

The Solent

A cruising guide for centreboard boats



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To Len, Liz, Steve, John and Jo and especially David, with thanks for helping me explore these beautiful waters.

First Edition, February 2008



About the Author

Cliff Martin is a dreamer.

He is bone idle and would far rather sit on a beach than go to work.

It all began with a sailing lesson at Calshot. Sitting in a Wayfarer, mystified about how make it respond, unsure why it occasionally tipped over, I decided, that although the boats sailing up and down Southampton Water were yachts, a little boat like this could take me a long, long way. Against the advice of the sailing instructors, I went straight out and bought my Mirror and the learning really started. Two years of racing gave me the skills to start sailing alone in Chichester Harbour. I began to find my way around and in early 2005 joined the Dinghy Cruising Association. These guys are in a different league, undertaking long journeys in difficult conditions as if it was a walk in the park. One aspect I found so frustrating early on was I did not know where to go. There was a big wet bit called water and a dry lumpy bit called land and many miles of coastline where it met. Despite searching high and low for guidance, all the pilot books I could find were aimed at deep draught yachts which use marinas when they are not sailing. I got the feeling a destination wouldn't even be mentioned unless someone was going to make money out of it.

This guide isn't like that. It is aimed at a boat which will float in a foot of water and can settle into the mud as the tide leaves it. Many of the places mentioned cost nothing. Some of them are supposed to cost but in practice mostly don't and the rest we use because we really like them. This guide is about land and sky, wind and water and how a little boat can bring them together and give happiness.



Early Days

My good friend Tony and I wanted to daysail together. My old car transporter was converted into a double trailer. This trip started a friendship which has survived ever since. Tony now owns a yacht which I occasionally crew on. The yacht is expensive to maintain and hopeless in shallow water but very comfortable. Car and trailer are seen here at Northney Marina where parking is free but launch and recovery are very expensive. Better to launch at Itchenor for a daysail. Boat with orange deck is a 12 foot Skipper, light and easy to sail, a fair choice for a cruise.

Cruising is an adventure activity and carries risks. Boat handling skills and seamanship are needed. Size of boat is an extremely poor guide to its ability to cope with bad conditions, the most important factor is the experience, skills and resilience of the crew. Real experts are rare. Only the finest have the skills to navigate small craft through fearsome conditions. Learning the Day Skipper syllabus, how to reef afloat, anchor and right a capsize is a very good start. Competing in windy races under full sail develops boat handling skills, the rescue boat means new techniques can be practised with impunity. Defective rigging and rudder assemblies can jeopardise the boat you rely so heavily on. The Dinghy Cruising Association has compiled a list of boat safety recommendations that should be read and carefully considered. Despite all this, probably the most life threatening of all is driving home exhausted on the Sunday night.

Whilst I have made every endeavour to compile this guide accurately and have visited all locations in the type of boat it is intended for, I accept some errors may have crept in. I still believe it is the best work of its type currently available, but is **NOT TO BE USED FOR NAVIGATION**. Always use a paper chart and compass. Stanfords charts numbers 10 and 24 cover most of our area. Some areas are beyond the scope of the chart. Ordnance Survey Landranger or Explorer maps may be all that is available. A simple GPS set is extremely useful when you get lost.

Sailors of the Solent who used small open boats formed the Dinghy Cruising Association (DCA) in 1955. Since then, fibreglass and plywood have replaced the original clinker built boats and Terylene sails and ropes are now used. They have a core of members whose ability to keep a boat moving through appalling conditions is legend and operate independently of rescue boats, visitors berths, launch fees and campsites. The traditional skills they use are dependable methods and make all this possible. Sailing with these people is a humbling experience. When most dinghy sailors are flinging themselves around the cockpit, the DCA skipper sits motionless on his boat, conserving energy as it cuts its track through the water and vanishes into the distance. A combination of sailing, camping, walking, sightseeing, eating out and lazing around on beaches make up DCA events. Transport is provided by the boat, powered by wind and tide. Most members seem unaware how accomplished they are and fail to see what they could contribute for newcomers to the sport. Despite the wealth of experience it has built up the DCA remains largely unheard of.

Cliff's sailing philosophy

Know that your boat is up to scratch. Regularly check all rigging, halyards and control lines, rivets and screws must not be loose, all the right bits in all the right places. Sudden catastrophic hull failure is very unlikely except if you hit something but check its chainplates, stemhead fitting and where the rudder attaches. Hulls deteriorate over time. Rectify cracks, rot, loose fittings and strange soft patches. Sails should be regularly inspected, especially seams and corners. A stitch in time... Stainless steel rigging has a tendency to break when it gets old. This includes halyards, especially the jib. Losing the mast or rudder whilst underway is something that must be avoided. Getting an older boat up to standard may take time but once there, parts shouldn't need replacing often. Outboard engines can (will) give problems. Never forget it. Learn how to row.

