

The joys of East Coast sailing

And a swansong

William Bourne

I have owned *Marlin*, a 1968 Holman Sterling, for four years, but circumstances (in successive years an extended refit, a major house move, a car accident and then Covid) have limited my sailing. 2021 was the first year I have been able to enjoy much more than a long weekend.

Sailing in the Thames Estuary has a long and proud history, but accounts of cruises there do not feature very often in the Journal, even under lockdown restrictions. Jane Russell's (RCC) lovely article last year was the exception. I shall try and convey the charms of mud, tides and swatchways to members used to open seas, turquoise waters and warm winds in accounts of my two one week long cruises.

My mother, Buffy Bourne RCC (aged 88) and Freddy Bott (RCC cadet) were on board for the first week. Departure on 25 June was delayed, as my dinghy had gone missing from *Marlin's* mooring the previous weekend; that morning I



William Bourne



received a text to say it had been found, washed up on the marshes a mile away at Horrid Hill. The wonderful names on the East coast are another endearing feature, anyone for Slede Ooze?

To my discredit, it had clearly come adrift; but to my credit I had stencilled my phone number onto it – which is the learning lesson from this episode. Darren, who found it, was able to

The joys of East Coast sailing



Marlin

mark its exact location in a text, and within an hour my mother and I were there. It was high up on the marshes and over a mile away from the slipway. Rescuing it involved carrying my outboard half a mile, then manhandling the dinghy across a causeway, before finally launching it into the mud with my mother and Freddy.

As a result, we only arrived on *Marlin* at 1245. As the weather sounded benign, we chose to tow the miscreant dinghy rather than take the new inflatable I had purchased. We were off after a quick stow and

hoisted the cruising chute off the fort at Darnett Ness. There followed a 25nm run to just south of the Whittaker buoy, the entrance to the river Crouch. Freddy had only used a spinnaker once before, but had plenty of practice today, as we hoisted it flying and gybed it a number of times. At one point the GPS registered 9.2 knots, which is not bad for a 28ft boat. While we were in hazy sunshine, Essex and then Suffolk seemed enveloped in a huge black thundercloud.

The spinnaker finally came down at 1750 as the wind started to go forward of the beam, but it wasn't till 1900 that we were able to get round the Whittaker spit in about 2.5m of water. The wind followed us around, but very light and as we entered the Crouch, we again hoisted the spinnaker on a course almost 180° different. It is ten miles in between the mudbanks and we ended up motoring to get the anchor down in the River Roach before dark. A successful 43nm sail, of which at least 35nm under the chute. A glorious moon had risen and the air was full of the mysterious sounds of the east coast rivers.

We awoke to blue skies and enjoyed breakfast in the cockpit on *Marlin's* teak table. Our objective was to get to the river Stour before the start of fresher north easterly winds that were forecast for later in the week. We set off at 1130 against the tide. The east wind soon went round to NE 4-5 and progress was slow, in fact we only made good two nm in the first two hours, despite beating other boats on

William Bourne



Buffy at the helm, under spinnaker, with William

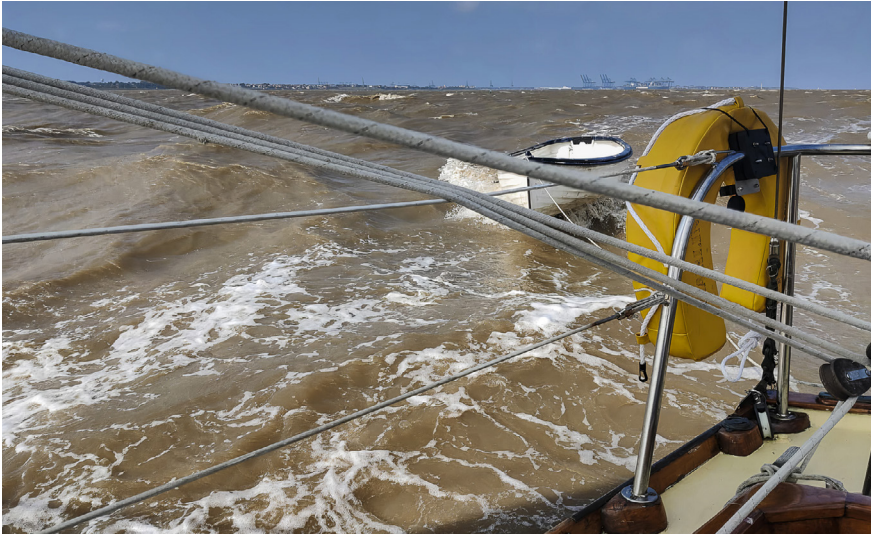
the water. We took the recently re-buoyed Swallowtail channel out of the Crouch in a freshening wind. At its narrowest this is only about 50 yards wide and, at that moment, the eye in the jib sheet started to come unseized. Some emergency sheets were rapidly tied on and we edged round the northern corner of the Ray Sand and across that famous swatchway, the Spitway, in about 3m minimum depth. The deepest water is now some way north of the two safe water buoys.

