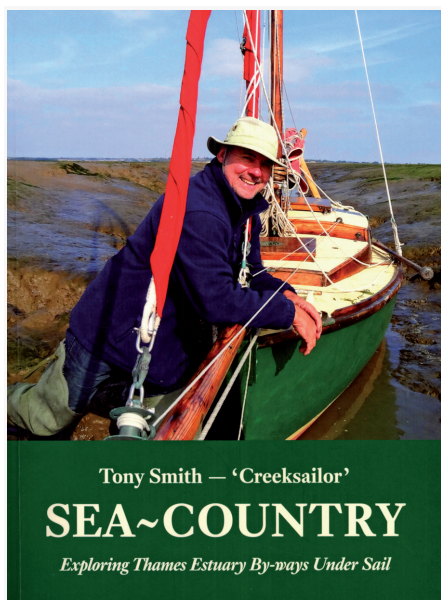


Book Review



Sea~Country

Exploring Thames Estuary
Byways Under Sail

by **Tony Smith**
(‘Creeksailor’)

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Reviewer: Keith Muscott

FOR DCA MEMBERS, THE MOST obvious fact about Tony Smith may be that Charles Stock passed on to him his little traditional cruiser *Shoal Waters*, which he built from a Fairey Falcon hull five decades plus two years ago, and then cruised the East Coast and Thames Estuary in her right up to his final illness. Or it may be recalled that Tony has maintained a popular online blog of his exploits in the same area, and now in the same boat.

This is another book which has sprung from sailing adventures related online, like Ben Crawshaw's *Catalan Castaway*; but *Sea-Country* does not betray its origins. Those who prefer a measured, methodical approach will like *Sea-Country*. This is not to say that Tony Smith's writing is at all predictable or uninteresting – far from it – as the great swathe of creeks and swathways he records captures the imagination of the reader on every page.

No, such variety needs a clear layout: hence the methodical approach. He begins by describing the charms of creek sailing in places that are more or less accessible from his mud berth in Goldhanger Creek off the River Blackwater.

Then he evokes the appeal of the miniature cruiser, amusingly tying in the attractions of a small cabin with the peculiarly British obsession with cramped garden sheds as places of refuge offering opportunities for self-expression.

But if small boats are a little like sheds, they actually travel much farther, opening up the prospect of minimal cruising as we all know it, which does not rely on the services of expensive marinas. Tony Smith conveys his passion for our kind of amphibious rambling with great conviction.

He proceeds to recount his favourite cruises: The Essex Loop, taking in the River Stort, the River Lee, Bow Locks and Bow Creek and the East Coast via the Thames, returning to Goldhanger Creek in seven days. Then there is Leigh Swath with the Crowstone, the River Roach with its history that encompasses oyster fishermen and the last service of FitzRoy's *Beagle*; followed by an unintended night passage when he misses the tide and takes the ground after visiting Johnny All Alone Creek, 33nm up the coast. Lion Creek, Yantlet Creek – the evocative names are

conjured and the places visited. He is not averse to leaving the boat to walk the six miles of The Broomway from Wakering Stairs to Fisherman's Head, or to take a closer look at what he calls 'The Wild Sea Coast' from Shoeburyness to Bradwell-juxta-Mare. His love of local history and geography illuminates the accounts.

On occasion he sails in other vessels, such as the Gravesend Bawley *Marigold*, moored at Maldon, or the Leigh Shrimper *Victorious*, or his own small 12ft home-built duck punt *Winkler*, with her single lugsail.

What more does a man need or want than to set a small sail and enjoy a cheerful brew, the writer muses, while singing snatches of *Haul Away Joe*. And he uses *Winkler* to visit my favourite of the places he describes – and perhaps his too, as it come right at the end of the book. This is Beaumont Quay, a backdoor route into Walton Backwaters.

The land around it is privately owned and access is impeded by a farm gate, but the walkers' gate beside it will admit the duck punt and the derelict quay is owned by the County Council, so it can be used without further let or hindrance.

It is made from stones taken from the old London Bridge, demolished after 600 years' service. The water level, four feet down, does not impede *Winkler* much more than a minute. Hard by are the bones of the old spritsail barge *Rose* – the place in total is a symbol for the enduring appeal of the East Coast.

Tony Smith's subject is not new. There is a long line of predecessors stretching back to Maurice Griffiths, the old Magician of the Swathways himself, and beyond; but this new title adds to that tradition and enhances it.

The typical reader? Both newcomers and experienced hands who seem never to tire of this 'sea-country'. It ends with the possibility of a sequel hanging in the air. My only quibble rests on the complete absence of charts, big or small – one heading every section would not have amounted to too many, in my opinion. Something to consider for next time? *KM*