Accept any opportunity to sail in extreme conditions when there is safety backup. Learn what you can do upwind and downwind. Dinghy racing is good for this. Some boats get very unstable downwind. Try beating to windward just under jib, gybing round if it won't tack. Sail with it downwind to see how it feels. This is your storm sail, learn how it behaves. Learn to right a capsize. If your boat tries to invert when it goes over, buy it a masthead float. A mast stuck in the mud is very difficult to get out without assistance and can leave you in a very vulnerable situation. Try hoisting sail, in a real blow. Some jibs with a highfield lever are near impossible. It may need to be modified, possibly with a furling drum. Hoisting the main will mean turning the boat head to wind. This can be difficult on the water

Decide when you want to sail and get everything ready. Ignore weather forecasts until the night before. Try to get a forecast on Radio 4 or VHF whilst rigging the boat. Telephone weather forecast services are available. Marinecall is linked to the shipping forecast. Weathercall is aimed at people ashore but gives a forecast wind description for 6 hour intervals. If the forecast looks a bit iffy, take the boat to some nice sheltered waters and look at the sky. You could always go for a walk if it doesn't feel right, but if you leave the boat at home you wont be going sailing.

If the weather kicks up whilst out on a cruise head for the nearest marina or harbour and go to ground. You then have the choices of waiting it out or travelling over land to fetch the trailer. Never be ashamed to use a taxi if you need to.

Be especially careful with the weather when going to the Island. Even when good conditions are forecast it can often get pretty fierce by mid afternoon. Thunderstorms occasionally happen without warning, powerful squalls often accompany them. Practice heavy weather techniques in advance. Thick fog can make sailing unsafe. Winds are lightest early morning and in the evening. Booking a couple of days off work after a planned event takes a lot of pressure off getting back.

Plan passages to follow the tides. On a crossing reach the other side well up tide of the harbour or river you are going into. Buy a tidal atlas so you know the direction of the water. Make sure your boat is afloat to start the passage when the tide turns fair. This is most important when travelling from west to east.

Know your endurance. I can only sail for about 8 hours a day, less in strong conditions. Once you set off you can't stop until you reach somewhere suitable. The crossing to Bembridge is especially tricky, partly the distance and partly the tides which are awkward for this crossing.

Believe in yourself because you know. If you don't know, go and find out. Ignore people who think they know, just by looking at your boat. Listen to the people you sail with.

Further reading

Sailing just for fun. Charles Stock. The seaman's guide for cruising dinghies and small yachts

Cruising the Leader. Len Wingfield. As above but based on the 14 foot cruiser - racer

Coastal and offshore navigation. Tom Cunliffe. Pilotage and navigation skills

Where to launch around the coast. Diana van der Klugt. Launch site guide

Solent Pubs and Restaurants. Peter Bruce. Places to eat.

Cruising the leader is out of print but available through the DCA library which carries a wealth of sailing books, past and present.

Camping on board

Learning to do this and getting the boat set up properly is a heartbreakingly frustrating process. Once learned it revolutionises what can be attempted. It also means you can rig and de-rig on separate days, spending more time sailing and relaxing. It increases the possible range of a cruise and makes working the tides much easier. You do not need a campsite, you become a yacht and have the same rights and responsibilities. This includes using a marina or yacht pontoon.

Quite a lot of gear has to go into the boat, make sure you do not overload it or you will have problems with it trying to sail through waves instead of over them. The following equipment needs to be accumulated

Tent

This has to be rigged over the boat, whether afloat, dried out or on a pontoon. It needs to be waterproof. Although some rain will probably get in where mast and rigging pass through it, this will not usually be a problem so long as it can drain into the bottom of the boat away from your sleeping bag. It needs to be rigged to give space to sit to eat and space to lie down properly to sleep. A plastic tarpaulin thrown over the boom and tied down to the hull is a starting point, experiment. Professionally made tents are available and very expensive. If rain drips off the boom rig a gutter of tarpaulin to run the water to the mast.

Bed

A flat area to stretch out in away from the bilge water is needed, some boats have floorboards which can be used, otherwise something will have to be made out of plywood. Give it a coat of paint so it doesn't soak up too much water. If you find you have problems staying warm at night bring a hot water bottle.

Clothes storage

These need to stay dry, as does the sleeping bag and will take up a lot of space but not add much weight. Dry bags or a locker is a solution, many boats have a large wasted space under the tiller where a locker could be fitted. A minimum capacity should be enough to hold 2 complete sets of clothes, an airbed, sleeping bag and pillow. A pillowcase stuffed with clothes saves using the pillows from home. Inflatable pillows are available, dry quickly and are quite comfortable.