We finally anchored at 2005 off Erwarton Ness in the Stour after another long day and 32nm made good. There were several other boats anchored, but sadly The Green Man pub, in old days a regular haunt, is no more.

The following morning was again grey and we ran downwind to Holbrook under genoa, anchoring further out than we needed in 2m. Freddy gave the outboard some much needed exercise and we went ashore on a glorious high tide beach for lunch at The Bakers' Arms, a local pub in the best sense.

At 1445 we left again in what was now ENE5 to 6 bound for Walton-on-the-Naze. It was a stiff beat the four miles back down the Stour with the tide, followed by an exciting entry into Walton. We had plenty of wind behind us, but the tide against us and, in depths of no more than 2.3m in parts, a typical angry North Sea chop had built up. The dinghy surfed past us on a number of occasions. Since I kept a boat at Walton over 20 years ago the channel into the Twizzle has become

The joys of East Coast sailing



The dinghy over taking us as we entered Walton

more twisty and narrow. With spray blowing right across it from the sands, it was uninviting. Without my local knowledge I might have baulked at it. However, the Walton and Frinton Yacht Club have done an excellent job of buoying it. Some of the buoys carry the names of local sailing worthies. I was delighted to see that the key starboard hand buoy No. 9 was named after Derek Halls, who used to look after *Roskilde* and *Whisperer* for me in the 1980s.

We came to a somewhat relieved halt at Stone Point, an iconic east coast anchorage (sand, not mud) and had it almost to ourselves as the wind blew over. It had been a shorter, though quite challenging day with 10nm made good. We had rain overnight.

We decided to cross back to the Medway the following day as the wind was forecast to fall and veer. We left at 0540 in an E3-4 and on the falling tide motored out of the channel out to the No. 2 buoy. It was much calmer than yesterday with less wind, an hour later, on the falling tide the tidal stream seemed weaker. There was 3m as we crossed the Pye sand just after half tide.

Remarkably the sail back was largely under spinnaker too. It was a grey and misty morning, and the wind turbines on the Gunfleet appeared out of nowhere. We handed the chute before the Spitway to harden up and cross it on the approved line, but it went up again once we were round the Whittaker. One and then two starlings hitched a lift to the Kent coast in murky conditions and little wind.

At 1410, off Shoeburyness, we sighted a porpoise. It is a clear sign, together with the seals and birdlife, how much cleaner the Thames has become. We crossed the main shipping channel reaching gently under genoa, and then ghosted in along the Medway approach channel.

William Bourne



William and Buffy

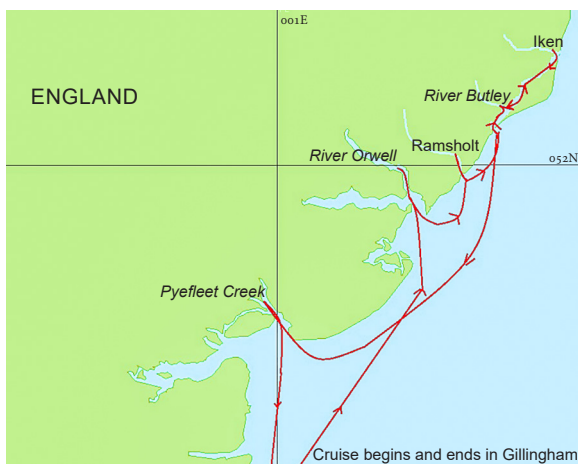
back to the mooring. After a beat back down Stansgate Creek, the wind died as we turned up the Medway and the rain started. We had been very lucky avoiding it up till now, but this was a true Michael Peyton cartoon style downpour. A suggestion to put the spinnaker up was met with wan smiles.

A couple of hours later we were back on the mooring after motoring the last mile. Before leaving we took the dinghy across to Hoo Fort, as Freddy was keen to explore it. Sadly, the rain had flooded it to three feet, so we were unable to get in, but Hoo Island was alive with birds and marsh vegetation. Freddy found plenty of clay pipe stems left by Victorian soldiers but none of the bulbs he was searching for.

For the second week I originally had Colin Barry (RCC) and another young cousin on board, but Colin had to cry off, so we were just two. Harry Bott has not had much experience but turned out to be an excellent helm and a first-class crew. We left at lunchtime on 13 August with a fair forecast and a SW4-5 wind which gradually fell. We poled out the genoa

We finally anchored at high water after 46nm in Sharfleet Creek, another favourite anchorage, at 1615. Though there was little to see of Burntwick Island and we appeared to be in open water, I had to be careful with the depths. By low water the mud had come close and one could only just see Thamesport over the island. There was the usual wonderful birdlife and bird noise.

On our last day together, we left under sail for the seven miles



The joys of East Coast sailing



Flying the spinnaker in the River Alde

as we emerged from the river Medway and passed a training ship under full sail coming out of the Thames, but too far away to identify. While gybing off Blacktail Spit, the 53 year old spinnaker boom end fitting disintegrated. We went through the Spitway at last light and anchored uncomfortably at 2315 in Pennyhole bay outside Walton, hoping the sands would give us some protection.



