

BOB is rescued by the crew of Sailing Barge Centaur

by Mick Nolan, Thames Sailing Barge Trust, July 2019

The Thames Sailing Barge Trust borrowed Medway & Swale Boating Association's body overboard dummy, 'BOB' recently, so their trainee barge mates could practise recovering casualties in a Man Overboard (MOB) situation.



BOB is filled with water to give a dead weight, which provides a more realistic impression of what it would be like to recover a person back on board.

Anyone who has swum from a boat will know how difficult it would be to recover someone who was unable to use a boarding ladder, or similar. On a Thames sailing barge, we carry a barge boat in davits, which can be used to assist someone back on board with relative ease.

With a wind strength of Force 3, it was interesting to note, even with our well drilled crew, how difficult it was to spot BOB in his red suit, floating low in the water. This from a deck 8ft above sea level.



It took an average of 16 minutes to tack the barge, through a figure of eight, to return to the casualty, and an average of four minutes to gybe into a hove-to position, and soak down onto our casualty in a slow and controlled manner.

Gybing a Thames sailing barge is not something that can be done on a whim. In addition to taking care of the mainsheet, we have running backstays, which hold our topmast in place on the windward side, and need to be released to leeward. We have vangs too, which control our sprit, the 55ft-long diagonal spar, characteristic of our spritsail rig.

Our mast and gear alone weigh in the region of 4 tons, with the best part of 5,000 square feet of canvas. This is a huge top hamper compared with most sailing vessels, and must be handled with care, if you wish to keep it all on board when gybing.

If there is any weight in the wind, before gybing, the crew would need to reduce canvas by dropping the head stick of the topsail, and brailing up the mainsail to a suitable amount of cloth.

Any slack needs to then be removed from the mainsheet, which also needs to be dampened, by taking a turn around the horns of the main horse, to slow its travel from one side of the barge to the other, as you come through the wind.



If you were sailing, just man and boy, all this would have to be done single-handed of course.

Without doubt, the best advice is to seek assistance in the first instance. A Mayday call can always be downgraded, should a successful recovery ensue. Hesitation at this early stage could be fatal.

It's also important to have robust systems in place, and a crew well-rehearsed in what to do, should the unthinkable happen.

If you or your club would like to borrow a BOB to practise MOB, contact info@msba.org.uk.