Anchor

This needs to be something really decent, it has an important job to do. Avoid folding grapnel anchors. Fisherman's and Danforth are good types, both have their limitations. If you sail into a creek at the bottom of a spring tide and anchor, there will be about 5 metres of water under you by midnight. 30 metres of line is needed although this does not all have to be in one length. Using chain for the first 2 to 3 metres is recommended. Shackles must be secure so they cannot come undone, suitable knots, correctly tied must be used to join lines. A fairlead at the stemhead is an important fitting, tie the anchor line off securely inside the boat. Polyester and nylon are suitable rope types. Cheap blue polypropylene rope floats so should not be used.

Food

Enough food and water for 3 days is a good starting point. This will be quite heavy but it is good to put all the food in one box so it can be carried up the beach for a picnic. Store it low down in the boat near the middle. Plastic boxes are available. An alternative is to make a plywood box that fits the boat. A small single burner gas cooker is suitable for heating up food and water. Pasta, porridge, tinned ready meals, biscuits, cheese and fruit are all suitable. UHT milk can be bought in 1 pint cartons. Avoid food that needs to be cooked for a long time. Beach parties are fun, a mesh put over a hole dug in the beach forms a barbecue. Fresh or frozen burgers and sausages may go bad in the boat. Tinned hot dogs stay fresh but don't taste of much. Lightweight camping stools are useful for picnics on wet or muddy beaches.

Lighting

A simple head torch can be used in most situations, fitted lighting inside the tent is probably not worth bothering with although navigation lights are. Expect the torch to fail at some stage, an anchor light will be needed in some situations, LED types are best as they use little power.

Launch site guide

Some charge for launching, some to haul out and some for parking. Launch fees are not usually charged very early in the morning, late in the evening or during the night. Northney Marina charge at all times but this is a good site for an extended cruise. Pay and display car parks normally charge double if you have a trailer. For extended cruises, parking charges can knock a big hole in the sailing budget. Try to avoid these if possible. People who have a valuable car or trailer favour Northney Marina. Home made trailers and tatty cars are an advantage. Lock the trailer and trolley to your car. It is said, if your car is worth more than your boat(s) you lack commitment.

The number after the location is its Ordnance Survey grid reference

Northney Marina 197 728 042

All states of tide, long concrete slipway, Expensive to launch and haul out. Free parking. Launch by car or hand. Very secure carpark.

Warblington Road 197 741 053

Near high water only, hard, stony beach. Free launching. Free haul out. Free parking in street. Launch by car or hand.

Itchenor 197 800 015

All states of tide, hard, stony beach. Free launching by hand, £3 by car. Free haul out. Nearby pay and display carpark allows parking for up to a week's duration. The carpark is run by the harbour authority. If you get caught on the Island by bad weather, telephone them to extend your stay. They won't want you crossing the Solent if it isn't safe.

End of Southsea Marina Peninsula 196 684 001

All states of tide, steep shingle beach. Free launching. Free haul out. Free parking. Launch by hand only. It is best to visit the area on foot at low water before bringing your boat. There are a few nearby alternatives for launching by car.

Warsash. 196 489 060

All states of tide, hard, stony beach but often very seaweedy. Free launching. Free haul out. Free parking in nearby carpark for up to four days (no vans). You may be asked to pay harbour dues. Launch by car or hand.

Eling 196 365 125

Near high water only, concrete slipway. Free launching. Free haul out. Free parking in nearby car park over toll bridge which has a width restriction. Launch by car or hand.

Ashlett 196 466 033

High water only, gravel slipway. Free launching. Free haul out. Free parking on Victoria Quay, which floods on a very big tide. Launch by car or hand.

Lymington 196 334 950

All states of tide, concrete slipway. Charge to launch. Free haul out. Nearby pay and display car park is very expensive with only very limited stay duration. Free parking available on the street some distance away. Launch by car or hand. It is best to visit this area on foot to assess parking possibilities.

Destination locations

Because some of these are so far up rivers as to be beyond the scope of my charts, all locations are given in Ordnance Survey grid reference

Location	O/S Grid Reference
Ashlett SC	196 466 033
Bembridge Harbour (anchorage)	196 642 887
Botley	196 517 129
Calshot	196 488 025
Christchurch Harbour	195 176 911
Cowes Town Quay	196 497 961
Curbridge, River Hamble	196 528 119
Dell Quay	197 835 029
East Head	197 768 992
Eling SC	196 365 125
Emsworth Pontoon	197 749 054
Folly Inn	196 507 931
Fowley Island	197 744 044
Hill Head Harbour	196 534 023
Hurst Narrows	196 325 895
Langstone Bridge	197 720 044
Lymington Town Quay	196 328 955
Newport Harbour	196 502 896
Newtown Creek (Shalfleet Quay)	196 415 905
Northam Bridge (River Itchen)	196 433 130
Oxy Lake (recommended anchorage)	196 330 936
The Kench	197 692 998
Wootton Bridge	196 548 920
Yarmouth Harbour	196 350 897

Our sailing area



Where to go

Chichester Harbour

Probably the safest place to dinghy sail in the Solent area. There are often dinghy and keelboat races taking place with rescue boats. An 8 knot speed limit is in place and if you get in a real muddle someone will probably help you out. The tides are quite strong, particularly around the harbour entrance. If you start to get swept out to sea, beach the boat on the west side of the entrance and walk it back in. Launching is straightforward at all states of tide from Itchenor and Northney Marina.

