

Smith and Jones Ride Out Once More, by Ted Jones

Ted enjoys a leisurely & long East Coast cruise in company with three trusty companions: two boats and one old mate ...

Over the course of the years fellow member Dave Smith and I have become good friends. His boat, a Skipper 17 called *Mischief*, and *The Genie*, my Sunspot 15, are berthed near each other at the Walton Marina, and they sail in company pretty well. Sometimes Dave will outsail me while in other weather conditions *The Genie* will pull out ahead. We don't let the gap between us grow too big and we keep in touch with PMRs, tuned to 2.34. But above all else, we both enjoy actually sailing no matter what the difficulties, and both hate motoring. This May we had a week together to visit some old haunts among the Essex rivers.

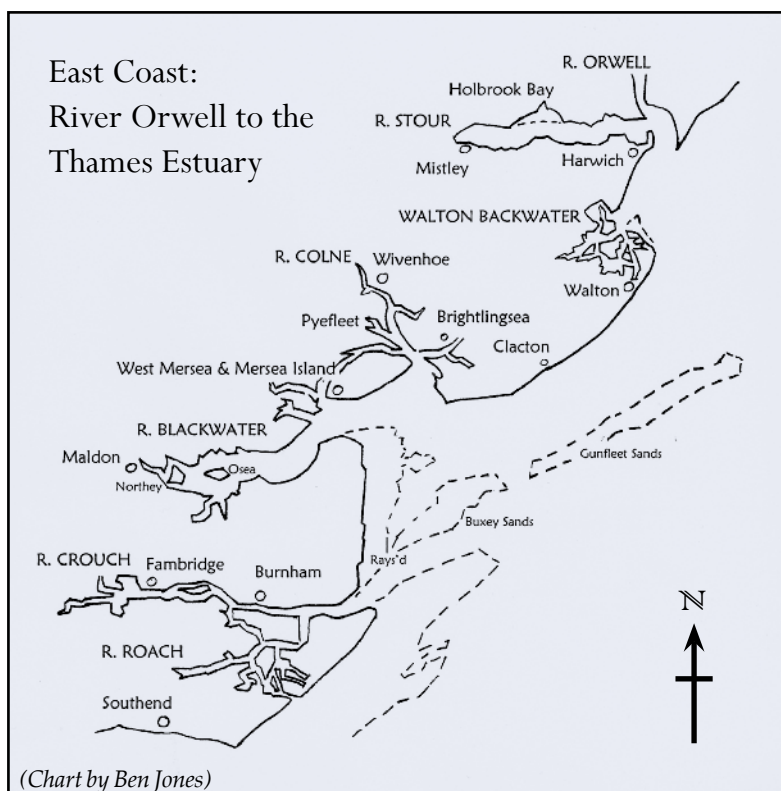
By the time we'd both arrived on Saturday, stowed gear and made ready, it was too late to set off immediately. Consequently, we made do with a short, warm-up sail in the Backwaters themselves, casting off from our berths at 1500h and anchoring for the night at 1740h in a good position to tackle the long trip down the Wallet channel the following day.

0630h on the Sunday saw us both under way, catching the last hour or so of the north-going ebb. The breeze was a gentle one from the west, which rose nicely as the morning wore on.

We negotiated our way across that long finger of sand known as the Pye, and when we were once again in deeper water, gybed south to round the Naze headland and pass the seaside town of Walton itself, with its long pier, at 0810h.

We came close on the wind, sailing southwest towards an extensive new wind farm sited on the Gunfleet Sands. Each turbine looks big even from a distance. Get nearer and the appropriate word changes to 'large', while nearer still and 'huge' seems better. As you finally get really close,

'enormous' is definitely the word. Nearer still and the description becomes unprintable! I didn't fully appreciate their size until I spotted the port-hand Wallet No 4 buoy smack in the middle of the field. Small coasters use this channel on their way down towards the Crouch or the Thames and therefore the channel must go between the turbines. I can't believe it will be left like this and would expect the buoy to be moved soon. Accidents do happen and the prospect of an engine failure in the middle of the farm would terrify me as a coasting skipper. I sailed in among the windmills only as far as the buoy and began to feel like a Lilliputian among a wading army of gesticulating Gullivers. Then we tacked over and headed NW to the River Colne. Once inside, we bore away towards Wivenhoe in the north



On our way, we dipped into the Pyefleet, a beautiful and lonely channel where we had anchored many times, tacking up as far as possible before turning back. And here I acquired my first red face of the trip by going aground as I turned. It didn't take long to get off with the rising tide, but not before Dave had noticed I wasn't behind him and had turned back to make certain I was OK.

