

## A weekend up the London River

### The changing moods of the Thames

For some years my friends Rick and Nick have managed to get a long weekend's sailing on the east coast. Last year we went from the Orwell to Walton Backwaters via West Mersea and had a great time. This year we wanted more of a challenge so whilst planning this year's trip over pints of ale in our local in East London, I suggested we do the London River. This was a trip I had done 20 years previously and was still a vivid memory. But that was a part of a week's cruise – could it be done in 4 days? Consulting tide tables and charts the answer was yes, just.

We were to use my club's boat Explorer a Contessa 32. My own boat has been in Greece for the last 7 years – excellent for sailing in school holidays but not much use for this trip. My membership of the Kessingland Sea Sailing Club offers me a Contessa 32 based at Suffolk Yacht Harbour. They also have a Barvaria 40 in Turkey. It provides a cost effective way of getting afloat indeed the whole 4 days cost me only £87 in boat fees.

Rick and Nick had work commitments so we left in the evening loaded with bags and provisions including a pre-cooked chicken curry I had made earlier. Thunder and lightning accompanied our journey up the A12 and the portents were not good. On arrival, it had all cleared up and soon we were settled into our curry supplemented afterwards by Rick's malt whiskey. There is something that happens when you get on board for the first night, all shore based cares fade away and the focus is solely on the boat, its preparation and safe navigation.

The next day tides allowed us to have a civilised departure at 9am. We motor sailed through Harwich harbour with a stream of boats and out into a sunny seascape. At Languard point the convoy of boats separated some down the Wallet others to the Deben but we alone stood out offshore. At that moment I realised what I had undertaken to do. The wind was light and in the right direction but our progress was too slow. We wanted to be at the Barrow Deep at low water, - the engine had to go on again. The plan was to sound our way round the northern end of the Gunfleet sand. Although the breaking waves on the sands were a good distance off to starboard they still looked ugly and the suddenness of the shallowing had our hearts in our mouths until we saw a distinct line in the water were brown turned to blue and we were able to turn into the Barrow Deep. It was a reminder that a good plan at the pub table can feel very different in execution, even in these benign conditions.



Indeed these conditions were still too benign and even with a strong tide with us we were falling behind our schedule and not wishing to motor sail the whole way so we resolved to make a decision whether or not to continue when we got to the Spitway. Meanwhile we soporifically succumbed to sun, sea and sandwiches. By 3pm there was little chance of us getting to the Thames before the turn of the tide so with a heavy heart we made our way towards the Spitway and Brightlingsea.

Then several things happened at once, we could not see the safe-water buoys marking the Spitway at the end of the wind farm, plotting our position we discovered that our route took us onto a sandbank and then the squall that had been on the western horizon for ages hit us like a train. We promptly did a 180 degree turn and shortly afterwards on reaching deep water hove-to to consider our options. The wind was now a good F5 out of the west – clearly Brightlingsea and all the east coast was not viable even if we could find the Spitway. Heading home was possible but with 3 hours of tide against us – a demoralising prospect so we took in a double reef and headed back down the Barrow Deep making excellent time despite having lost an hour messing about off the Gunfleet wind farm.



The wind steadied but stayed strong, we zipped down the coast 6-7 kts SOG. The sunset was spectacular and highlighted the sea forts out in the estuary. It felt as if we were a long way from anywhere. By the time we got to Yantlett reach in the Thames, it was dark and started to rain. We started along Sea Reach by now the tide had turned foul. Further progress was going to be slow so I found a suitable anchorage just west of the Shoebury buoy (green) so by 9pm we had anchored in 10m just outside on the channel to Leigh on Sea and outside the firing range ( just in case). We could not see the chain markers clearly so I made sure we had plenty chain down, something the crew did not thank me for next morning. There was plenty swinging room about 1.5 miles to the nearest shore. Dinner was egg fried rice and left overs, wine and a good tot of rum.

It was a quiet night and a beautiful view over the estuary to port, the ships in the channel and the Kent shore. The lights of Southend on the starboard side flashing away – glad that they were more than a mile away. One of the biggest changes since doing this trip 20 years ago are the profusion of

red lights marking the wind farms winking away on the horizon, to me, they are a fascination and a wonder.

Next morning started early, 5am saw us creeping back over the shallows to the main channel. The dawn was pink and fresh with no wind; pockets of mist lay across the water in patches. As Canvey Island slipped by the channel narrowed and the Kent shore came closer looking very rural as opposed to the Essex shore which is dominated by the huge new container port.

By 8-30 we had made our way out of sea reach passed Mucking Flats and on to Gravesend. HW was 11-00 and we already had doubts we may not make our destination, that mecca of all things nautical Limehouse marina and a plan B was required. Meanwhile the river was in transition from the almost eerie and mystical sea reach at dawn to a greyer Gravesend as a Saturday morning got underway. The river got busier, not just shipping up and down but boats plying their way in all directions. The magnificent forts, Coal House and Tilbury still looked menacing from the river. The London Cruise terminal looking like a redundant film set left over from the making of Titanic. Has it got a preservation order is it just neglected?