East Head

Close to Wittering to starboard when entering the harbour, this is a great place to just sit and relax. There are sandy beaches and extensive dunes and a café and toilets are a short walk east along the shore facing the English Channel. Wittering itself is quite a long walk but food, drink and shops are all available. On sunny days there always seem to be dinghies on the beach waiting for the tide to return. Nearby Snowhill Creek is a good overnight anchorage.



Ness Yawl sailing out of the anchorage at Snowhill Creek, my first DCA rally.

Sandy Point

On the west side of Chichester Harbour entrance, this is the first place you can stop when you enter the harbour from the Solent. It is home to Hayling Island Sailing Club but you can anchor off their beach and have a picnic on it. Beware of enthusiastic young sailors trying to launch racing dinghies through your anchor line. If you have to walk your boat into the harbour this is the side you will enter. There is deep water close in and the beach is mostly clear of rocks.



Skipper and Daydream at Sandy Point, East Head in background

Emsworth

At the head of the Emsworth Channel a pontoon is available for short stays except at low water. It is probably the most convenient place for shopping on the harbour. A waiting pontoon is available further down the channel in deeper water. Nearby Fowley Island is a useful overnight anchorage, sheltered from all wind directions and a realistic voyage after dark from the Emsworth pontoon in good conditions. Water here is available HW + - 2hrs approx. If approaching in the dark, the waiting pontoon is about 200 yards due east of the island.



Fowley Island at low water. You can camp ashore here but not on a very big spring tide.

Dell Quay

An excellent place to stop for a meal, there is a pontoon for short stays to the north of the pier which dries at low water and the pub is famous for its good food. There is a beer garden with a view over the water. Watch out for anglers lines from the pier.



Daydream at anchor in moorings at Dell Quay on a winter daysail. Viewed from beer garden.

The sailing club is private, however in my experience they have been welcoming and asking the right person very nicely may allow you to use their showers.

Visit Chichester Harbour for a short cruise, to gain confidence or when it's too rough outside.

The Kench, Langstone Harbour

If a trip west to the Solent is planned, starting from The Kench will give around a one and a half hour head start over using Snowhill Creek. The Kench is a sea of mud which covers at around half tide and is situated inside the east side of Langstone Harbour entrance, near Sinah Warren holiday village. The eastern side of it is surrounded by shingle, which gives shelter from virtually all wind directions. The shingle ends in a nice clean peninsula, ideal for a beach barbecue. The nearby Ferryboat pub serves food and has a good view over the harbour entrance. There are public toilets nearby which close at night.



Langstone Bridge near high water springs. There is a slipway like this either side of the bridge to step out to lower or raise the mast. Alternatively use a mooring. Try not to anchor in moorings, if you hook up a chain you'll have to go swimming to sort it out. The nearby Royal Oak in Langstone village is worth a visit, tie up to the wall near the slipway on the Chichester Harbour side of the bridge.

As well as entering from the Solent, Langstone Harbour can be accessed from Chichester Harbour at most states of the tide by going under Langstone Bridge. I have been reliably informed a Mirror Dinghy under full sail will pass under the bridge at low water neaps. At a little less than half tide I can get under just by lowering the gaff. At high water I have to drop the mast and row under. The position of the watershed is reputed to vary, be prepared for currents in either direction under the bridge.

Visit The Kench to anchor before a trip west.

Upper Hamble

Three bridges separate the lower yotty stretches from the top end. The bridges are quite low and some means of lowering the rig will usually be needed. Once above the bridges the pontoons of motorboats soon disappear and a sleepy river meanders across green fields. Most of the Central Solent area has a double high and a double low tide although the second low is often hard to detect. The first high occurs approximately at high water Portsmouth, with the second high around two hours later. After this second high the ebb quickly sets in and the water moves fast.



The creek to Curbridge, full of impatient mariners gasping for a pint. On reflection I should have anchored under a tree and had a sleep for an hour.

The wind can be rather disturbed and this is one area where I had wished I owned an engine. Visiting the upper Hamble should include a trip to the Horse and Jockey at Curbridge. The river is very shallow up here, aim to arrive half an hour before the first high water and leave at the second high. The pub will be expecting visitors to arrive by boat at this time and do good meals. There is a steep bank to starboard just below the bridge to moor up against. Bring a big screwdriver or similar to push into the bank to tie up to. There is also a pontoon which may have vacant spaces.

It is possible to reach Botley up the port creek. It is very overgrown and narrow. I managed this in company with a Wayfarer. It is not really recommended except by canoe.