The River Colne, when we regained it, was alive with racing dinghies from the clubs in Brightlingsea creek over on the east bank, and as we passed it, I had a chuckle to myself remembering an incident some years ago – during the miners' strike in fact. Coal was being imported into many tiny east coast ports using small coasters and one from Germany was alongside further up the creek. I happened to be ashore at the time and spotted a taxi displaying a Brighton telephone number standing outside

The Genie approaching the Gunfleet wind farm



the waterside cafe, and from the driver I learned the story. Two of the coaster's sailors had gone ashore, taken the train to London for a night on the tiles and had then taken the train to Brighton, being misdirected when they enquired about trains to get back to Brightlingsea. When they woke next morning – only a few hours before their ship was due to sail – they found the only way to get aboard in time involved a taxi ride costing them £80, quite a sum in those days, and making it a very expensive night ashore!

At Wivenhoe, three or four sand barges were loading at the quays on our weather side, churning up our westerly breeze. In addition, the yacht moorings were on trots close by to leeward making the already narrow river even narrower. So although we had hopes of going further north, we decided to return as there was altogether too little room to manoeuvre. The westerly carried us back down easily and we anchored for the night at 1530h just north of The Stone on the end of Mersea Island. It had been a chilly day and I for one was glad to get below with a hot drink.



The Genie dried out at The Stone

On Monday morning, the 18th, we were both awake early and ready to get under way (another piece of compatibility is that neither of us are Johnny-lay-abed-till-noon types), but while stowing gear and making ready, I didn't keep close enough watch on my depth sounder with the result that *The Genie's* keels were in the mud on the very last of the ebb. My second red face of the trip, and it was only day three! I should have been more vigilant of course but *The Genie* was afloat again after about an hour and we set off. While waiting for water, the breeze had got up and the sky had

taken on a rather uneasy look. Dave had already tucked a precautionary reef in his main and I took the hint and did the same. According to the local radio's Coastal Forecast winds were supposed to be a F2 from the NW and set to veer throughout the day before settling in the SE. But the actual shipping forecast for Thames warned of occasional F5s, so caution was justified.

The Blackwater, where we were bound, must be the queen of the southeast rivers and, like a beautiful woman, gets more interesting the further you can go. To the south of the entrance lies the oldest church in Britain, St Peters on the Wall. Some Roman bricks from the ruins of their nearby coastal fort of Athoma were used in its construction, making them close on two thousand years old. Further west is the giant nuclear power station at Bradwell, now decommissioned. Sad to think that in two millennia, some of its bricks could still be too 'hot' to re-use. Our weather remained distinctly chilly though, making it difficult to remind ourselves that it was almost midsummer. And as we passed West Mersea, I remembered the story about the tough old Mersea smacksmen who were reputed to own seven jerseys. In summer, it was said, they used to take two of them off! That day, I would liked to have borrowed them.

When we had set out the wind enabled us to fetch a 240-degree course, pretty well right for our trip up towards Maldon, but before a couple of miles were under the keel it backed rather than veered and we were hard on the wind all the way up the Blackwater. Angry clouds and gusty winds alternated with blue skies and lighter ones as we went along, but the sky remained questionable and we kept our mains reefed. At Osea Island, however, we were suddenly overtaken

by a dead calm. Light airs returned after about 15 minutes which williwawed around, leaving us both thoroughly bewildered. One minute we had been sailing along admiring the magnificent house on Osea – once the home of the Charrington’s brewery family and later a home for alcoholics when they realised how much harm their lucrative trade had caused – and then, without warning – nothing! Dave eventually caught a puff which headed him over towards Southey Creek on the south side of Northey Island, but as the breeze filled in again on my side of the river, I found one that enabled me to set *The Genie* towards the north end of the Island following the natural turn of the river.



I was three-quarters of the way to Maldon by 1520h when I realised Dave wasn’t with me. He had earlier told me his echo sounder was ‘playing up’. Occasionally it stuck on 1.2 metres, which is fine only as long as he is in that depth (!) So I turned back near Herring Point to make sure he was OK. He was, of course, and as we came close he indicated he was ready to return, so I bore away eastwards with *Mischief* following. We returned going north of Osea Island across the roadway enigmatically known as The Stumble. I don’t think this comes from the days when it was a home for alcoholics but I could be wrong.

By this time the wind had fully returned but had continued backing before finally settling in the ESE, meaning that although we had tacked upriver, we then had a close fetch, and sometimes a tack or two, to get back down again! Oh well, we know whose Law it is, don’t we? On the plus side, the sky finally lost its angry look and during the return we both shook out our reefs.

I led us over towards the eastern shore of the Colne and anchored under the weather shore near a nature reserve, thinking we would have a calm night there. However, a low swell – the kind you don’t notice until you stop – was obviously going to turn our anchorage into a restless one. I told Dave this and he tried a little further upstream, where it did appear calmer. It wasn’t, and when he radioed to say so, we decided to go further into the Colne, back to the Stone in fact, where we knew for sure it would be calmer. By this time it was after 1900h and we were both chilled, tired and hungry, and as we had already dropped our sails, we motored to end our long day, finally dropping anchor at 2015h.

