

## **From Chiswick to the Mouth of the Thames Three days by Wayfarer, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> September 2010**

*Thursday night, 2<sup>nd</sup> September*

Last December, Ben Nye, Steve Lindley and I, Alex Jacobs, had met for a pint in Paddington and come to the beer-fuelled conclusion that it would be a good idea to sail down the Thames. Ben and I could borrow Steve's Wayfarer. Easy. Three days would do it, if we could catch the tide right to sweep us out to the sea.

Ten months later, a couple of hours after sundown, Ben and I were working out how to put up the boom tent in the dark at Chiswick Quay Marina. It's not a big place, tucked away in a modern housing development by Duke's Meadow on Mortlake Reach. It dated from 1974, the Harbour Master told me on the way to fill our petrol can the next morning. Owned by the house owners. Had built concrete barges in the war and been hit by a doodlebug. Distinctly down at heel now, with six live-aboard boats, four more owned by the house-owners and a handful of water-logged yachts and green-tinged motor cruisers.

We finally got the kit stowed, the sleeping platforms in place, the mattresses blown up, the sleeping bags out and the tent up – which proved to be excellent, a masterpiece of velcro fastenings. Nothing fell in the water apart from Ben, and even then only up to the waist as he was on the phone and wrong-footed by thick algae that looked like surprisingly like concrete. "I've got a car round the corner and a comfortable flat with two double beds in it 20 minutes away", I said to Ben. We crawled on our hands and knees through the tent's side door and wriggled in to bed, tired, hungry and head-ached.

*Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> September*



*Daybreak, Chiswick Quay Marina*

Up at 6.30 in the morning, feeling much the same as when we went to bed, only more so. We took down the tent, rolled up the sleeping bags, stowed the sleeping platforms under the thwarts and unloaded all the kit so we could put it away again in the two hatches fore and aft. "What on earth where we doing here? I've got enough on at work at moment," I thought "to say nothing of home". On we stowed. By 0915 we had cast off and were in the marina lock, heading out on to the river.

A perfect still morning. High pressure sitting over England. Clear blue skies. Scarcely a breath of wind. Forecast to build from the East over the weekend and stay fair. High water: 0830 at London Bridge, a little later up here, the ebb just starting to run. A couple of narrow boats on the river, nothing else.

What an immediate pleasure to be on the water. The outboard was running smoothly. The banks seemed very rural, tree lined on the North bank, the water an earthy brown. And the river maybe 100 yards across. It was an idyllic, gentle scene. We set off downstream under Chiswick Bridge, dropping the mast around a pivot pin just below the foredeck.



*Underway, Mortlake Reach*

The canal boats, also catching the tide, dropped away behind us and the sights started to come up thick and fast. Fullers Brewery and Craven Cottage to the North. Unfeasibly beautiful Georgian houses, one with a clinker skiff in davits over the garden wall, ready to lower in and row away. Under Hammersmith Bridge at 0945, the lowest bridge we'd pass at 3.5m at high water springs. We were getting more confident about the bridges and mast dropping by now. Harrod's Depository to the South, then Putney and the rowing clubs. By Wandsworth Bridge at 1010 we could start to see taller tower blocks and modern developments line the river. Under the elegant Albert Bridge, past Battersea Power Station and towards MI6 and bronze statues looking out from the piers of Vauxhall Bridge of powerful women holding ritual objectives. Wikipedia says they depict the Arts and Sciences, made from 1904 to 1906. They were stunning, confident Victorian adornments, invisible from the road.

We were soon on Lambeth Reach, the Houses of Parliament in front of us. Big Ben read 1045. The river had none of its rural feel now. A little wider, it was crowded with ferries, moored barges and the exclusion zone around parliament. There was wash bouncing off every hard surface, the tide roaring out and confused waves going every which way. The massive piers of the bridges seemed to be coming up very quickly, each one with its own huge bow wave. It wasn't a place to slow down and enjoy the view. We kept the engine going and pressed on ahead. The water seemed to be even more chewed up and untrustworthy just downstream of every bridge. Past the eye and the Shell building, the City loomed large with the Gherkin and St Paul's just off to the left. We kept on going, staying well clear of the knife hulled catamaran ferries flying up and down. Under London Bridge – all gloomy and boxed in – and suddenly there was a battleship on the bow, HMS Belfast upstream of Tower Bridge. We cruised past its gun turrets, scarcely saw The Tower of London

and were under the main span of Tower Bridge and away downstream before we knew it.



*Past St Pauls, feeling small*

fewer. Just the odd ferry and moored waste barge. We tacked slowly upwind, with the tide still running under us, taking us to the Docklands.

That was the last bridge for some time. What a relief. The river opened out further, with Wapping on the left and Canary Wharf towering ahead of us. As we talked about hoisting the sails, the engine spluttered and died, having run dry after two hours of hard work at 1115. The mainsail ran up and the jib unfurled without a hitch. The wind had filled in a little, but was patchy from the East in bright sunshine. We enjoyed the space and quiet. There were fewer boats – far

An hour later, we'd made slow progress and arrived off South Dock Marina, by Greenland Dock in Rotherhithe – our first overnight port of call. We moored up on the inside of a ferry jetty, as instructed, and called the marina. We were just too late to come in on that tide. The lock only worked two to three hours either side of high water. We sat down to wait, helped along when Steve and Kev arrived and we found our way first to one pub then another to while away the afternoon.