Under tow with DCA friends Steve and Mike, approaching Botley. The last half mile was horrendous.

The trip back down river seems quite a long way, there are anchorages above the top bridge then nothing until you cross Southampton Water except Swanwick.

Visit the upper Hamble for solitude.

River Itchen

My 2007 summer cruise was intended to wrap up my tour of the Solent and the Itchen and Portsmouth Harbour were on the list, launching at Eling. The Beaulieu River and Keyhaven would have to wait. On the second day, a F7 forecast intervened, I attempted to sail to Calshot anyway but it was getting a bit silly and I decided to go home to wait for calmer weather. On the way back up to Eling I saw some rather bored looking people at the Southampton Boat Show, taking their shoes off to climb inside various yachts they couldn't afford. They did seem to brighten up a little at the sight of a lone helmsman driving a well reefed Mirror Dinghy slowly into the wind.

The day before, I got a chance to sail the tidal part of the River Itchen, all the way up to the canoe club. The Itchen is a real mixture, there are very posh parts like Ocean Village Marina which don't interest me, lots of marina pontoons on the river which look rather exposed. Fishing boats on moorings, one high bridge and three low ones and various scrapyards and concrete works. Towards the top of the river are parks with riverside footpaths to starboard and gardens to port, each with a berth for a motor launch or a small yacht with a lowering mast. At the very top is a sheltered pool with a canoe club where you can drop an anchor off the stern and tie up to a willow tree. Beyond this is a park with the river running under the road from the non tidal section with a towpath alongside.

For most people Northam Bridge will be the limit of navigation, with 4.7m clearance at MHWS. I got under it with my little boat, but only just. I had to lower the gaff for the two next bridges and sail with just the jib. The river dries out above Northam Bridge, attempt this only near high water. It is allegedly possible to anchor at Northam Bridge and visit Towsure, the camping and trailer supermarket, which is visible from the river, and probably other Southampton shops too. Hoping to anchor for the night in the Itchen, I was unable to find anywhere suitable and ended up sailing against wind and tide in the dark back to Eling. It

would have been easier to spend the night at Calshot but given the conditions the following day, I was glad I didn't.

Visit the Itchen to explore new sailing grounds and buy camping gear.

Ashlett Sailing Club, Ashlett Creek

I was rather misled about this one. A good friend and yachtsman whose dad kept an eighteen foot centreboard boat here years ago assured me it was available at most states of the tide. It is slowly silting up and it is recommended to arrive one hour before the first high water and leave shortly after the second high. The south channel, the easy way into Ashlett became blocked during a storm in the winter of 2009. We had a DCA rally here in October 2007. Because of tide times, it was dark when we entered the creek. I missed one channel marker, ran into the wreck of a barge in the mud and smashed a hole in the front of my boat. Please follow the proper channel. The Ashlett Sailing Club website contains a chart of the channel with GPS references for the buoys.

There are anchorages below the moorings but at high water you can tie up against the bank by the yellow cross marking the south channel or use the pontoon. The depth and consistency of the mud is such that traditional keelboats actually dry out upright and the pontoon is recommended for a first visit. An £8 mooring fee for visiting craft on the pontoon is very often waived for dinghies. If possible, park your boat up close to the clubhouse where only shoal draft craft can get to and be ready to move it as the ebb sets in.



View across Southampton Water from River Hamble entrance. Ashlett creek is behind the pontoon that the oil tankers are berthed onto. Cross this shipping channel with care.

On arriving you become a "visiting yachtsman" and can use club facilities. Food and drink at the Jolly Sailor, discounted beer at the mill. A good convenience store is at the top of the hill. The club members always seem extremely welcoming and made everything all right again after an extremely frustrating trip up the Hamble in a heatwave. They were especially keen I should use their showers.

Visit Ashlett for a meal, a quick shop and the warmest welcome imaginable.

Eling SC, Eling Creek.

There are many similarities with Ashlett. Eling was the old trading wharf for Totton and like Ashlett uses the old tide mill building as its clubhouse. Whilst Ashlett has a picturesque harbour with a soft muddy bottom gently caressing the hulls of its moored yachts, Eling is a rather stark looking place. A motley selection of ageing boats dry to a gritty bottom, the facilities look more functional than beautiful and there is a sign warning people off a contaminated beach. Despite or possibly because of this, the club members are very enthusiastic about their sailing, boats are regularly used and visitors receive a warm welcome. For the dinghy cruiser one enormous advantage over Ashlett is its launch facilities. Whilst Ashlett is a good place to launch, its hard can only be used near high water and this means a day's sailing will normally involve taking the ebb out of Southampton Water into the Solent. Conditions in the Solent can often be too rough. Launching is free of charge at Eling and can be used from about half tide. Launching at high water in the morning will give a good day's sailing without leaving sheltered waters. A free car park for car and trailer (I back my trailer onto the verge) is available over the toll bridge. This bridge has a width restriction, please check your trailer will pass through.

