LEFT HAND DOWN A BIT

"Holy Mary Mother of God! – he has the very Divil in his boat so he does!" I can't be sure those were the actual words uttered by the burly Irishman trying to follow my drift along the lee shore of Inishgleasty Island but, by the expression on his face, he was certainly thinking along those lines. And there was some justification for his perplexity. A stiff breeze was blowing on to the island at a steepish angle and between almost every cast he had to heave on his oars to avoid parking his boat on the rocks. As he cursed and zig-zagged behind me, I sat serenely on my padded swivel seat drifting precisely along the drop-off without a trailing oar in sight. Occasionally I would reach behind my back, make a little twiddle and my boat would marginally change course to follow an undulation in the shore-line. My fellow fisherman had cause to suspect diabolic intervention and if he'd had a heavy crucifix in his boat I am sure he would have thrown it at me.

A year or so ago I wrote briefly about a rather clever drogue I had happened upon on a visit to Tasmania. It was a fairly agricultural bit of kit comprising little more than a rectangle of tarpaulin with a length of foam pipe lagging fixed to the top and a chain sewn into the bottom. The clever bit was that a rope from one side was tied on to the front of the boat and a rope from the other end to the back. Sorry - bow and stern. By adjusting the relative lengths of the two ropes, the drogue could be moved backwards or forwards along the length of the boat and this had the effect of altering the angle of the boat to the wind thereby changing the direction of drift. Let us consider how this works.

Unless a boat is heavily weighted at the bow, when broadside to the wind, the front end will have a greater surface area exposed to the wind ('windage' if you are of a nautical bent) than the back and the bow will be pushed in the direction the wind is blowing towards. As a result, the boat will have a tendency to drift laterally towards the stern. A heavy outboard engine on the back of the boat pushes the stern deeper into the water and increases this effect. In the old days, heavy clinker built wooden boats were the norm and, as these sat deeper in the water than modern plastic tubs, they were less prone to such crustacean habits. Boats sometimes used to carry movable ballast so that weight distribution could be carefully adjusted to encourage them to drift true. If you have a really fat fishing partner who you can place on the front seat this will help but, in practice, nearly all lough boats have an inbuilt desire to drift towards the stern.

The only boat I have ever come across that doesn't behave in this way is my pal Baldrick's seventeen footer which he has, with great originality, christened "Baldrick". The drifting pattern of the rowing vessel Baldrick defies all known laws of physics and, without any intervention from its occupants, will first scuttle one way and then the other. Fishing from r.v. Baldrick feels rather like riding on the back of a demented crab.

Lough boats which aren't subject to demonic possession are more predictable and if by some means one can hold the boat square, it will drift straight down wind. Similarly, by changing the angle of the boat to the wind, it should be possible to control the angle of drift: bow nearer to the wind - boat moves to the left (looking

downwind); stern to the wind - boat moves to the right. Diagrams make this clearer than words.

Traditionally, when drifting a lough, an oar is trailed amidships and the direction of drift is controlled by regular application of a strong fore-arm. Indeed, a skilled boatman will be able to control a boat's drift with remarkable precision - which is fine if you always have a skilled boatman to hand. I often fish alone and, having a tin shoulder (actually titanium and cobalt/chrome), regular heaving on a heavy oar is not a comfortable option. Which is where my clever drogue comes in very handy.

The original Tasmanian prototype worked reasonably well so long as you didn't need to change your direction of drift too frequently. Tootling down the middle of Arthur's Lake in the Tasmanian Highlands required little readjustment but following the contours of the shoreline of an island on Lough Mask demanded a more sophisticated system. The Mark 1 version was a close copy of the Tassie Driftmaster. A cord ran from one side of the drogue to a jam cleat on the gunwhale at the bow and from the other side to a similar cleat at the stern. This was fine so long as there was someone at each end of the boat though there were frequent contretemps when the captain of the vessel (me) set up a drift which was subsequently altered by unauthorised fiddling from the cabin boy at the front.

The Mark 2 was a substantial improvement. Constant changing of the relative lengths of the bow rope and the stern rope was a right pain and not easily managed if I were fishing on my own. It didn't take a great deal of brainpower to work out that if the two sides of the drogue were connected by a continuous cord loop running through a

series of fairleads fixed to the outer side of the gunwhale, I would be able to slide the drogue back and forth from anywhere in the boat. And so it proved. The Mark 2 version worked quite well from the start but there were some small irritations. As my friends will attest, I can't be doing with "quite well" and amendments had to be made for the system to be awarded an A* rating.

