

SYNOPSIS

At 2330 (UTC + 1) on 7 August 1999, while on passage under sail from Guernsey to Gosport, the 10.44m long yacht *Bluebell of Warsash* collided with an unidentified ship on a south-westerly course about 23 miles south of The Needles, Isle of Wight. Solent Coastguard notified The Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) at 0148 (UTC + 1) on 8 August 1999. Captain P Kavanagh carried out the investigation.

Two of the yacht's crew members were down below, the other two were on deck keeping a navigation watch. Although they were steering 038° magnetic, the yacht was making 336° over the ground, due to the westerly-setting tidal stream, and the light to moderate easterly wind. The two watchkeepers saw a brightly illuminated ferry ahead showing her green starboard navigation light. They deduced that she was on a near reciprocal course to their own, and would pass clear down the starboard side of the yacht. They did not have the advantage of a radar set. They also saw a ship on their starboard bow showing her red port side light and deduced that she was crossing ahead. The yacht was approaching the northern edge of the south-west bound recommended direction of traffic flow, between the Dover Strait and the Casquets traffic separation schemes.

The ship passed ahead of the ferry and then closed the yacht very quickly. The yacht's helm was put over to port to lessen the impact. One of the watchkeepers threw himself over the port side just before the ship's bulbous bow struck the yacht on the starboard side amidships. Four minutes after the impact, the skipper of the yacht made a "Pan Pan" message on VHF channel 16. He gave their position, and conveyed details of the collision and man overboard. Solent Coastguard responded to the message. Shortly afterwards, the skipper reported that the yacht was not taking in water and that they would make for The Needles to rendezvous with the Yarmouth RNLI lifeboat.

The lifeboat met the yacht and advised that two crew members be airlifted to hospital. This was carried out at 0258. *Bluebell of Warsash* was then towed by the lifeboat to Yarmouth, arriving at 0651.

The predicted tracks of a number of south-west bound ships, which had reported to Dover Coastguard while passing through the Dover Strait were plotted up to the time of the collision. Some of them were found to have been in the vicinity of the accident. Despite making a number of enquiries, and taking paint samples from one particular ship for comparison with paint left on the yacht, the ship involved in the collision has remained unidentified.

The causes of the accident were that the ship failed to take avoiding action in compliance with her obligation as a give-way vessel under the *International Regulations for Preventing Collision at Sea*, and also that the two watchkeepers on the yacht did not appreciate the ship was on a collision course early enough to take effective avoiding action.

The MAIB has no safety recommendations to make at this time.