Tilbury came into view and the huge cranes dwarfed us. Here we were approached by a black rib with black uniformed men, It was the UK Boarder Force, checking us out. We slid past Grays as our last hope that the incoming tide would accelerate us up the river was beginning to fade. We were passed by 2 warships, we think coming from an arms fair at the Excel exhibition centre.

The industrial scenery continued until we passed under the QE2 Bridge and shortly after passing the RO-RO terminal on the North bank the mood changed again, this time into open country. Passing by Erith and on to Rainham marshes the river became quiet and we no longer were stalked by huge ships. The sun made a feeble appearance and the scene of tranquil country would have been complete if not for the large land fill site which, being up wind of us, made its presence felt. The river too began to smell different, not unpleasant but vaguely soapy.



The next bend took us in to a scene of industrial decline, the Ford factory still magnificent, but a fraction of the size it once was, alongside there were plenty of spare brown field sites. By now it was 10-am and time for coffee and reality check. With 1 hour of tide we were not going to make Limehouse, and the thought of gunning the engine for 2 hours so to make 2 kts SOG did not appeal so we reluctantly cancelled our booking at Limehouse, and phoned Gallions Point marina instead. I had noted in the almanac that we needed to report to the London VTS at a certain point, but Rick saw a large warning sign on the south bank. We could not read it even with binoculars, so as there were no craft on the river, we crossed to read it [mistake 1].

It was a warning to contact the VTS so that's what I did. Immediately they requested that I get back on the right side of the river, I said of course but there is nothing on the river and we only crossed to read the notice [mistake 2]. This did not go down well and the VTS operator, warming to his theme asked if I would drive on the wrong side of the road ( In fact I would if there was reason to and no traffic coming but by now I was wising up) – I take your point! I said teeth clenching, He then asked if I had reserved a place at Gallions reach, further teeth clenching, affirmative! I said. He then gave me a stream of data about high and low water, by now teeth clenched and aching. Finally obviously convinced I was a complete idiot, suggested that if I wanted to save diesel I should take the flood up the river and the Ebb down. By now I was seeing a funnier side of this exchange and thanked him most profusely for his help and assistance. I am extremely glad I used a mobile phone rather than the radio so the whole embarrassing encounter was at least done in private!

The welcome at Gallions Point marina was very friendly. Run I think, by father and son who guided us through the locking in process and showed us where to tie up. The visitors pontoon was filled with various craft in a varying states of refurbishment, the toilets and showers were basic but adequate and the whole ambience was of a kind of small boat yard once common on the east coast but a surprise in the glass and concrete of modern docklands. We loved it. Situated at the bottom of the City Airport runway several planes came in at what seemed mast height, however they mysteriously stopped at about 3pm and we were undisturbed for the rest of our stay.



Seeing Lowestoft on the stern of the boat we were asked if we live there- no! we said we live 5 miles up the road, that caused some consternation and a bit of explaining. We were charged £15 per night and £10 for locks – Diesel was brought by can at a very favourable rate compared with marina prices. We settled into lunch which consisted of beer and crisps followed by more beer and crisps with cheese sandwiches as an afterthought. Sleep was a priority so the afternoon slipped by pleasantly.

Rick's wife and family were visiting in the evening so after showing them round the boat set off across some waste land to the pub. It was one of those enormous Edwardian pubs clearly built in the heyday of the docks but now surrounded by expensive flats. It had fine dining on the upper floors but we went for the bar food which was certainly good enough for us.

Making our way back we tried to imagine what it would have been like when the docks were at their prime with thousands of men coming in and out at all hours and the streets teeming with goods and people. No doubt a shady deal or two was done.

The night was quiet and the tides gave us another civilised start so after a proper cooked breakfast we locked out at 10-00 and heading up stream. Contact with the VTS was straight forward and we rounded the corner to find the Thames Barrier ahead with the Woolwich Ferry plying its way across the river. Traffic was building and the Thames took on a purposefulness which put us on our guard. The Emirates cable car signalled the start of another phase of the river with the O2 dome dominating the water and the first of the fast catamaran ferries shot by. The sharp turn south to Greenwich was a curiously quiet stretch of water on one side beautiful houses on the isle of dogs reminiscent of Dutch houses and on the other an industrial estate on the Greenwich side.



I knew from my previous trip that Greenwich was likely to be the high light and even though I am familiar with this area, it still made my spine tingle to be passing these historic sites on your own boat. Some people at Island Gardens on the Isle of Dogs, waved to us which cheered us up.



By now something else had happened, beyond Deptford the river narrows and the banks are sheer concrete or brick so the wash from all the passing craft was reflected back setting up a nasty chop which in places was decidedly rough. So it was an unpleasant run up past Limehouse and past the famous landmark pubs but in compensation the sun came out. The river got busier and choppier as we approached Tower Bridge, which raised as we approached – in our honour? Sadly no – a large yacht coming down from what used to be known as the Pool of London. We turned and took loads of photos with Tower Bridge in the background – which we could not resist texting to our families and friends. Mission accomplished!



