

Cruising around Britain in a 27ft boat: Part 1 – Gosport to Ramsgate



- [Top stories](#)

Rhea 850 Timonier owner Philip Davies sets off from Gosport Marina on an ambitious cruise around the British mainland

I've been motorboating for 30 years and during that time have owned, in chronological order, a [Princess 45](#) (10 years), a [Trader 535 Signature](#) (10 years), an Island Packet SP Cruiser (3 years) and a [Fairline Squadron 42](#) (5 years).

I have cruised extensively both sides of the [English Channel](#), the Spanish Costas and the Balearics. So why did I choose to undertake my biggest nautical challenge yet, a complete circumnavigation of Great Britain, in the smallest motorboat I've ever owned?

AdChoices

ADVERTISING

Perhaps it was the confidence I had in the sea-keeping of the pretty little Rhea 850 Timonier I had recently downsized to. Perhaps it was to prove that ambitious boating is not the exclusive domain of larger motor cruisers.



Philip's sturdy Rhea 850 Timonier *Start Me Up*

Perhaps it was a 67-year-old trying to convince himself he could still act and think like a man 30 years younger. Or perhaps it was simply because it was there to be achieved. What is certain is that it was never on my 'bucket list' of things to do, so perhaps I'd better explain how it came about.

Late last year I was being given a lift home from our local pub by my 27-year-old godson, Charlie Boutwood, and his father Nigel. They came in for a nightcap. Nigel, who is a rag-and-stick man, informed me that they would not be participating in the [Round the Island Race](#) in 2019.

He had sailed in 14 consecutive races around the Isle of Wight to raise money for Charlie's Challenge, a children's brain tumour research charity he had founded with his wife, and which I had been a trustee of from the outset.

Article continues below...



Rhéa 730 Timonier

[VIDEO: Rhéa 730 Timonier review](#)

Honest, charming and brimming with French flair, the Rhéa 730 Timonier proves a trusty companion in a rough Solent sea



[Secret South Coast cruising: Discovering the hidden gems of Sussex and Kent](#)

Charlie had survived such a tumour as a 20-month-old child and was the inspiration for the charity. I was 'over refreshed' at the time and said "why didn't we go round a proper island... Great Britain, in my new boat, *Start Me Up*?"

The following day Nigel phoned to ask if I meant it. Not wanting to admit that it might have been the beer talking, I said that I did. Then he asked if that meant going right around the top of Scotland or the softer option of cutting through the [Caledonian Canal](#), again I responded that we were going to do it properly or not at all.

From that moment on I went to sleep every night thinking about going around the top of Scotland and woke up every morning thinking about going around the top of Scotland until eventually we did go around the top of Scotland!



The planning begins

The first thing to decide was which way round to go. Having made a dozen or so trips down to [Devon and Cornwall](#) from the Solent in my boating career and been held up on more than one occasion by the prevailing south-westerlies, I felt that we should head east and go around Britain in an anti-clockwise direction.

However, I did read the blogs of the most recent circumnavigators, two sailors (one solo, the other crewed) who went clockwise from the Solent and one motor boater, who went anticlockwise from Falmouth. I also looked up the question on Google and found long and detailed arguments for both cases.

To me it just seemed logical that the prevailing south-westerlies would deliver a more comfortable following sea state along the south coast to Ramsgate and would hopefully continue to blow offshore on the east coast giving slight seas, then become more southerly and therefore still following us as we headed up the North Sea.



The same weather system might even deliver south-easterlies and easterlies at the top end of Scotland and north-easterlies and northerlies down the west coast of Scotland with the constantly hoped for benign sea states.

Logic further dictated that we hugged the east coast of Ireland rather than the exposed west coast of England and Wales to gain further protection from the prevailing westerlies/south-westerlies. From southern Ireland across to south-west Wales we would have to rely upon the weather Gods, against prevailing weather, to deliver comfortable sea conditions to cross the Bristol Channel and eventually round Land's End.

We were originally intending to start our adventure on the 1st April 2019, April Fools' Day, in the hope that we would be around the top of Scotland by early June at the latest. The assumption was that at some point we would be held up by unsettled weather and this would give us the time to be patient and wait for the right combination of tide and wind before pressing on.