Visit Eling for a meal, to anchor for the night or as a really useful launch site.

Calshot Outdoor Activities Centre

My first experience of a sailing boat happened here. It was all rather frustrating and I kept getting very wet. For the dinghy cruiser this is an important place. Somewhere to stop and rest, to wait for the tide or to eat out. They have a licensed bar which does good food. For a daysail from Eling or Warsash it makes a good lunch stop, useful in conditions where it is too rough to go to Cowes. It is a suitable place to anchor but try to get right round the back out of the wash from shipping and ferries. The waves break just before they reach the shore. This is where your boat will be as it dries out. Fishing boats moored around the back come and go at strange times. Use an anchor light if stopping overnight. Calshot mud contains grit which tends to jam centreboards, moving boats on fenders or rollers can cause problems. Calshot is a sailing school, there are likely to be novices on the water with little control over their boats. Visit Calshot to wait for the tide, to enjoy a meal or because everywhere else has dried out.

Hill Head Harbour

Look at the chart and trace a line due East from Calshot Castle. Where the sea meets the land is Hill Head, the mouth of the river Meon. It is hard to see on the water and the best way of finding it is with a hand bearing compass. As you come closer you will see a white building behind some sheet piled walls. Access is possible from about half tide and inside is a drying harbour a bit like Ashlett or Eling with moorings for an assortment of boats.

The locals are really enthusiastic and brave dinghy racers and the local racing fleet goes out into the Solent under full sail in very lively conditions. They have their own local class, the Jaqueline, a 14 foot clinker boat with a Bermudian rig with wooden spars, a daggerboard and an iron rudder blade. Most of these were built in a shed near the harbour in the 60's

Visit Hill head so you know where it is should you need it.

Lymington

I have David Jones to thank for showing me around. He accompanied me in his 16 foot Beaufort. Lymington has a reputation amongst the yotties for being fiercely expensive. This need not be so.

Much of this area is salt marsh but it is possible to get ashore at Oxey Lake or up the river at the town quay.

The river itself is quite busy with 2 marinas and RORO ferries coming and going but it is a trip well worth making as there are plenty of shops. There is a small area on the town quay specifically for dinghies which the yotties use for their tenders when they go ashore. These days they are generally inflatables and make excellent fenders. Park here.



Daydream anchored at recommended place in Oxey Lake. Land on the horizon is the Isle of Wight

Oxey Lake is a good anchorage although it dries at low water. At about 50deg 44.5' North, 1deg 32' West there is a spit of firm silt to dry out on. Further NW along this bank is a nasty step where the sheet piles hold the bank up. At the top of this bank is a good path. Rather a long walk will take you to a pub, the Chequers at Lymington.

The approach to Oxey Lake from the Solent can sometimes be identified by dinghies sailing on 8 acre pond. Following the sea wall NE will take you into the river. Pylewell Lake, across the river is a good place to wait for the tide for a passage east. The tide should turn about one hour before low water. The best water is marked by a line of moorings.

Visit Lymington to get away from it all, yet be only a stone's throw from a good sized town.

Christchurch Bay and Harbour

We had a rally planned at the harbour and I was going to trail the boat to Keyhaven, launch and cross Christchurch Bay with Len, a friend from the DCA. I hate driving, Ashlett is closer than Keyhaven. I went to Ashlett and put the boat together. After a very brief sail on Southampton Water I went back into Ashlett. I had to leave early the next morning to catch the tide. The forecast came through westerly F4, didn't sound too bad.

Timing the next morning was quite good, I got to Hurst Castle just before slack water to take on Hurst Narrows. It had taken 4 hours to get there but reefed down for comfort with tide under me, it was after all, a dead beat. Len was waiting for me at Hurst Castle. Hurst Narrows look alarming on the chart but turned out quiet as a mouse. We followed the north channel, keeping in close to the shore, there are a few buoys here for guidance. According to the chart there is very little tide in Christchurch Bay. It didn't feel that way, the water was rough, big waves coming in from the south west despite the westerly wind. OK on one tack, not on the other. The tide was obviously dragging me back, there was no option but to put up lots of sail, sit out hard and hope nothing broke. 10 hours after leaving Ashlett I finally entered Christchurch Harbour. The last hour was the windiest F4 I have ever sailed and I finally came to realise what survival sailing means. I arrived a nervous wreck, exhausted and soaked with spray, hit the bottom and bust the centreboard. I had to use a bed board to get home. Len was standing on the beach. He'd had a hard sail but had stayed dry and seemed carefree.

The harbour is rather pleasant. The entrance is a narrow channel known as The Run. It has a sea wall to starboard and a sandy beach to port. If entering in an ebb tide or headwind, walking the boat in is probably the best bet. The main channel follows round the south side of the lagoon and is marked by the moored yachts as well as port and starboard buoys. Tides are very strange, it seems to alternate between a big tide and a small one, tidal range is only about 1.8m but all the ebb happens in the space of 3 hours and the water moves fast. Tidal graphs are available from the internet, otherwise expect the unexpected. Keep the boat afloat if it is too heavy to move on fenders.