In a really strong blow, the chain which served as a weight along the lower margin of the Mark 2 just wasn't man enough for the job and struggled to stop the drogue from lifting. This was remedied by upping the gauge of the chain from 6mm to 8mm and countering the extra weight by replacing the pipe lagging float with one of those foam noodle sausages that kids use in swimming pools.

Pulley blocks were fixed to the steel loops at either end of the boat and the number of fairleads increased to reduce friction and make it easier to pull the drogue back and forth. But this reduction in friction allowed the drogue to slide back into the centre position of its own accord so I fitted a clam-cleat on top of the gunwhale next to my seat so that I could clamp the cord and hold the drogue in whatever position I chose.

Initially I used too long a cord loop with the result that the drogue would collapse if I tried to be a bit too ambitious in drifting across the wind. Shortening the loop to just under 10 metres (for my 19 ft boat) kept the drogue close to boat and solved the problem.

In his book 'Trout from a Boat' Dennis Moss discusses the need for a hole in the middle of a drogue and concludes that it serves no useful purpose. Had he spoken to

Monsieur André-Jacques Garnerin, he might have come to a different conclusion - though this would have been a little tricky as the gentleman died in 1823. M. Garnerin is credited with making the first jump using a modern style parachute. He and his parachute went up in a hot air balloon and when he felt he was high enough, he bravely cut the rope to the balloon. His parachute was made of silk and had a similar mushroom shape to that of modern day versions, but what it did not have was a central hole, a fact that M. Garnerin regretted very soon after he started his descent. Without a central vent, air spilled out randomly around the edge with the result that the parachute rocked and spun like a dervish and, by the time he reached *terra firma*, M. Garnerin was not feeling at all well. He decided that his parachute required modification so cut a hole at the centre to see if it made any difference. It certainly did, and on his next jump, with air ducted along the inner surface and out through the hole, stability improved dramatically. He floated to earth like a feather and had no further need for seasickness tablets. A drogue is essentially an aquatic parachute and the same principles apply. A drogue without a hole will spill water randomly all around its edges. It will also hold a volume of static water and thus provide less resistance than one with water flowing over its inner surface and out through a hole. In deference to Monsieur G. and his experiments, my drogue has a central circular vent.

The current Mark 3 version of my clever drogue works a treat and I can now go out on my own, leave the oars stored away in the bottom of the boat and control my drift as well as any horny handed boatman. Apart from its direction controlling abilities it has other advantages over a traditional parachute drogue. The swimming pool noodle keeps the drogue at the surface so it will never sink down and get stuck on the bottom

when the wind drops. As soon as the drogue is dropped into the water it is fully operational and it is a doddle getting it back to the boat by pulling on one end of the cord loop. When motoring short distances it is not even necessary to pull the drogue into the boat as it will just lie flat alongside - though take care that the trailing loop doesn't get caught round the propeller. (Yes - it has happened to me.)

I would love to be able to tell you that I made the drogue myself with nothing more than a pair of scissors and a needle and thread but that would be a fib. The truth is that I found a long suffering sail maker who, realising I was somewhat eccentric, humoured me and managed to translate my drawings into the finished article. Master sail maker Jonathon Abrahams (jonathon@wottac.com) will make you one – please contact him for details or visit the website – www.wottac.com.

My drogue necessitates screwing lots of bits into the hull which isn't a problem as I have my own boat - but I am not sure the management of Rutland Water Fishing Lodge wouldn't be too pleased if you rocked up at the boat mooring with a bag of pulleys and a Black and Decker. However, I have recently seen advertisements for 'drogue clamps' and am sure, with a bit of ingenuity, it would be possible to rig up a system that would enable the drogue to be fixed to a boat without any hole drilling.

However well you are able to control your drift you need to work out the precise wind direction so that you can start from the right place. I am hopeless at it. I study the waves, hold a wetted finger aloft yet still find that I am heading straight into the shore. A simple little wind indicator solves the problem. I use a small extendable aerial from an old radio with an 8 inch length of dapping floss tied to the end. A length of wire

cut from a coat hanger would be just as effective but isn't as pretty. Fixed to one of the thole pins with a couple of rubber bands it provides a perfect wind vane.