Start Me Up may only be 27ft long but it punches well above its weight

Considering how cold it was in Scotland by the time we eventually got there in late May, I was very pleased we didn't get going until May 17 and not earlier as originally planned.

One of the clockwise sailing blogs I had read started much later, ending up rounding the top of Scotland very late in the summer/early autumn causing uncomfortable conditions and questionable decisions. He concluded his blog by saying he would have gone sooner and anti-clockwise to avoid this with hindsight. So, anticlockwise it was, with the plan to get around the top of Scotland ASAP!

Magna charter

I went to Gosport Marina (where the boat is kept) from our home in East Sussex. I wanted to check out the various systems and source the other bits and bobs that we might need going around Great Britain but weren't previously necessary when simply pottering around the Solent.

The charts in the plotter only covered the English Channel, for instance, so I upgraded to the whole of the British Isles. For some reason these also included the entire European Atlantic coast and the Western Mediterranean. Garmin only does this huge area rather than just the British Isles.

The sales guy told me I just had to take out the existing card and load up the new one. Simple, or was it? When I loaded the new card the image was at 90° to the north and the autopilot was 40° out. Apparently, even though my plotter was only one year old it needed a 'simple' operating software upgrade that should fix the problems. Just to be safe I also ordered 17 Imray 'C' series paper charts for passage planning and back up.



Philip and Nigel set off from Gosport at the start of their big adventure

The engines, twin 220hp Volvo D3s, had their first service and whilst I was at it I bought a complete set of additional service parts in case they were needed en route.

I'd bought the 2019 Reeds Almanac as soon as it was available before Christmas 2018, and had spent two days researching which harbours we would call into as a basic passage plan. There were two essential requirements, fuel and 24-hour access. There was only one compromise – calling into Grimsby, which had a lock and access restrictions but where there was no better choice on that stretch of the east coast of England.

Then I read about the passage from Wick at the top right-hand corner of Scotland around the top, but not before we had got through the dreaded Pentland Firth, an eight by five-mile nautical nightmare of 12-knot races that awaits you when you make that top left-hand turn. This only seemed to amplify my mounting dread of this part of our voyage.

I had the boat lifted for a bottom scrub and hose down at Premier Marinas Port Solent, then purchased industrial quantities of Mini Cheddars, Kettle Chips, Twix, bottled water and beers for the crew. It's just as important to keep the crew fully fuelled as it is the boat.

Gosport to Eastbourne

I had been looking at the weather for a suitable window of opportunity to kick the project into life. I had also been taking note of the sea forecasts, particularly at the very top of Scotland, every day since we had committed to undertaking the trip. For months I had only seen Force 5s and upwards, always accompanied by Rough to Very Rough and frequently High to Phenomenal. Gulp.

Finally, there was a big high-pressure weather system settling over the whole of the UK, it was blindingly obvious that we should take advantage of it and see how far we could get up the east coast of England.



Passing the vast Rampion wind farm en route to Eastbourne

Our friend Peter took us to Gosport marina and at 2pm on the dot, seven months after we first floated the idea, we fired up the engines and off we went. We couldn't quite believe this was the beginning of a 2,000-mile journey around Great Britain in our little motorboat – we must be completely mad.

Our course took us via the Outer Owers Buoy and directly along the coast to Eastbourne, passing the massive Rampion Wind Farm, which produces enough energy for 350,000 East Sussex homes. A little later on we passed the magnificent Seven Sisters and then Beachy Head itself.

Surreal send off

When we reached the entrance to Sovereign Harbour, we couldn't get an answer on Channel 80 but as the lock gates were open and the lights on green for another boat ahead of us, we just followed her in.



Passing Eastbourne's once-lavish pier

When I asked the berth master why they weren't listening on Channel 80, his reply was brief and to the point. "Because we listen on Channel 17!" Note to self: consult your 2019 Reeds Almanac more thoroughly and don't make any assumptions about anything!

We were allocated a lovely berth with more than enough pontoon space to host a little leaving party on Sunday 19 May for our local friends, this particular marina being located only 12 miles from our home.

At the appointed hour a suitable number of bemused friends turned up to enjoy a glass or two of Black Dog Hill 2013 Classic Cuvée, an award-winning English sparkling wine, and send us on our way.

