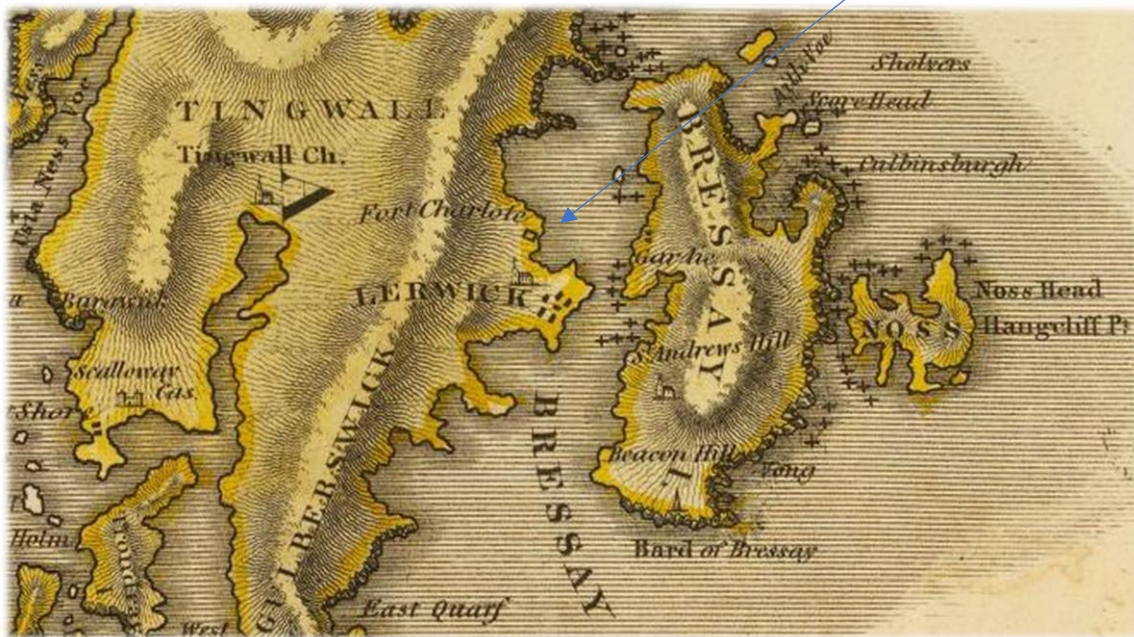
But no, things do change and things have changed on SOL, as a quick review of the leaderboard immediately shows. In 2016, fifteen minutes separated first from fifth, and a further fifteen fifth from tenth. This year, those gaps were two minutes and then a further four minutes respectively. Yes, the fleet is so much more competitive, with the top thirty or so all routing and rounding very accurately thanks to two major innovations since that time: SOL interpolation in our router of choice, and Kipper1258's AGL. Another thing that has changed is that in 2019 there were only three privateers in the T30, whereas in 2016, there were eight boats not flying an SYC burgee. One thing that has not changed though is that Smo can still turn it on, without touching the router. What a race he had until he decided to get some sleep!

But, in short, the fleet has matured, professionalized if you will, which IRL tends to lead to dwindling numbers, but on SOL – 185 starters vs 190 in 2016 – not so much, in part and importantly to some great new blood: WRmirekd, CelemansRKN, Fallabella, batseba, Antares_sydney, I salute you all.

What about this year's racing then? Well, as said, it was close. With a modest bear-away at Kinnaird Head within reach before the next WX, there was little debate about where the tack point was going to be, and the way the polar worked, it mattered not one iota if you sailed off free-and-fast for it, like I did, or sailed a tad higher to take the header early. Similarly, tacking slightly later to ease sheets after a while and romp in, or tacking early to curve up to the headland; again, it made no difference.

Thus, off Inverness, there was nothing in it, although on rounding I did manage to go into the lead, only to lose it immediately to Hirilonde who rounded better and sailed off more for more VMC. However, at the next WX (1030) I neglected to load up the new weather to the router (I had downloaded it) and tricked myself in to wandering just slightly off course. And then I did the same again at 1630! These aberrations saw me drop to fifth rounding Gruney, with StingFI slightly less than a minute ahead of me in the lead. From now on, it was all cornering, and by a mix of careful use of AGL's DC-checker and my own alarm clock, I managed to recoup my losses, but if our Finnish

friends, StIngFl and Smo hadn't come a-cropper, I don't know that I would have. And, naturally, Wolff and Hirilonde continued to breathe down my neck all the way to the finish, where, on this occasion, I didn't go for the obviously wrong end, but for the starboard pin under Fort Charlotte!



Great racing and of course a magnificent fiery festival to be associated with!!

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