

## IT'S ALL TIMS' FAULT REALLY

It seemed like an interesting story to tell. After three days anchored at Shipstal Point in Poole harbour, enjoying the bird and wildlife sanctuary at Arne, it was time to head out. There is not a lot of water in the Wych Channel at the best of times so I always head in and out at the top of the tide, using the start of the ebb to head off for the next destination. With hot water now available my crew was looking forward to a shower when I cut the last corner on departure and promptly ran into the soft ooze at the edge of the channel.

I was not sure whether the look on my crews face was because she had just got into the shower or because my request for her body being needed to swing out on the boom, to lean the boat over, implied an excess of body mass! This tactic failed miserably but once she had covered her dignity and I'd convinced her to lie in the deployed Genoa we broke the suction of the mud and managed to power the keel out of the mud, heading back into the channel before the tide fell too far to cause an embarrassing situation developing into a real drama.

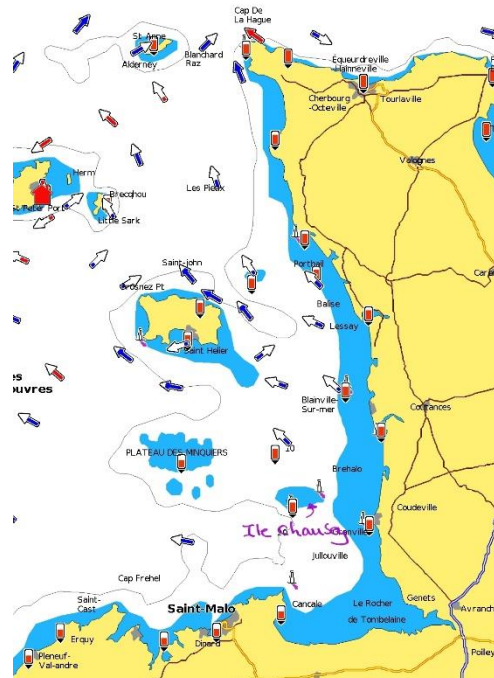


Wych Channel in Poole Harbour

I was retelling the story to my very experienced sailing friend, Tim, who promptly told me that running aground and getting off again unaided does not count as a grounding. Add this thought to the story from Risto, the builder of my yacht (a fin keeled Degero 331 drawing 1.55 metres) about a sister vessel that had hit rocks in Sweden at over 7 knots, which on lift out for examination only needed the lead keel reshaping and the sealant between the keel and the hull stub replacing, and I started to develop a more relaxed attitude to touching bottom.

Obviously this all depends on the type of seabed and I still maintain an aversion to rocks but having adopted the idea that boat speed in knots should never exceed twice the depth in meters I no longer worry about shallow creeks and mudflats. So here's a short resume of (some of) my 2018 sailing season where the above strategy helped reduce the usual worries when exploring new sailing grounds.

The first time I made good use of the shallows was whilst visiting Ile Chausey, a group of islands 15 nm NE of St Malo. The almanac shows visitor moorings available in 3 metres of water however, on arrival this area was occupied by local boats and the visitor buoys were now located 200 metres NW on a drying sand bank. I motored around and calculated that I should be OK for one day but I'd probably ground at LW in a couple of days as springs approached. Finding the deepest area I moored up, lying to one buoy rather than securing fore and aft as advised in the book and in the office on the slip where donations can be made for use of the buoys.