The trip back couldn't have been more different, leaving at nine, rowing the first hour on water like a mill pond, the tide was carrying me onwards, a gentle breeze filled in, I hoisted sail, poured a coffee and was back in Cowes for a half past one lunch. Hurst narrows was a bit swirly especially "The Trap". This was a light wind with a neap tide. In a wind against tide situation it could become nasty.

Visit Christchurch Harbour and have a safe crossing.

The Island

Sailing to the Isle of Wight is cheaper than taking the ferry and much more fun. It is not a massive achievement in its self but reaching the other side and getting ashore always feels really great. The easiest crossing is probably Lymington to Yarmouth, with Calshot to Cowes close behind. It is quite realistic to launch in the morning, sail to these places for lunch, return in the afternoon and have the boat safely home by late evening. Bembridge can be a pig to get to if there is too much wind or not enough. Sailing there and back in one day is a bit ambitious if the weather isn't going to co operate. Beware of tides trying to sweep you beyond your chosen harbour, tides move fast, particularly between Cowes and the Needles.

Yarmouth

This has to be THE 5 star luxury destination in the western Solent. You have the choice of the "Sandhard" pontoon accessed by following round on the inside of the sea wall at a moderate cost or the mud opposite for free. It's quite a long walk round over the swing bridge to town but once there shops, restaurants and B&B are all available. The harbour office has a launderette and showers.



The Sandhard pontoon at Yarmouth

Stringing the fender from the masthead means it won't interfere with the boat tent.

Pontoons often float higher than the freeboard of a dinghy.



Hanging a lump of lead off the stern line takes out the slack so the boat is held in against its fender. I don't use springs

It is possible to sail up the River Yar but landing is not easy and looking at it at low water I recommend walking instead. If you carry on south to Freshwater Bay, food and drink are available. It makes a nice gentle stroll conveniently using up about 3 hours while you wait for the tide. Take a map and compass, it's easy to get lost. If you intend to sail east, the tide will turn fair shortly before low water. Make sure the boat is afloat.

Visit Yarmouth for a break from sailing in real comfort.

Newtown Harbour

The first harbour on the Island west of Cowes, Newtown is a nature reserve and an extremely pretty place at high water. It is made up of a series of creeks joining at the entrance with various boats on deep water and drying moorings. The first time I visited it was a DCA rally and the feeling of tranquillity was quite an incredible experience. Even the mud is tranquil and an awful lot of it appears as the tide ebbs away. The favourite DCA anchorage is just above Shalfleet Quay to starboard. Boats are normally anchored bow and stern to gain access to the track which leads to the New Inn. There will only be water here for about 4 hours each tide. There is a floating pontoon you can move onto if you prefer to stay afloat overnight and this is important if you are planning to work the tides for a passage east the next day.



I only plan to sail for 5 - 6 hours a day and often nod off waiting for the tide. The white boards under the tiller form the base for my bed. They are the correct shape for temporary centreboards.

Both times that I have been there blanketweed made setting a (Danforth) anchor difficult. I finally got it to bite in the gut but it then took 100 feet of warp plus my mainsheet to get me back to the bank. If possible tie to a stake or tree.

Visit Newtown with time to spare and purify your soul.

River Medina

Cowes Harbour is the estuary of the Medina which is sheltered from rough conditions by an artificial sea wall. The river narrows upstream to form a bottleneck where the chain ferry crosses. The tide moves extremely fast here and walking the boat in is not possible. At the same time, tall buildings affect the wind. I badly misjudged it on my first visit and the Harbour Master kindly towed me upstream and parked me on a pontoon. There are two options for waiting for the tide, either pick up a vacant mooring in the harbour or moor up in the Old Town Quay and go into town.

Cowes Town Quay

I was extremely pleased to find this early in 2007. It is situated immediately south of the Red Jet (big catamaran) ferry terminal to starboard of the river entrance. There are pontoons, which are rather exposed to swell from the river and get congested with rubber speedboats and also an enclosed area further in which is more sheltered. Officially a scrubbing berth, this has a shingle bottom with a metal ladder to climb out of the area. I recommend taking some soundings, dropping an anchor off the stern and tying the painter up to the bottom of the ladder. Care must be taken that the boat does not dry out or your entry into the river will be delayed but this is a useful chance to get ashore. Various café's are scattered around Cowes or buy some food from the supermarket and eat while you watch the boats going up and down the river. There are a few park benches here.



Cowes viewed from the River Medina just up from the chain ferry. Watch the tide, it's powerful.