So in time honoured fashion we marked the occasion by putting the kettle on and breaking out the chocolate biscuits. We also noticed that although the tide had half an hour of flood left we were shooting down river with the current. So fast in fact that we were doing 6kts SOG and the land marks slid by quickly soon we were back in Greenwich.



Nick realised that it was near 1pm and the red ball on the top of the observatory was due to be raised and dropped so we took up our station on the north half of the river, slowly motoring into the current and waited. We waited until we could wait no longer – had we blinked and missed it or perhaps they did not do it on a Sunday? In any event when we were sure that it was well past 1pm we turned again and continued back down the river at considerable speed. The choppiness was left behind and the Barrier, Dome and Gallions point all flew by. Lunch was taken in the rural part between Rainham and the QE2 Bridge. We saw a lump on the bank and realised too late that it was not a tyre but a seal, but we were going too fast to get a photo. The late afternoon found us racing past Tilbury and Gravesend, which looked far more interesting than it did the previous day. After Lower hope reach we turned east and turned the motor off. A wonderful silence descended. The pace slowed as the tide turned and we had an idyllic sail along Sea Reach. The late afternoon sun was warm and a gentle breeze took us along the Kent shore at a stately 1.5 kts.

The plan was to reach the south end of Barrow Deep at next HW so to maximise the effect up the coast and then take the incoming flood up the Orwell. So we had 11 miles to cover in 6 hours or so 1.5 kts was fine. We relaxed as we kept to 3-5m depth and outside of the channel. The Kent countryside looked a picture. Green fields with sheep grazing in the distance we could have been on any of the rural rivers in Essex or Suffolk (so long as we looked south and didn't hear the changing of the container port on the north bank). Suddenly we came upon a seal and 2 pups lying on the mud 20yds away and at this speed plenty of chance for photos. After that excitement and whilst things were calm we heated the precooked Bolognese and allowed ourselves a small glass of red.



Darkness fell and as the river widened I felt less happy about being far away from the channel so we kept close to but outside of the channel even though this meant going against a stronger tide. The wind dropped and the motor put back on. I went below to check the chart and on returning to the companion way to speak to Nick at the helm my blood froze a huge ship was bearing down on us outside the channel and going so fast I had time only to say "hold your course". It passed us on the starboard side at about 20 kts and was gone.

As we reached the end of Sea reach a useful wind picked up from the west so we were able to sail against the last of the tide, crossing the channel and passing the W Oase buoy and beginning our passage up Barrow Deep just on time.

It was a beautiful, clear, moonless night and the stars were magnificent. We headed for the first waypoint, thankfully that we chose cardinal buoys as our waypoints, because the whole sea was covered in red lights from the wind farms. Sometimes flashing in unison and sometimes in a pattern, It was almost as spectacular as the stars, but did make seeing port navigation buoys more difficult to spot.

At some point it clouded over and the wind increased. At midnight we started a formal watch system 1 asleep and the other 2 taking half hour turns on the helm. At 2am at the change of watch the wind was now a steady F5/6 we were doing 8kts SOG. So I took the opportunity of all hands being on deck to take in 2 reefs in the main and half the genoa. When we resumed we were still doing 6Kts.

We plunged on through the night, the buoys appeared when and where they should and progress was good, in fact too good. At the 4am change of watch were at the top of Barrow Deep an hour earlier than planned. We decided to hove to and have coffee, breakfast and consider options. Looking at the chart and the wind direction NW6 getting North West into Harwich harbour avoiding the sand banks, as it was now low water was going to be tricky. We agreed to go as far north as we could then at 51degree 51 minutes tack in and try to make the Medusa buoy. But here I made a mistake. If I had looked at a tide atlas I would have seen that the last of the ebb would have helped



us in. We wasted an hour waiting for the tide to turn only to find that we could not fetch Medusa and the tide was pushing us south.

Realising my error there was nothing to be done until we had made sufficient westing to clear sand banks to the north but after that we tacked but needed the engine to counter the tide. The effect of the tide lessened as its direction changed as we went north from ahead to more beam on, helping us to keep our heading, the tide effect helped counter the leeway from the wind still NW6 and we made an almost straight line to our waypoint at Languard. I felt my mistake had been punished lightly but I felt bad about it all the same, but I was glad I swallowed my pride and resorted to the engine when my error became apparent, it helped us get to the channel and up the Orwell on the last of the flood.

After the thrashing we had received all night the shelter of Suffolk Yacht Harbour was almost balmy. Packing and cleaning all took time but I regretted not insisting that our driver Rick was sent to rest rather than clean. He got us home Ok thanks to cans of Red Bull! Another learning point for next time.

So we did the London River as the old bargemen called it. It's one river but many aspects and contrasting moods depending on which stretch of river we are in and the weather prevailing at the time. We enjoyed wide open sea, remote anchorage, rural scenes, industrial decay but also state of the art new ports, tourist areas and historic sites. All these aspects are quite different and changing, suddenly, often in just a bend of the river.

James Parnell

James Rick and Nick were sailing an Contessa 32 Explorer, owned by the Kessingland Sea Sailing Club. Their trip took place in Mid-September 2017