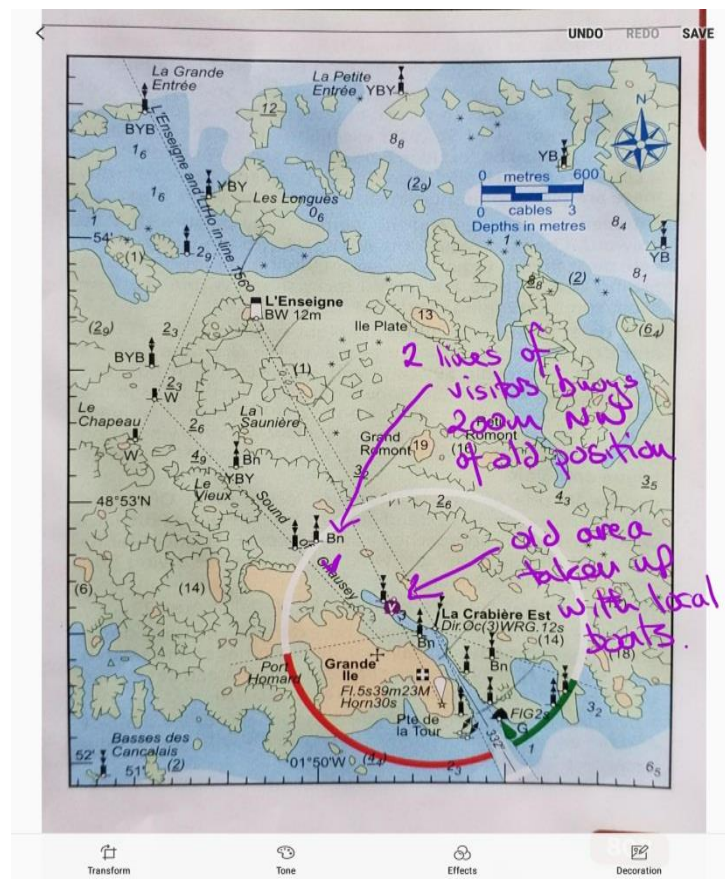


Ile Chausey – the southernmost Channel Island

As it was early in the season and the only other visitors were a few day boats out of Granville, staying for lunch before returning in the strong NE's that had been blowing constantly for a few days, I would not be preventing others from using the buoys. It also gave me a more comfortable stay, unlike an open day boat that was tied fore and aft and was

heeling markedly in the strong breeze, shipping water as the waves splashed up her hull at the top of the tide.

I contemplated anchoring in the bay to the south but boats already there were rolling around in the swell so taking note of the depth under the keel I calculated that I would probably only be aground for an hour either side of the lowest tide on the day before I planned to depart and with no tide running, and protection from the exposed rocks to the east, decided to stay put and let Touchdown settle. If she did fall over I doubted that she would heel very far. With a constant breeze she settled on her keel



The amendment submitted to the almanac editor

and exposed her hull allowing me to scrape her waterline of some weed that had accumulated before I went off in the dinghy to measure the lowest depth in the visitor's moorings so I could send in an amendment for the almanac. Two hours later order was resumed and Touchdown was back afloat none the worse for her two hours of partially drying out at a buoy.

The next grounding was not so well thought out. I was supposed to be making passage from Hornfleur up Channel but after taking the last of the ebb out of the Seine I rounded the corner as the flood started to pick up and headed into a stiff Nor'easterley that was building as the afternoon sea breeze developed. This made for an uncomfortable ride and so I elected to divert into Le Havre. I'd made a note of needing to avoid the main channel used by the

regular commercial traffic so stuck to the shallows, quite content with little depth of water under the keel on a rising tide, as several large cargo vessels and a ferry headed into port.

Crossing the main channel at the harbour entrance I dropped the sails in the protection of the main marina wall and headed into the marina where I was not surprised to see several other boats from Hornfleur that had also diverted in, rather than battle up Channel against the stiff breeze.