We didn't find much else in Rotherhithe. New executive flats everywhere and Greenland Dock, a kilometre long. So called because whalers used to bring their catch there from Greenland, presumably to dismember and sell. Later, it had been a centre for timber trade in the nineteenth century. Now flats and an RYA sailing centre. We admired the 1902 high-pressure water hydraulic rams that had swung the iron swing bridge and opened the old lock gates. The Hilton, just upriver, is sited on an old filled in dock, we learned. It felt undignified.

By 1730 we were in the marina and, more practised, put the boat to rights and the tent up. A bite to eat in our third pub of the day, and bed shortly after for an excellent night's sleep.

*Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> September*

Up at 7am, we breakfasted on bread rolls and went through the routine of moving from tent to cruising mode. At 0930 we locked out. More sunshine, occasionally overcast, with a light breeze from the East. High water: 0959 at London Bridge. There wasn't enough wind to sail on, so we turned downstream under the engine again.

The river was 200 yards wide by now, as we rounded the Isle of Dogs. Greenwich Naval College came up to starboard, classically beautiful with its regular colonnades. And then into Blackwall Reach, on the far side of the Isle of Dogs. More working industrial wharfs and jetties, and more modern developments and apartment blocks. All with Canary Wharf and its fellow glass sky scrapers towering behind them. We passed the dome, wonderfully white and nautical, and rounded to the South again heading away from the City. The light Easterly carried a smell of boiling sticky sweetness, and the Tate and Lyle works came up to port. A huge complex of cranes, pipe work and corrugated factory walls. Then the Thames Barrier took shape in front of us, its silver domes sparkling in the sunshine. When we first looked there were green arrows clearly pointing us in to one span. We turned and looked back, and the green arrows had all turned into red crosses. Lucky we were so small that we didn't show up in the control tower and slipped through the southernmost span.

The river was a step broader again here and even more empty. With the breeze filling in, we hoisted sail and turned off the motor at 1030, in time to sail past the Woolwich Ferry. Maybe it even waited a moment for us to go by.

There was good sailing here, as we beat past Gallions Point and the Royal Woolwich Arsenal (as another apartment block conversion proclaimed itself). By now there was wasteland, rotting steel hulls and decaying warehouses on both sides of the river, interspersed by live industry, heavy plant, broken down and abandoned piers and modern blocks of flats. The flats were starting to peter out. "Plumstead Marshes" the chart read just behind the southern bank and flat, grey and uninviting it looked. There was still sunshine on the river and we had the water to ourselves.



*Through the Thames Barrier*

At 1125 we passed Creekmouth, with a huge concrete tidal barrier spanning Barking Creek, ready to fall like a guillotine and cut off the flow. Dagenham came up on the northern shore, with Ford corporate blue factories and familiar logos on the trucks by the landing stages.

The river turned South into Erith Reach and we saw more sails. That was a surprise. We were used to our own private Thames, with nothing more than the odd official

launch ploughing past us. It looked like a sailing school with four or five boats out. A safety boat came and had a look at us. We waved and sailed on by, the tide carrying us along downstream all the while.

More marshes on either side, and then the chart showed a precise nautical mile, marked by waypoints at either end. We covered the distance in 11 minutes 35 seconds, with the wind swinging around and freshening just at the right time: a couple of long tacks and one short step on starboard back out away from the shore. That brought up Purfleet and the carbon dioxide plant where Ben (a chemical



*Under Dartford Road Crossing*

engineer) had worked, and then the huge suspension bridge of Dartford Road Crossing, stiff with lorries edging slowly South. "You'd be better off on the water", we told them, glad that they weren't. And then commented how blunt the bridge's square towers looked.

Greenhithe came up at 1320 as we turned into Fiddler's Reach, sailing at a good pace close by St Clements starboard channel buoy. Tilbury docks and power station started to fill the view ahead, with a massive container ship loading up from cliff-high wharves, covered in stacked containers. Cranes ran smoothly up and down on rails, sorting and piling them.

We sailed serenely past to Gravesend Marina, our goal for the night. The wind had picked up to 10 knots. We'd taken a little water on board under the floorboards. So we turned across the river, half a mile across here, opened the self bailers and planed our way to the power station on a broad reach, picking up the waves as they rolled upwind. One reach there and one back, and the boat was dry inside. We tucked inshore by the huge mudflats, dropped the main and, not quite swinging the boat through the wind under jib alone, fell off to leeward and on to the mud. Drat. Ben immediately did the right thing and jumped over board into the waist deep water, pushing the bow round off the wind and off we motored, feeling foolish and having put a ding in Steve's rudder. Drat again.