We entered the lock at 1500hrs and departed to the cheery goodbyes of friends and family, setting our course for Dungeness. The plotter was still 90° out but I still had a compass and a chart, and the visibility was excellent, even if the seas were a little choppy.



Ramsgate was the crew's final stop before they tackled the east coast

We coast hopped from headland to headland until we passed Dover Harbour and took our first significant turn to port on the final leg to Ramsgate, avoiding the infamous Goodwin sands to starboard.

Having read Reed's entry for Ramsgate we were able to call Channel 14 for permission to enter (granted) and then Channel 80 (correctly, this time) to be allocated a berth. We were offered a choice of 20 different fingers on Pontoon F. We took our pick, hosed the boat down and tidied up for our first visitor, Nigel's sister Janie.

We had covered the 60 miles to Ramsgate in 3 hours 30 minutes, from lock to pontoon finger and were feeling pretty smug about things. Something told me things were going to get a bit tougher on our route up the east coast but for now we were going to enjoy our early successes with (another) celebratory drink or two!

Next month: Philip and Nigel enter the North Sea proper as they continue their intrepid adventure...

Cruising around Britain in a 27ft boat: Part 2 – Ramsgate to Grimsby



- [Top stories](#)

After a rash idea to circumnavigate the whole of Britain in a 27ft Rhea 850, Phil and Nigel find themselves plugging up the windswept East Coast...

This is part two of Phillip Davies and Nigel Boutwood's round Britain adventure. You can [read part one here](#).

Our strategy for circumnavigating Britain was arrived at over numerous conversations before embarking. Nigel would plot the agreed passage plan on the Imray paper charts with courses to steer from waypoint to waypoint, marking our position on the chart as we went at least once every hour.

AdChoices
ADVERTISING

We would rely on the Garmin plotter, with its electronic chart, for the detail in conjunction with the Reeds Almanac and visitmyharbour.co.uk for local pilotage notes. Weather and sea forecasts would be a composite of the BBC's Coastal, Inshore Waters and Shipping, plus myweather2.com and windfinder.com

Tide times would always be taken as at Dover for passage planning purposes. This would keep things simple, as all of the tidal flow charts in The Reeds Almanac and marked on the Imray charts are as per Dover and the local standard port. However, as we would rarely be in the local standard port this would remove the need for another calculation.



Lastly, our intention was to cruise only in fair weather – nothing above a Force 4 and preferably with neap tides and a gentle following sea. So much for good intentions!

Ramsgate to Lowestoft

Although we have made it [from Gosport to Ramsgate](#) safely enough, thus far we have always been in sight of land. Our first proper offshore passage now awaits us across the navigationally tricky outer Thames estuary to Lowestoft, the most easterly point on the British mainland. We'll be going past a number of wind farms and some significant sandbanks.

The wind is predicted to be Force 3 gusting 4, rising to Force 5 later, but if all goes to plan we should arrive in Lowestoft before the 5 kicks in. The only fly in the ointment will be having to endure a stretch of wind against tide in the first hour or so. That will probably be the 'moderate' bit of the predicted 'slight to moderate'.



Phil at the helm during the steady passage northwards

We need to refuel and while treading water awaiting our turn on the fuel barge, it's very noticeable that the wind, even in the harbour, is a bit stronger than the predicted Force 3-4. Too late for second thoughts now, so we fuel up and ask permission to leave the harbour.

Motoring through the outer harbour we can already feel an underlying swell rolling in and beyond the protective walls we can see significant white horses riding the waves, well beyond what one would expect from a Force 3-4, even against the tide.

We discuss the possibility of it smoothing down out to sea and decide to carry on up the track (our faulty plotter screen still displaying everything at 90° out). However, I keep the helm on manual to try and dodge the bigger waves.

Article continues below...



We plug on, by now at displacement speed, beyond the famous North Foreland Lighthouse, but it's obvious that we are not up for spending seven hours battling this sort of sea state. We think it's a straightforward Force 5 gusting 6 with steep short waves, like a Solent chop on steroids. All I have to do is turn around and go back to Ramsgate – easy enough to say but not to execute.