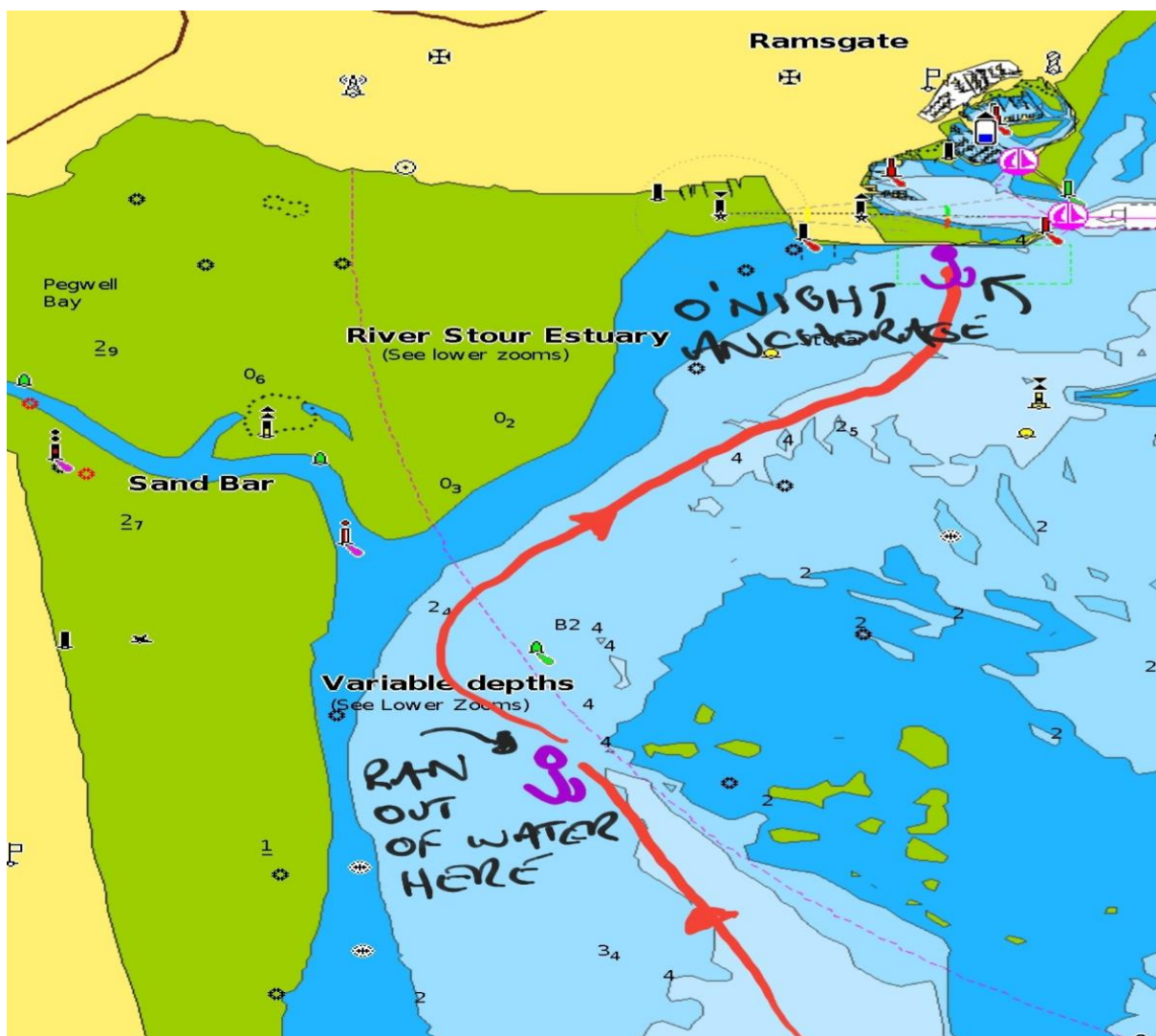
Hoping to catch the early Channel flood I was up with the sun and heading out as the day burst. Whilst hoisting the main just outside the marina the boat promptly stopped. Looking across to the sea wall I could see a large slope of mud that had built up on the corner and I'd managed to catch it as I tried to stay close in away from the main channel that was presently occupied by a dredger, which obviously never worked close in to the sea walls. Backing out I headed off, suitably annoyed that I had not set my depth alarm but glad that the French mud was not as sticky as that in Poole harbour!