We sailed serenely past to Gravesend Marina, our goal for the night. The wind

We picked up a buoy outside the marina and called in at 1430. "You can't come in," they said. "There's not enough water in the marina to open the lock gates. No one's going in or out until Monday evening." That would be a third drat. We considered our options. There were no other marinas nearby. We could go back to Creekmouth, but that was a long way back. We could try to press on to Holehaven. But the tide

would soon be turning, the wind was freshening and we'd be tiring. We could stay where we were and overnight moored to a buoy among other yachts off Gravesend.

Staying where we were seemed like the best option. We were safe and in good shape. We had food and water. The wind would drop in the evening. We could put the tent up from inside the boat. We'd be fine. We lay back and slept in the afternoon sun.

A couple of hours later, the Gravesend Sailing Club launch came by as it was picking up its members from their day's racing. "You don't want to stay here," they said. "It's terrible on the river. We don't even sleep in the cruisers here. Come and tuck in under our club by the lock instead." We motored up a little muddy creek behind them, to the bottom of six metre high stone walls. The club perched on top of the walls and they craned their boats in and out. The closed marina was behind closed lock gates another thirty yards along the creek. There was mud everywhere and dark weed hanging from the stone walls, with hard edges just right for grating the edge of a moored dinghy. Water leaked and spurted through the lock gates with a menacing suggestion of the power held behind them. We hoped they really would stay closed until Monday night.

There was no way of mooring so the boat would rise and fall with the tide. As we stood there, holding on to the ladders and shaking our heads, wash from the river rushed down the creek and swept us one way. Then bounced off the lock gates and swept us the other. We accepted a cup of tea from our hosts, who seemed glad to see us and were very keen for us to moor at the foot of their walls – or to crane us out – and said that all things considered we felt we'd better on the river. Out we motored, relieved to be away from the mud and stone and iron, and picked up the visitor's buoy at the far end of the moorings.



*Ready for the night, moored off Gravesend*

amidships to dampen the boat's swinging.

And under our tent, fuelled by mackerel sandwiches, cribbage and whisky, we passed a very comfortable night, watching the lights come out on the industrial plant over the still river and the navigation lights wink their way to the sea.

We left the tent door a little open to admire the view, which turned twice through 180 degrees as the current ebbed and flooded.

Around midnight, in slack tide we fitted the tiller and lashed it

*Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> September*

Now so used to how it all fitted together that we packed up the tent and sleeping kit without batting an eyelid or worrying that we couldn't step ashore, we slipped our mooring at 0930 under sail. The breeze was still in the East, with a touch of South to it. The river was beautifully quiet, rippling under the wind but with no chop or swell. And no boats either. We made good progress over the tail of the flood, tacking under the towers of Tilbury power station and slipping away downriver.



*Dawn in the lower reaches*

East Tilbury Marshes to the Northwest and Cliffe Marshes to the Southeast. We took a long fetch along Lower Hope Reach, in our wide open river, a mile across by now. Two canoes appeared out of nowhere and disappeared behind us heading upstream along the Northern bank. We cleared Lower Hope Point and turned East straight towards the river mouth at Southend and the open sea beyond.



*Tracking past Tilbury Cardinal*

The wind picked up quickly to a solid force three. The seas picked up a little too, with surface chop and a rolling swell coming in from the East. Beneath us, the water was grey-green, with a look of the open sea about it. We made long sweeping tacks between Kent to the South and Essex in the North, under a grey sky. Shellhaven and countless oil tanks passed on the North bank. We started having to work the boat over the waves and keep the splash and spray to a minimum. A forlorn beach ball blew along the middle of the channel. We picked it up and then watched as it bounced out of the boat and blew off downwind again. The navigation marks came as the chart said they would. Some strange shaped heavy industrial vessels and the odd ferry came past us and we stayed well clear. It was excellent sailing,

with all the space we could want and a handsome breeze for the boat to sit up to.

By midday we were passing the East end of Canvey island. Southend's pier was clear ahead of us, a few miles upwind, stretching unfeasibly far out into the estuary. A mile and a third long, we were told later, with a train running the length of it.

We turned off the wind to a powerful beam reach heading North, looking out for our final landing place at a slipway on Two-Tree Island, just by Leigh-on-Sea. The chart showed that this water dried out at low tide and we were an hour or two after high water. The centreboard touched once or twice as we went over the mud banks. We piled on, confident that we were over the worst and seeing the slipway among moored boats ahead of us. A few hundred yards out, we dropped the sails and motored in, with a brisk wind behind us, a rapidly falling tide and an unknown landfall coming up fast. We did a bit of depth-sounding with a paddle and kept to the channel where moored boats were still lying to the wind, rather than on the mud. The end of the slip was clearly marked with two green beacons and as we were swept across it downwind, one last time Ben jumped overboard into knee deep water and caught us on the slipway.

We pulled the boat up to where it grounded and held it there for quarter of an hour until the falling tide had left it properly beached. Then the shore-master pointed us to where we could find a cup of tea and we settled down to wait for Steve to arrive in his powerful car and take the boat and crew back to the other side of London. The return trip took an hour and a half, even with the traffic on the North Circular.

In total, we covered about 50 miles on the boat. It was an education and a delight; a modest adventure over a long weekend, following the Thames from domestic, leafy Chiswick to the industrial mudflats at its mouth at Southend.



*Journey's end, Two Tree Island*