Nigel, a life-long rag and stick merchant, thinks we should slow right down to 5 knots or less from our current 10 knot maximum displacement speed before making the turn, as that's what he'd do in a sailing boat.

We have our first 'discussion' about the different size of rudders fitted to motor and sail boats and the necessity for power and speed to give good steerage on a motor boat (fitted with small rudders) compared to a sailing boat (longer, larger rudders for good manoeuvrability at slow speeds).



Glitches with the plotter tested the crew's patience

I've only had this boat a year but with 30 years of motorboating experience in all sizes of boats, I felt I had the upper edge in this matter. And while the Rhea 850 has legendary seakeeping capabilities we still have to execute a 180° turn without broaching.

Second attempt

Eventually, I pick my moment and spin the wheel hard over. Heart in mouth, *Start Me Up* powers through the turn until we're facing back in the direction we came from. A very uncomfortable following sea accompanies us all the way back to Ramsgate until we arrive, gratefully, on the very same berth we left a couple of hours earlier.

On the plus side it's fun to have an unplanned day in Ramsgate. It's a very attractive harbour and we get the sense that the place is on the up. We decide to take advantage of the time to try and get somebody to assist with the plotter/autopilot problem but there is nobody free to help us.

Then I remember that when I had my first boat, a [Princess 45](#) in 1989, we put our free-standing 12-volt television on the bed in the guest cabin in expectation of bumpy weather. As I engaged the autopilot the boat immediately veered off course towards the beach.

It transpired that we had plonked the TV directly above the autopilot compass, fixed under the guest bed, playing havoc with its sensitive magnetic readings. Could this be our problem? We search unsuccessfully for the autopilot's electronic compass. I phone the people who sold me the boat to see if they can help. They promise to get back to me.



The sea state between Ramsgate and Lowestoft provided a stern test of *Start Me Up's* seakeeping

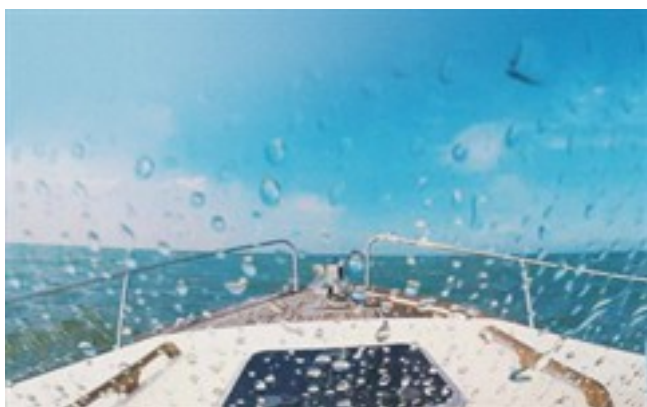
The following day the forecast looks considerably better and from the tall inner harbour wall we can see a completely different smooth-to-slight sea state. We leave our berth immediately.

Outside the harbour, I advance the revs to 3,500rpm and we cruise very comfortably at 20 knots heading north on our planned 72 nm passage to Lowestoft. We eventually lose sight of land and become irritated by the plotter showing the boat going sideways across the screen where it thinks north is. Even though the autopilot holds the course, the plotter decides to create a destination 'mark' and the 'stop panning' button appears.

I learn subsequently that this is called 'ghost panning' and is probably a result of the operating software needing updating to facilitate the huge number of new chart files and operational capabilities.

We do at least have accurate GPS latitude/longitude and are able to note our position on the paper charts, thus maintaining a safe compass course to steer and avoiding the numerous shallow waters and wind farms prevalent in the Outer Thames Estuary.

After three hours or so, with about another hour to run to Lowestoft, the weather suddenly starts to pick up, then picks up a bit more, and then a bit more again. The resultant Force 5 gusting 6 creates an uncomfortable head sea, sending plumes of spray hurtling over the wheelhouse. In these conditions the boat feels very small indeed.



Approaching Lowestoft Harbour

We reduce to displacement speed for the final 10 miles. It's a very long hour so when at last we reach Lowestoft it's with some relief that we call Channel 14 for permission to enter (granted) and Channel 80 for a berth at the Royal Norfolk and Suffolk Yacht Club. The manager is there to greet us and we are very glad to have arrived. We hose down the boat and break out the beers.