## Le Havre harbour entrance

I was supposed to be heading over to Holland but the real world required me to stay in England for a while and so I headed over to the south coast and beat against the easterlies hoping to explore the Deben and Oare rivers that I had only seen previously from shore. I made good time past Dover and headed against the first of the ebb (or was it the flood? it all gets a bit confusing round there) for Ramsgate. With a falling tide I knew that it would be tight making port as the foul tide built against me but not wanting to head out into deep water, and the stronger counter current, I stayed inshore of the Goodwin Sands where the chart showed enough depth to get through.



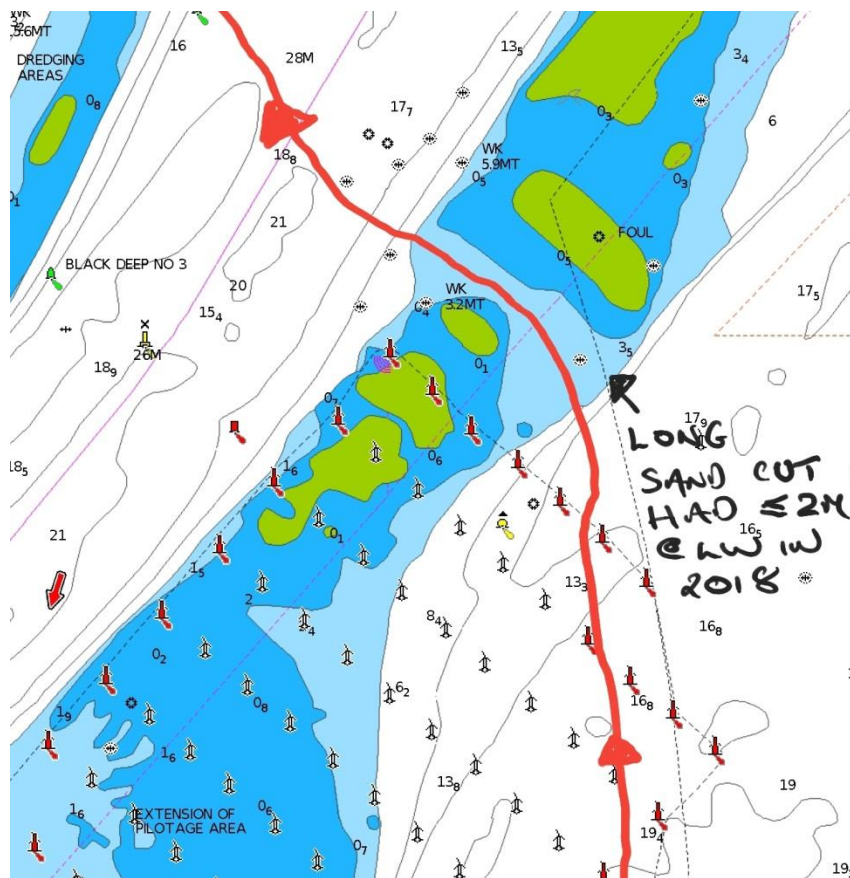
Hoodwink Sands south of Ramsgate are renowned for shifting

However, as the displayed depth reduced towards zero I slowed down and about a mile south of the harbour I decided to anchor and have an early dinner as the tide fell away. At least the sands were taking most of the weather as the seas broke half a mile to the east and I sat in relative calm in a maelstrom of turbulent but flat water. Whilst sat in the cockpit enjoying my

meal a couple of motor gliders buzzed overhead, no doubt curious about a yacht parked offshore in the shallows. More usefully a couple of small fishing boats headed up the coast inshore of me and turned around what looked like a pot marker before heading for Ramsgate.

Although they would draw less than me I decided that the locals probably know where the deepest water is and weighed anchor and headed over to follow in their wake. Sure enough the shifting sands had created a deeper channel inshore and I headed towards Ramsgate. The delayed arrival had the added bonus of allowing the strong East'ly breeze to moderate and the seas to flatten so rather than head into port I anchored to the south of the breakwater and had a relatively quiet night, only aware of the noise from the revellers ashore as I got up to check the anchor as the tide turned in the early morning.

