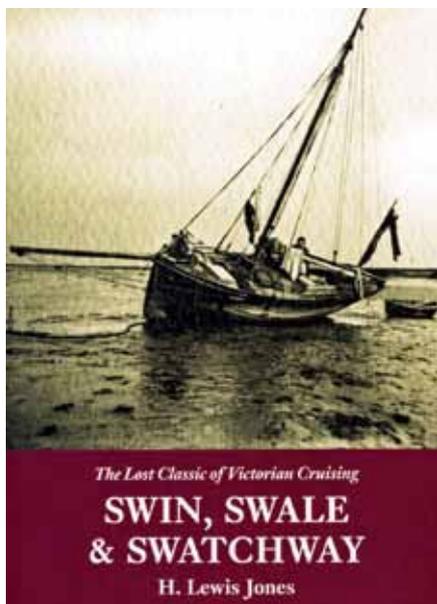


Book Review



Swin, Swale and Swatchway

(Cruises down the Thames, the Medway and the Essex rivers)

by H Lewis Jones

ISBN: 978-1-907206-30-6

First publ. 1892. Publ. by lodestarbooks.com, 2014

UK: £12 Europe: £13
Outside Europe: £15
216 x 156mm, 144 pages,
mono photos, map.
Softcover with sewn
binding, cover flaps and
matt lamination.

Reviewer: Keith Muscott

THE LAST DECADE OF THE 19TH CENTURY saw many young middle-class British men – and eventually women – joining the myriad of professional sailors, fishermen and longshoremen on the waters around our coasts, often to their irritation, or to be exploited by them financially, or to be genuinely helped by them: frequently a mixture of all these, as the events in this book sometimes show.

In the 1890s tales of amateur sailing enjoyed a surge of popularity which was to return to Britain at regular intervals over the years, as in the 1960s when sailing came within the grasp of all and even crossing the oceans under sail or oar became a common dream.

H. Lewis Jones and his sailing companion C.B. Lockwood, with Dr C.E. Shelly on occasion, were typical of those 19th century enthusiasts – young high-spirited graduates, who in their case were medical men.

The writing is light in tone, at times reminiscent of *Three Men in a Boat*, but that was published seven years later in 1889 and Lewis Jones is dealing with sterner stuff:

'The upper Thames is all very

well in its way, with its houseboats, water-parties, gaudy-coloured blazers, banjo-accompaniments, and such soft delights, but it is all tame when compared with the stirring incidents of salt-water sailing.'

Not that his humour isn't entertaining in itself. Early on, the author deprecates the tendency of professional men to dress down when they go to sea, and he quotes the example of a 'Master of Arts, or a LL.D., or something of that kind' (what else), who goes ashore in his scruff rig, carrying the ship's bucket to use as a shopping basket for strawberries, and calls at the Post Office to see if there are letters for him: "...and the good and kind postmistress handed him a postcard, saying, 'Shall I read it to you, my man?'"

But there is a lot more to the book than this. It is an entertaining social document that enlightens the reader on a number of levels. Many of the creeks and inlets of the Thames Estuary were virgin territory to these early amateurs, including Lewis Jones in his 3½-ton *Teal*, and it is strange to see him sounding his way nervously over now-familiar ground, wary of 'horses' (shoals) or desperately seeking local knowledge. He rubs up against

professionals who are often hostile, like the irascible oystermen who fiercely protect their patch, as they did against all-comers for a couple of hundred years. (It came as a surprise to me to learn that their oysters were not native, but imported from France then grown to maturity in the muddy Essex rivers.)

Then as now, finding a suitable berth for your boat in the Estuary was not easy. The railway was the only way to reach her, so a good cheap convenient service is the first consideration, followed by security: he had a friend who left his boat on the beach at Southend for an hour to find on his return that his mainsail had been stolen by 'loafers'. So the advantages of a place simply as a boat haven come low on the list.

He plumps for Leigh, as the Southend train, more reliable and less expensive than its natives, stops here at convenient times. Drawing only three feet, *Teal* has the luxury of being afloat for about three hours around high water, which may not sound so convenient, but she lies secure under the gaze of the Coastguard Watch House and the Ship Inn is close by for him to nip in and change his wet clothes – I've no idea what the present landlord would say about that, or whether he or she can still supply ginger beer to what the author judged then to be of champagne quality.

The Thames was polluted and smokily industrial in the 1890s. Up the river from Leigh the fish had all but disappeared, and the suspicion was growing that the sea might not after all be able to process all the sewage of London into fish food, a belief sustained by one Sir J.B. Lawes.

And there were worries about over-use of the estuary. Out from Leigh the creek runs into Hadleigh Ray, or The Ray, which was perceived to be silting up and becoming too weedy, possibly as a result of mussels being seeded along its edge, or perhaps because of a secondary creek that was reducing water flow. Lewis Jones fears that in a few more generations Leigh will be high and dry and her fishermen will have taken to farming.

Like most amateur sailors the

author is – fortunately for the reader – fascinated by the boats using the river and especially by the vessels employed by fishermen. In the case of Leigh these are Bawleys: clinker-built cutters of around twenty tons, drawing six feet, on which they can boil their shrimps under way.

The Bawleys have all but superseded the small Peter Boats, which he describes in detail, though they belong more properly to the Medway side. But there is too much work for the hufflers for their boats to disappear: '... very nice-looking tiny lugsail boats ... rigged with brown-tanned main and mizzen, the latter a tiny pocket handkerchief shipped on the rudder post. They are about 14ft long and built like barge's boats and belong to the hufflers ...' whose business was to assist barges through Rochester Bridge and make themselves useful around Chatham and Rochester.

Then there are the Oyster Boats, which were 'wonderfully handy' and picturesque, with yacht-like overhangs and high-peaked gaffs and 'a peculiarly Dutch look' under sail.

Dutch eel boats are sometimes found in Holehaven with live cargo (presumably kept in wet holds open to the sea), waiting for the chance to take it up river to Billingsgate, where the poisonous water would soon kill the eels if they arrived early and stayed long.

More dramatically, Holehaven harbours 'powder hulks', loaded with stores of gunpowder, gun cotton and 'blasting gelatine', each watched over by one man, who welcomes guests to brighten up his lonely existence. One such 'explosionist' always spoke very loudly, as if to make sure that his last words would be heard clearly as his cargo and guests went up.

So Lewis-Jones proceeds around the Estuary, and navigates through Swin, Swale and Swatchway, often covering the same ground as Tony Smith in *Sea-Country*, at one point following the same route into London via the River Lea (*sic*) and Bow Creek, but hearing the 'clank of the iron shipbuilding yards and seeing the masts of tall Australian clippers in the East India Dock.'

And he tells us that here, near

London, the '... air is full of the perfumes of gas and manure works and the river full of defunct dogs'.

The book is realistically warts and all, but it is mainly focused on the romance of sailing here, and the author conveys this without feeling the need to always wax lyrical – but when he does, it is often striking:

'... there comes a little draught of a land breeze making a ripple at the bows for a few minutes, and then slowly dying away into stillness again; or it freshens and the ropes flap in the nightwind against the mast pat-a-pat, pat-a-pat, which sailors call the sound of children's footsteps, and when the tide turns the slack anchor chain drags along the bottom ...'

Lewis Jones was not the first amateur to sail these waters and neither was the Hon. Roger North, who kept a little yacht in London in 1685, and from whose memoirs LJ quotes, but it is good to see his account once more in print so he can tell us what it felt like sailing the Thames Estuary 122 years and more ago. KM

Note: This chart is not taken from the book, but it is authentic, having been drawn around 1900. Anything changed, do you think ...?