I phone the boat dealer again as I am now thoroughly fed up with our plotter/ autopilot problem. He tells me that the electronics guy, who does his work, will phone me and talk me through the autopilot setup. He doesn't call but does text me the number of support staff at Garmin, who can help.

I phone them and they are helpful in so far as they confirm that the software needs updating but it's not a DIY fix. They have two dealers in Lowestoft who can help but both are now closed. I'll ring them first thing.

One of the two contact numbers also features in the Royal Norfolk and Suffolk Yacht Club welcome leaflet, KM Electronics Ltd. I ring them at 8.30am the next day and am pleasantly surprised my call is answered by a Kevin Smith rather than an out of hours answerphone.

Lowestoft to Grimsby

I tell him my problem and he says he will download the software then come to the marina to install it. Sure enough he shows up at 9.30am clutching the all-important USB stick and we wait for the new Garmin software to upload (30 minutes).

Once installed we head out of the harbour to do the other routines needed for the (still hidden) electronic compass to find north, which it does. We head back to the visitor's berth, intensely grateful for Kevin's help. How much? £48 inc VAT. I want to kiss him – fantastic service and amazing value for money.

The forecast is fair, so we fill up the tanks and ask the harbour authority for permission to leave. We make our way around the Norfolk coast, across the Outer Wash until Spurn Head comes into view and we pick up a target buoy to head up into the Humber Estuary.



The Humber Cruising Association Club

The Humber Cruising Association Marina is south-west of the fish dock through a very old lock that opens three hours either side of high water and has a free flow two hours either side. We are three hours before and are told that we are on a list for entry but commercial traffic has priority.

We can only see one fishing boat so we follow it up to the lock to see if they will let us in any way. They don't so we tread water until 10 minutes or so later the lock manager invites us into the lock. She explains that it's strictly one boat at a time and no need to tie up as there isn't going to be a big surge of water so we should be able to control the boat (eek!)

We make our way in and I am instructed to move forward a bit so the back gates can be shut (maximum boat length, including bathing platform, is nine meters). I shuffle *Start Me Up* into position and then almost immediately the lock gates ahead of us open into the fish dock. We find ourselves an appropriate berth on the visitor's pontoon.



The Royal Norfolk and Suffolk Yacht Club provided welcome respite after a long day at sea

We hose the boat down and look for somebody. We find a couple who tell us that the staff have all gone home but the club is open so Nigel is able to play the club's piano without annoying anybody! The same lovely couple open the bar, get us a drink and give us a gate card for a £10 deposit but are unable to recommend any restaurants in Grimsby and advise getting a taxi to Cleethorpes instead. Cleethorpes and Grimsby are one town, like Brighton and Hove, you really can't see the join.

Cleethorpes has a lovely seafront and we manage to find a Thai restaurant and enjoy a delicious curry. We return to the boat sated and satisfied at our progress but we both know the real challenges still lie ahead as we make our way north and ever closer to the perils of Scotland's fearsome North Coast.



Philip paid for the entire adventure out of his own pocket but hopes it will raise awareness and funds for two charities, Brain Tumour Research and Prostate Cancer UK. To read more about their adventure and donate to either cause visit: boataroundbritain.co.uk

First published in the January 2020 edition of Motor Boat & Yachting.

WORDS Philip Davies PHOTOS Nigel Boutwood



PART **A** THREE²

SMALL BOAT ROUND BRITAIN

*Philip Davies and Nigel Boutwood battle up the North East coasts of England
and Scotland in their charity raising effort to circumnavigate Britain*



The marinas we have chosen for our circumnavigation of Britain have been selected for two reasons – they have fuel and 24-hour access. Grimsby is a rare exception as it only has access two hours either side of high water, which for us means leaving between 7am and 11am. The forecast is fair with a slight sea state for the 110-mile leg to Sunderland — a six-hour run at our Rhea 850's comfortable cruising speed of 18 knots.

Fully refuelled, we exit the lock at 10am and make our way back through the Humber estuary before pointing the bows north up the Yorkshire coast.