The planning for the next day, aiming for the Walton Backwaters, had filled my thoughts for some time. Crossing the Thames with its associated windfarms, avoid areas, heavy shipping and shifting sands seemed like a lot of hassle but taking note of, but ignoring, most of the recommended tracks I headed straight for the Thames Array wind farm at Knock Deep to make best use of the tidal flows through the numerous channels. I planned on crossing Long Sands at a recognised cut which unfortunately was marked as having less water reported in 2016 than the 2 metres marked on the chart.

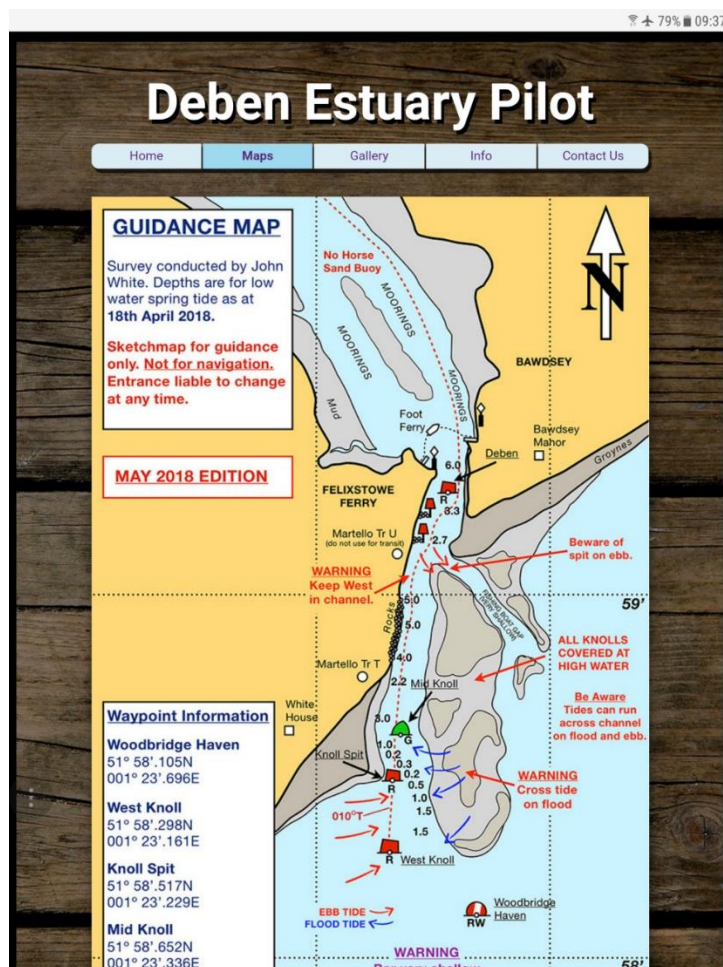


Long Sand Cut above the Thames Array

This was not very inspiring, especially on a falling tide but as it would save me over an hour in transit time I considered it worth testing the water so to speak. Cutting corners through the wind farm to save more time I slowed down in the shallows and noted a metre of water at low tide so just as well I had arrived several hours beforehand. Unfortunately I was not confident to enter the Walton River just before LW and instead opted for the easier option of anchoring in the River Stour to enjoy a couple of days of peace up river from the ferry and container terminals.

Later in the week I planned on going ashore to explore Mistley at HW but getting there at 10am with no wind and the air temperature already rising through 33°C it was not going to be a pleasant experience ashore so opted to head out and make for the Deben. As I drifted out a larger yacht ahead called port control for permission to leave and was told to hold position as a Very Large Cargo Carrier (VLCC) was preparing to leave. Deciding to carry on and stay in the preferred yacht channel, even though this would add extra time to my journey, I was leaving the river as the VLCC was still preparing to leave over an hour later. I cut across the main channel and headed into the shallows to keep clear of the commercial traffic but picked up a counter current that slowed my progress even further. I was now looking at arriving at the Deben entrance later than expected (the book recommends arriving after half rising tide) with a falling tide but my calculations showed sufficient water if I did not delay.

