

A Long Drag Across the North Sea

Paul Heiney, Vice Commodore

I was looking forward to rekindling an old friendship with the North Sea. It was here, on the east coast, at North Fambridge on the River Crouch, where I had taught myself to sail and from where I set off in my 17 footer on those early brave voyages to exotic places such as Brightlingsea, and then, in an adventure of unprecedented proportions, even to the Walton Backwaters.

I happily sailed the east coast for three or four years, but Libby finally persuaded me that it was worth glancing at what the West had to offer, and she was right. After the Maplin Sands, the Buxey and the tidal torrent of the Wallet, everything down west seemed so majestic and inspiring, and easier. I missed the sinister names, though, like Fisherman's Gat, Swin Spitway and Black Deep - names overflowing with threat. Worse, you were never certain exactly where they were, or how deep they would be when you got there. Tricky places, like so many on the east coast.

Down west, I discovered that rocks stand still and even peer above the water at you (mostly), and could be approached with some certainty. Maurice Griffiths (RCC) was right when he wrote of the magic of the swatchways, but the tricks they perform can sometimes go horribly wrong on you. I wasn't sorry when my love of the east coast fizzled out. The affair was over.

Thirty years later I crossed the Thames Estuary again, in the dark, to bring *Wild Song* into Southwold Harbour in Suffolk, which is within walking distance of where we live. She was booked in for what I thought would be a 'wash and brush up', but it evolved over a very expensive winter into a complete removal of the keel and replacement of the engine, and my wallet has carried considerably less ballast since. Only by late April was she ready for the off once again, the destination being the Belgium Meet in Ostend.

Libby was with me, and James Morrow (RCC) who is an east coast sailor, so I had good company. Even so, with a decent forecast and a stout and revitalised little ship, I felt somewhat nervous. I remembered back to my early North Sea days and, while it was true that I had had some good times hereabouts, I had some hugely lousy ones too. The chop in the North Sea is short, the waves can be almost square in profile, you can

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bang into each of the them with the force of a runaway train hitting the buffers. And the water is depressing; there is no deep, ocean blue, which I have become used to in recent years, but instead a thick brown soup, which may well be rich in history but is hardly inspiring. Then there's the horizon, unbroken by any natural feature. I find some magic in the slow disappearance of distant hills and mountains, and the welcome they give when they first appear some hours before your arrival. On the east coast, though, there is only the misty outline of the cranes on Felixstowe Docks to wave you goodbye, and on the far side the only sight will be the belch of the oil refineries that string out along the coast of Europe.

We motored for the first few hours in light airs to make the Outer Gabbard, then dodged round the end of the new Sunk separation scheme which is the nearest any waterway in the world has got to a Spaghetti Junction, and then to the south east to position ourselves for a perpendicular crossing of the North Hinder shipping lane. By now I was remembering how time-consuming all these North Sea doglegs can be, and how easy those point and shoot passages from the West Country to France.

With our desired course now to the south east, it was inevitable that the breeze would get up from that very direction, and through the night it strengthened

only requiring us to take one reef, but sufficient to throw up those nasty little wind-against-tide chops that seem to be the first weapon of choice in the North Sea. One by one we were soon hunched over the sick bucket, though grateful for a small mercy as the wind shifted



a point or two to allow us to fetch the Ostend harbour mouth to arrive in time for breakfast. It was gratifying to see a decent fleet already gathered, for although it had been my initial idea that we should go to Ostend to remember those members of the Club who served and were lost in World

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War I, I was far from certain how many members might feel the same about it as I did. In the end, the idea paid off. This was in no small part due to the organisational skills of Stephen Lennane (RCC) who carried the considerable administrative burden. It was a relief to see the obvious tension on his face drain away as the weekend progressed.

And then it was time to face the North Sea again. The demands of work had forced Libby to return early and so it was left to me and James to make the passage. Twelve hours before departure I made the mistake of getting out my phone and looking at the GRIBs which showed the wind was shifting relentlessly into the north-east, our desired course. A headwind one way is an inconvenience, but to suffer one both ways seemed like malice on the part of someone, probably the North Sea.

Tinfish, David and Jane Russell (RCC), left at some ridiculously early hour, but this ship prefers a good cup of continental coffee ashore and a properly baked croissant before departure, so it was mid-morning when the lines were dropped and with one reef we faced the north east wind, bound for Southwold once again.

Somewhere off the West Hinder the wind went mercifully round to the east, just a little, but enough to lift the spirits and enable us to make progress. Strangely, it is on short hops like these that I find headwinds most frustrating. On an ocean you take what you're given in the safe knowledge that within the next 36 hours you'll have something different, but when the distances are short you know that this is how things are going to be till you get there, and it can dull the spirits.

By dusk we were more than halfway across, had crossed the North Hinder traffic lane and were making our way back up the Outer Gabbard. By now the wind was failing and the engine was on, motor-sailing against the foul tide, the progress still good, and it was clear we would be off Southwold far too early to get through the shallow entrance. How foolish to allow such a thought to enter my head.

Supper was taken as the costly but steady drone of the brand new engine drove us onwards. And then, round about coffee time, it stopped. Dead. It didn't cough or splutter, or offer any of those signs that a dying engine usually makes; it just stopped. I put it in neutral, turned the key, and she burst into life. Good. Then I slid her back into gear again, and she froze once more. Not so good. I looked over the side. We were trailing a long length of blue, luminous fishing net, as long as the boat and in other circumstances quite a pretty sight as the blue strands wafted in the sunset. There was clearly no way of removing it, despite a verbal outburst at the uselessness of the rope cutter that had just been expensively installed.

We bore away to see what kind of course we could make and thought, with the help of the turning tide we might make it to Harwich. Like a trawler now, we dragged this net behind us and as the hours passed the

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course fell away and with a wind-farm between us and our destination we undertook yet another frustrating diversion. The hours ticked by. We were down to less than 2 knots towards our destination. There was no possibility of beating against the ebb tide in the river Orwell, where Levington Marina would give us refuge, so by dawn we anchored off the Pye End buoy and grabbed some sleep while the tide turned.



The author and his trawl

The Pye End buoy, which marks the start of the channel to the Walton Backwaters, is famously a difficult buoy to spot and I remarked to James, over coffee a couple of hours later, that it had done its disappearing trick again. And it had. We were adrift, anchor dragging as the tide caught hold of the drogue-like mass of netting attached to the prop. We were heading speedily for the vast shoal to the south of us. James had the mainsail up faster than a rocket could

have lifted it. The yankee exploded from the furler and the helm went up to gather way. There was now less than the thickness of a fiver between the keel and the hard sand beneath. I put the helm over and, by great fortune, she tacked and we were able to sail into deeper water. That felt good. We eventually picked up a mooring under sail and awaited rescue by the marina launch.

On lifting, it became clear that what we had been dragging was not just any old piece of net but a major chunk of the tool of a trawlerman's trade. In fact, when it came time to cut it free a crowd gathered to marvel at the sight of it. It hung from the propellor as long as a bride's train, and the entire mass took two big blokes to lift it.

I sailed back to Southwold a couple of days later and decided that it was time to close the book on the North Sea for good. It was trying to tell me something. When I left a couple of weeks later, I turned sharp left at the harbour mouth, bound for Iceland, intent on putting the Thames Estuary behind me forever.

To be continued.