As they didn't, we carried on into the river Orwell at first light and had breakfast anchored just beyond Felixtowe Port, 52nm made good. It was a grand viewing point from which we to watch a five masted cruise sailing ship, a lifeboat, and a succession of container ships, including the *Evergrade* (a sister ship of the *Evergiven*, which Harry on the helm

William Bourne

blocked the Suez Canal for six days in the summer, having run aground whilst manoeuvring in high winds). Later in the morning we left for the river Deben, entering under sail and picking up a mooring off Ramsholt, 14nm. The round tower church and pub are both well worth a visit.

We had earmarked day three for a long leg up to Southwold or Lowestoft. However, the former had no free visitor berths and the Royal Norfolk and Suffolk Yacht Club at the latter was also full. So we decided to go into the river Ore instead. Timings at the bar (river, not pub) and *Marlin's* small engine meant we had to leave Woodbridge early but could not enter the Ore till 1300. So in the SW4 we had a pleasant sail round Roughs Tower and then tucked ourselves well in just north of the Ore bar for a few hours at anchor.

The Ore entrance, like the Deben, requires up to date knowledge; even at half-tide we only had 2.3m of water. We then sluiced up the Ore, which turns into the river Alde, all the way to Iken. Passing Aldeburgh was interesting, as shoals of racing craft came down on us and we then had to tack up Westrow Reach packed with moored boats. *Marlin* is not built for such gymnastics and there was a premium on sharp sheet handling.

The passage upriver to Iken is marked with withies to port and starboard. The trick is to start early, as the withies can go underwater at high tide. However, at the top end that means very little water to spare in the now tortuous channel. One reach is named Troublesome Reach, not without reason. We chose to anchor mid channel before we reached the most difficult bit, but even so we only just cleared the closest withies as we turned with the tide. 30nm under sail. A walk ashore in the evening made us rather regret not persevering, even though we were to see a Freedom 35 drawing 1.1m go aground at the top of the neap tide.

We left next morning in W5-6 and were followed by a small Thames barge under nearly full sail. It was a spectacular sight, as was the sight of the local racers (Dragons, Flying 15s and one-designs) with full sail up. Aldeburgh YC kindly provided showers and we carried on after lunch. With the tide against us and a falling wind, progress was slow even with the spinnaker up and we had to resort to the engine to get to the Butley river anchorage by 1700 in 6m. Butley is a top favourite anchorage of mine and

Mid channel at Iken



The joys of East Coast sailing



the dinghy trip up the river did not disappoint, with seals on the shore even five miles from the Ore's entrance and an avocet overhead. But the most spectacular sight was yet to come. As Harry was cooking and I had my gin in the cockpit, a flock of swallows and martins decided to use *Marlin* as a temporary roost. At one point we had over 50 birds preening themselves, some so close that I could touch them. Only a few had the classic swallow tails, so we think the rest must have been this year's broods on their way back to Africa. It was nature at its best.

After stopping for twelve hours the anchor came up at 0500 to time being at the Ore entrance at high water. The tide was still flooding and we ended up motor sailing against the wind. Even so, it took nearly two hours to cover less than three miles. Once out of the river at 0715 the wind got up and it turned into a stiff beat down to the River Colne in heavy rain showers and moderate to poor visibility. In such conditions the GPS was a godsend ... until the bracket it hinges on came loose as we gybed. For the first time in 15 years I was back to traditional navigation and buoy spotting. I rather enjoyed it.

We took a mooring off Pyefleet at 1535. I have a 1948 RCC chart of this area which showed depths of nine to 12ft (datum 1ft below mean spring tides), but modern charts show only between two and nine feet. It isn't falling sea levels, so it must be silting up. The ticket on the mooring said the overnight charge was £10, but when I rang up it turned out to be £15! A cold grey evening. 38nm covered.

Our penultimate day was the only lie-in of the week. We left under sail at 1120 with W3-5 forecast to catch the tide back across the Thames, along with a host of yachts doing the same. There was more of the F3 than F5 to start with and we had the spinnaker up on the way out to the Spitway. However, from there on it was on the wind the whole way and by the time we reached the Medway we were reefed with some rolls in the genoa. After 38nm we anchored again under sail at the top of

William Bourne

Stansgate Creek as dusk was falling before a final beat back to the mooring rounded off my second week.

There is no doubt that east coast sailing is challenging. There is usually a mud bank within 200 yds or less and the skipper can almost never relax. The tides and difficult entrances add to the difficulties, albeit made much easier by GPS and the availability of up-to-date chartlets on the internet. But the pleasure of watching sea level marshes slip past, of negotiating a narrow channel or tricky entrance, listening to the unforgettable sounds (and silences) and the famously big skies of the East coast are full compensation. Hoisting the spinnaker at some point during each one of four Thames crossings was a bonus.

My mother described the first week as her swansong at 88 years old, but it was a remarkable achievement at her age to come for four active days sailing in which we covered 138 miles. She played her full part, steering the boat under spinnaker, hauling up the mainsail and winching in the jib. I did let Freddy and Harry pull up the anchor, though.