I am feeling guilty about not going into Whitby as it looks rather lovely and is said to serve the best fish and chips in England. As if to spite us the sea picks up from slight to moderate as we pass, forcing us to reduce our speed below 14 knots and drop off the plane. We are tempted to duck in for some respite

but decide to plough on for a few more miles to see if the sea flattens off again further up the coast.

Sure enough the waves gradually subside, allowing us to climb back up to 16 knots, so we plough on past Hartlepool to Sunderland. The entrance to the River Wear proves joyfully simple and we're soon pulling into Sunderland Marina, a short distance from the harbour entrance. It turns out to be a super little marina, clean, modern and very convenient for leisure boats like ours. It even has a very respectable Italian restaurant on site. We hose down the boat and crack a couple of cold beers to lubricate our tonsils.

SUNDERLAND TO EDINBURGH

It's strange to think that leaving Sunderland, our next planned English port of call is Padstow, Cornwall, 1,200 miles away! But first there's the small matter of going round the top of Scotland.

This leg will take us past Newcastle (more guilt pangs), up the wonderful Northumberland coast to the Farne Islands and on past Berwick-upon-Tweed to Scotland.



Forth Rail Bridge is a proud symbol of Scotland's industrial heritage



The passage slides by without incident on relatively calm seas. Once north of the border we enter the Firth of Forth and make the 26-mile run up to Port Edgar Marina, nestled between the two road bridges just beyond the famous Forth Rail Bridge.

We are allocated a berth by the marina manager and once secure, make our way up to South Queensferry with its quaint cobbled streets, where we enjoy an excellent fish and chips with a zesty white at the Boathouse Bistro overlooking the bridge.

EDINBURGH TO PETERHEAD

The forecast is the best yet with a slight sea state and a gentle following wind. We refuel and make our way back up the Firth of Forth before turning north towards our planned next stop of Peterhead, 23 miles on from Aberdeen.

This is our simplest and easiest passage yet. I set the revs at 3,400rpm under the Forth Rail Bridge, equating to 18/19 knots and don't touch the throttles again until we slow down to enter Peterhead Harbour some five and a half hours later.

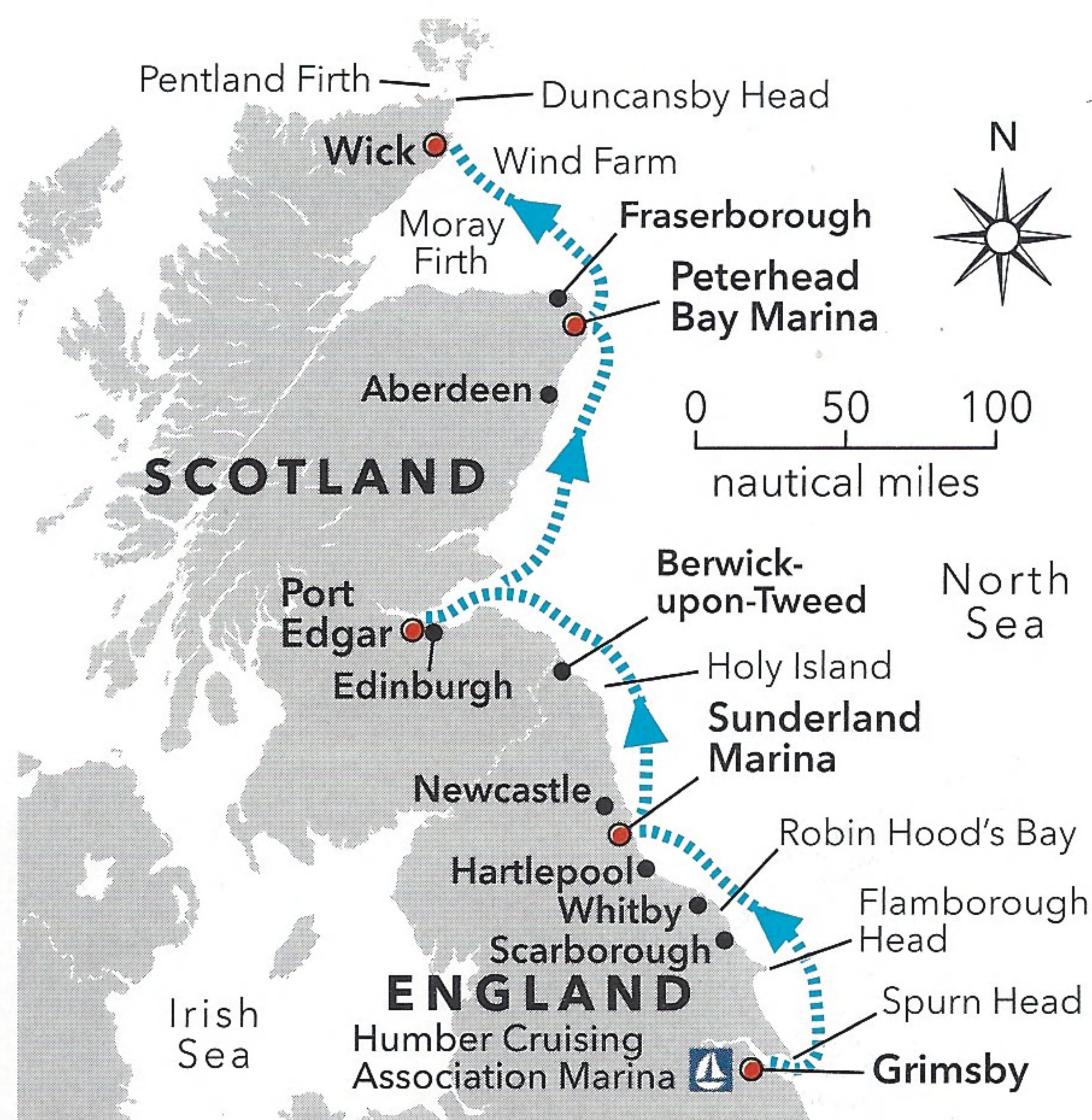
I spent around £2,500 having Webasto heating installed on the boat and I'm starting to get my money's worth. It may be the back end of May but by early evening the temperature is only 9°C and falling fast. I have to wear gloves to hose the boat down.