Approaching the shallows in the entrance to the river the strong counter current coupled with the strong East'ly wind was not making for a comfortable ride. I considered heading back to the Stour but thought I'd "give it a go" and pressed on. The shallowest part is just outside the river entrance and as the depth sounder headed to zero once again the ground speed dropped markedly as the ebb built against me. However, with a zero depth reading on the log I was still making way over the ground. With the water down-current of the boat turning a very sandy brown colour I decided that the strong cross flow was scouring the sand from under the keel as I made way slowly into the river. This would be fine so long as the sand remained loose but I had to bear in mind that getting stuck on the sand bar with another couple of hours to go to LW would not be very comfortable given the strong current and the onshore wind.



River Deben advice can be downloaded at [www.debenestuarypilot.co.uk](http://www.debenestuarypilot.co.uk)

I was soon into deeper water but still made slow progress until well past the foot ferry and the ebb reduced to a manageable 3knots, the advice to enter on a rising tide just before HW is well made! Subsequently I was given the latest survey map from April 2018 which showed less water than my chart and from which I worked out that I was too far over, the counter current and strong East'ly wind pushing the channel marks further west so I was not following the (relatively) deepest channel. As it says, the chartlet is only a guide and subject to change.

The final use of shallows was planned in a way. I was still in the Deben when heavy thunderstorms were forecast. The east coast rivers have several anchorages available but also local practice allows the use of unoccupied mooring buoys so long as you are prepared to move should the owner return. I was anchored on a bend in the river on the east side which was fine with the prevailing East'ly winds but with thunderstorms appearing from the west and numerous shifts in the forecast wind I was going to be on a lee shore. I decided that the boat would be better sitting to a secure anchor with the keel in the soft mud as the storms passed overhead rather than tied to an unknown buoy so stayed put for the ensuing light show. I removed all my electrical components and placed them in the oven for safety.



The storm clouds brought darkness at 6pm with the lightening returning sporadic moments of daylight that coalesced into longer periods of brightness. However, with increasing winds several boats decided to up anchor and head off downriver but with the heavy rain reducing visibility to a few metres I was glad that I was parked in the shallows well clear of any passing traffic that was heading off with the crews getting a drenching as they tried to make way in the challenging conditions. A few hours later the thunderstorms diminished and normality returned, Touchdown rising out of her mud berth and swinging to the flood tide for a peaceful night.

Having learnt my lesson I left the Deben at half Ebb and worked against the current to enter the Walton Backwaters on a rising tide, noting the depths so I could make best use of the currents when departing later for the south. Confident that I now had a good working knowledge of the soundings in the Walton Channel, I used the last of the ebb to depart a few days later for an easy sail, on a rising tide, to the River Colne. This has a deep approach channel and makes a good refuge without having to worry about available depth of water.



My route across the Thames to the Swale

As the East Coast Branch Chairman said in the RNSA winter 2012 “our sand banks are more forgiving than rocks in the south west” but I still wanted to avoid running aground if I could and so proceeded south across the Thames, passing through Wallet Spitway at a couple of knots over the ground at LW. I was hoping to follow a large motorboat through, thinking that he would leave a decent trough in the sand if it was that shallow but he kept station on me, not accelerating up to planing speed until well back into deeper water. I was prepared to anchor if needed, to await the rising tide that would push me south towards The Swale however, this was not required.

Leaving the Swale and heading south past Ramsgate it was prudent to stay in the deep water East of the Goodwin Sands to use the current pushing me south. The tidal strategy further West demands a decent groundspeed to avoid counter currents at the tidal gates at Dungeness and Beachy Head but at least there were no longer shifting sands to worry about. The biggest problem now was working out where I could find a decent anchorage as the prevailing Sou’westerly had kicked back in and once again I was close hauled with wind over tide for the trip down Channel – but that's the joy of sailing!