Tuesday the 18th was our day for the Crouch and we were underway at 0810h in a light E to SE breeze. Low water would be somewhere before 1000h and we hoped to take the ebb out of the Colne and catch the new flood south into the Rays’n channel, pass through the bottleneck at the end, and head west with the flood into the Crouch. Back when Maurice Griffiths was writing his classic sailing yarns, the Rays’n was open all the way through, but in the

intervening years it has silted up and is little more now than a half-tide swatchway. Frequently, yachts are anchored hereabouts just waiting for the tide, and we thought we’d have to do the same, but we kept going, and began to think we’d made it just in time to ease through when, quite suddenly, it became only ‘walking-deep’ and we grounded shortly before noon. Every few minutes, as the tide rose, the boats would give a bump and scape ahead for another few inches, until eventually we did pop through. I logged this as 1230h.

One sight that will remain with me for years was of a large group of seals who had been basking on the exposed sands. As we approached they suddenly launched themselves off. At first I thought they were frightened by us but they swam eagerly towards us and quickly encircled us, with heads popping up for a better view, or so I thought. But it didn’t take me long to realise that they were after food having probably been treated as a ‘tourist attraction’ by every passing yacht’s crew. And doubtless, we would have sacrificed a biscuit or two, but the tide continued rising and the boats bumped and slid their way forwards until by 1230h we were obviously over and into the Crouch.

The Crouch plays Ugly Sister to the Blackwater’s lovely Cinderella, in that it runs almost boringly straight between high sea walls with little to see and with virtually no shallows or odd anchorages. The wind came at us from the east and we goose-winged our way through Burnham, passing the Corinthian club’s ‘sugar-lump’ building itself at 1410h. It’s actually an art-deco, square-shaped, white-painted building, so it is easy to see how the nickname arose.

We continued up to Fambridge before turning back at 1335h, tacking against the continuing flood at first until the ebb commenced soon after 1500h and carried us along with surprising speed. Somewhere on our trip Dave’s GPS logged our maximum speed of 7.2k and we think it must have been here that it happened since we fairly raced through Burnham, feeling as if we’d been flung out of a club by the burly bouncer on the door. By 1825h we had turned into the Roach and anchored on the west side in 3M.

We did nothing during most of Wednesday as Dave said he wanted a day off from our routine of early mornings and all-day sails. So apart from some jobs that's just what we did. Strangely, my echo sounder had begun playing up along with *Mischief's*. It seemed not only were we and our boats compatible, but now our echo sounders appeared to have developed some special simpatico! Mine was showing only ghost-like, almost unreadable figures until I pushed the display hard with my thumb – but you can't sail like that for long! I attempted to find the cause, but failed. Then, during the afternoon, I worked out that neither tides nor forecast winds were very favourable for returning to the north the following day without either a disgustingly early start, a really long sail or perhaps both. So I proposed we lifted anchors and sail out to the Yellow buoy, which is placed by the local sailing clubs to mark the most favourable way through to the Rays'n, anchor there and take the ground, ready to move on tomorrow morning.

Fortunately the cold weather had relented because it was almost sunset when we started out in a smart little still-warm SE breeze, found the buoy an hour or so later and headed for it. To my surprise, we actually got well north of it before finding the ground and anchored until morning. Low water was at about 2300h and high water would be at 0515h the following day when we could set off with the first of the ebb.

Alas, despite the comfort and stillness of the night, we were both awake early at about 0300h on

Wednesday 19th and were ready to go at 0520h as the ebb commenced its run. Visibility was very poor and quite misty conditions prevailed virtually all day. There was an oily, windless-looking sea and I feel sure I could have combed my hair by my reflection on it. The telltales on the sails refused to move and I smoked numerous pipes, trimming my sails according to the smoke drift, which continuously changed about every two minutes or so during that first hour. Yet amazingly, the GPS showed us making 2.5 knots. Most of this must have been down to the tide, of course. We continued this Micawberish sailing first past the Buxey beacon – the only distinguishable mark – and then by compass into the NE in deeper water, still hoping that 'something would turn up'. Nothing worthy of calling a breeze did of course and we had the most boring day of the trip. Eventually it dawned on us that unless we motored, the ebb would have run its course before we reached Walton Pier – where the flood would soon run and quickly sweep us back. Reluctantly we submitted to the throbbing of outboards.

Shortly before passing Walton Pier at 1100h, I gave Henry (my Honda) a much-needed drink. He'd been running an unbelievable 2½ hours on one tank. I passed the Pier ten minutes or so later, with raised revs to combat the first of the new flood. A lazy breeze did fill in from the south, but each time I stopped the motor we either stood still or only inched forward, and so it was back to Henry. It had been Peace versus Progress and peace lost!