We ask a couple on a sailing boat if there are any good restaurants nearby; when the answer comes back 'no', Nigel decides to give his Xiaomi M365 electric scooter a workout. We're told there's an Aldi two miles away so Nigel heads off on his scooter to buy a cottage pie and a decent bottle of red.

Much to my amazement, within 30 minutes Nigel is back with a full bag of shopping and four two-litre bottles of water. What a brilliant device that scooter is and perfect for smaller boats such as ours. We enjoy our Aldi cottage pie and an appropriately robust red, while watching *Britain's Got Talent* on my laptop. Living the life!

The following day, with the weather set to deteriorate and the most challenging part of the journey still to come, we decide to leave the boat here for a few days and head home until the weather improves. A taxi to Aberdeen, an open return to Lewes (ticket price heavily discounted courtesy of our Senior Railcards) and we are home by 9pm, almost the other end of the country. It's so easy it makes us wonder why more people don't venture this far north in their boats.

Easy to access Sunderland on the River Wear



PETERHEAD TO WICK

The weather is looking good for our attempt to round the top of Scotland, so after almost a three-week pause, we return to Peterhead to resume our anti-clockwise circumnavigation of Great Britain. I've taken the opportunity to buy my own Ninebot Segway scooter to take the legwork out of the sometimes long distances from visitors' berths to marina showers and local shops.

Start Me Up seems to have enjoyed her holiday too and I am relieved to see that the seagulls of Peterhead have not used her for target practice. I drop by the marina office to sort out our charges, which amount to £240 – good value compared to the south coast. Keith, the very helpful manager, is intrigued by our mission and having heard about our charity fundraising efforts makes a telephone call to the Harbour Master. Within minutes our berthing fees are donated to the charities. Thank you, Keith and Peterhead Bay Marina.

The weather forecast looks good enough to make the 70-mile hop across the Moray Firth to Wick but this being the very top of the North Sea, the potential for big northerly swells rolling in from unseen storms beyond Norway is cause for concern. We are beginning to wonder if Scottish 'slight' seas are rather less slight than those in the Solent.

Nevertheless, we fuel up the boat, seek permission to leave and head north with a brisk south-easterly rolling us around from



Sunderland Marina is compact but as good as it gets