While I was refuelling, Dave cracked on, turning *Mischief* more to the north to round the Naze as he did so and by the time I restarted, he was some way ahead, lost in the general haze. Because the new flood hadn't made much, we anticipated having to go quite far to the north to pass over the Pye sands before heading south again into the Backwaters, more or less retracing our outward route. This is what Dave did, although I couldn't actually see him because of the haze. But as I was absolutely fed up with the noise of the engine drumming in my ears I worked out that the tide would possibly have made just enough for me to cross the sands at a gap further south, known locally as the 'Swatch'. You might say, as the nursery rhyme has it, this was the point 'when the Pye was opened' – although only gulls screeched. So I headed *The Genie* that direction, through very shallow water, setting the sails to catch more of the light breeze on our quarter to make enough progress and shut up Henry's chatter. It was going to be touch and go, I knew, and she probably would ground, but what the hell! There was only a gentle southerly breeze and hardly any sea, which meant that if we did, no harm could come to us and the flooding tide would lift us through sooner or later. So after finally stopping Henry, I let *The Genie* ease



The Genie approaches the Buxey Beacon

along, grounded and finally squeezed through the Swatch as the tide rose those few more inches.

Ahead of me in Hamford Water I could see Dave anchored. He had not long arrived and I joined him at 1420h. Almost the first thing I did, after a mug of tea, of course, was to go below and snooze for a couple of hours!

On Friday the 21st, we decided we'd have our one last night on the Stour and set off at 0830h in light airs from the NE which were forecast to firm up to a F2-3 and veer east. We had the ebb under us and LW would be about 1230h or so. Once outside, the wind soon veered and enabled us to steer the direct course to Harwich, N30E. We passed the Harwich breakwater at 1010h and as it was really too early to proceed directly along the Stour, we headed into the Orwell just to spin out the sail. When we were just west of the Suffolk Yacht Harbour Marina at 1215h we turned back towards the Stour.

It was a fight back as the breeze had now gone into the SE and brought us close on the wind; the flood was now against us too and running at full tilt. Moreover, we had to pass through the wind shadow of the huge China Shipping Line container vessel which always berths at the northern end of the dock when it's bringing its latest delivery for Marks and Sparks. This also happens to be the narrowest section of the river. But with a bit of cussing and swearing – on my part at least – by 1255h we had rounded into the Stour and were heading westward. The breeze lost some of its strength during the afternoon and progress slowed. Nevertheless, we reached the outskirts of Mistley by 1500h before turning back. The channel ahead would be full of twists and turns, becoming narrower and shallower and be no place for a couple of wrinklies with wonky echo sounders. We retraced our course towards the east and anchored finally in Gallister Creek at the eastern end of Holbrook Bay at 1635h.

Saturday 22nd May was our last day and as usual we were both up early. Since we were only bound back to the Marina and then home, we agreed to leave independently as and when we were ready. Dave got under way at 0815h and I followed 25 minutes later. There was a light and variable breeze and while it remained light throughout, it steadied in direction eventually, in the ESE, and I was able to tack out of the Stour. The wind finally woke up and gave its best about 1030h and *The Genie* passed out of Harwich Harbour at 1115h, blowing a loud raspberry to the China

Shipping Lines as we did so, and sailed down through the approaches to the Walton Channel and finally docked in the marina at 1335h. Dave was already there of course.

We had a last cup of tea together alongside before making the boats ready to leave. This is the bit I always hate. Instead of 'rough stowing' gear each night, it now had to be neatly done with sail covers on; the boat washed down to remove the anchor mud off the foredeck, and the portapotti had to be emptied. Question! What sounds like a church bell, is brown, and smells terrible? Answer, Dung! And doesn't it weigh a lot too? We'd spent a week afloat, anchoring each night and now it all had to be carried ashore and emptied. If Rene Descartes had been a small boat sailor, he might have been remembered for a slightly different phrase; 'I stink, therefore I've been!' My holding tank was so full that I don't think we could have managed another night out.

Throughout the sail Dave had run his GPS and it said that we had covered some 177 miles at an average speed of 3.2 knots. When I stepped it out on the chart later employing my usual method – a measured length of pipe cleaner bent round the coast and river bends – I reckoned it was nearer 165, but of course the GPS takes every tack into its calculation so that 5 miles by pipe cleaner registers as something like 7 on the GPS. We had, though, actually sailed for 55 hours and 20 minutes during the week and motored 14 miles.

Dave, having a longer road journey, left for home before the Walton Rally boats arrived, whilst I stayed and had dinner with Charles Proudfoot and our ex-president David McClellan before leaving. Pity he missed that bit; it was most enjoyable, but you can't have it all. We'd spent a marvellous week together. The photographs are his of course. Not only does he have a much better camera but he's a far better photographer. TJ