Newport Harbour

Sited at the head of the Medina, this small harbour has a sheltered pontoon on the Town Quay with excellent access to a good sized town and showers in the harbour office. The pontoon dries at low water



The town Quay at Newport near high water springs, Daydream is just visible behind the second yacht.

Folly Inn

THE place to visit in a yacht, sited between Cowes and Newport, instantly recognisable by the roof with INN painted on it. I have visited several times and have always been made very welcome, the most recent being for a whole weekend, there was a force 8 in the Solent on the Saturday, and a force 7 on the Sunday. I sailed back in a lovely choppy force 4 in sunshine on the Monday morning.



The Folly Inn from upstream

At The Folly there is a deep water pontoon with water taxi. Mooring costs £1/metre and the taxi £1.50 return. The harbourmaster may ask you to use a particular berth. Smaller craft usually use the western side of the pontoon. Another pontoon is connected directly to The Folly by a bridge. This is often occupied by many tenders in the evening although I have used it the next morning. Otherwise beach the boat on the mud to the south of The Folly. This mud contains lumps of concrete and old engines.

Service in the Folly is good although it can be slow in the evening, food is available all day and the staff are friendly. Showers are available.

Visit the Medina to sail a river, shop, dine and see a real working port.

Wootton Creek

My least favourite place in the Solent, Wootton does however have a good pub, a launderette, a Tesco convenience store and excellent shelter.

I have only stopped at the head of the creek near the bridge and there may be better places further down.

When approaching Wootton beware of Wootton Rocks on either side and RORO ferries coming and going. The ferries do however give a guide of the safe water channel.

The head of the creek is very crowded with moorings and drying marina berths. There is a public slipway to starboard but the bottom here is very steep and very foul. I spent the night here and it was horrible.

Near the river mouth, just up from the ferry terminal is a sailing club. We passed their race control box and they invited us in for breakfast. It sounded tempting but money was tight and we'd bought food already so we had a picnic instead.

Visit Wootton with an open mind



Be calmed near the shipping channel, hoping to cross. Do this with care, assume the ships can't see you. If the wind starts to die on you mid shipping channel, put an oar in a rowlock and row as you sail

Bembridge

Picturesque natural harbour with a sandy drying anchorage to port. A handful of scattered shops serve this small town. Food is available nearby at the Pilot Boat, at Baywatch or in St Helens which are both quite a long walk. There is a chandlery at the south end of the harbour near the houseboats. A buoyed channel shows the approach, the ebb runs very strongly but it is possible to beach the boat to port and walk it in. Be careful you don't get swept into the groin doing this. Boats normally anchor bow and stern. If the tide is going to rise while you are away, work out a strategy for gaining the boat again which may be 50 yards out across the water and impossible to identify from the shore in the dark.



Bembridge Harbour at low water. This was on a Thursday evening in July. The sandy anchorage fills up at weekends. A dinghy can normally get in somewhere.

If you intend to return to Chichester Harbour make sure you anchor so you can leave before low water. I have left it too late in spring tides with very light winds and spent 8 hours in the Solent as a result. I was swept west to Portsmouth and only managed to get into Langstone against the ebb because a worthwhile southerly eventually built up. Visit Bembridge for its challenging crossing, beautiful harbour and comfortable overnight anchorage.



Leaving Bembridge on the flood tide. You don't need an engine to cruise a dinghy but if you take one someone may want a tow.

TWO YEARS ON

Just when I was getting ready to get **The Solent** published we had the DCA winter meeting. Liz lined me up to sail with a new member called Sarah as she had a Mirror and wanted to see my boat. We got on well and there happened to be a very poorly fibreglass Wayfarer of mine doing nothing in particular. I took a week off work, re rigged it, fitted rowlocks, spent a whole day on the sewing machine breathing new life into a near hopeless mainsail and fitted an Enterprise Jib in place of the genoa which was even worse than the main. On the 2nd of May we loaded the Wayfarer up with land tents and camping gear and pushed it into Poole Harbour for the DCA rally. It sailed like a pig, it was awful. Later on we tuned the rig, fixed many broken bits, straightened the mast and at length got it a new mainsail. We love that Wayfarer. It's the business.



Shipstall Point, Poole Harbour. The morning after our first night cruising the Wayfarer. We arrived in the dark and didn't notice the No Camping signs until the next day. For the first 4 months we camped ashore when on a cruise leaving the boat at anchor.

The Wayfarer has a reputation for being a fantastic sea boat, and also a death trap to the unwary. It's a pretty seaworthy shape but carries a phenomenal spread of sail and when the wind gets up can become a handful. These boats are really good but reefing gear is essential. We can reef our new mainsail right up to the second batten and carry a storm jib which we use a lot. We can make to windward right to the top of a force 6 so long as the sea isn't too rough and almost never have to luff up or spill wind. The tiniest breath of wind will get it moving which is a good thing as it's a pig to row. We still have no engine.

Going from Mirror to Wayfarer was an interesting transition. The Wayfarer scared the living daylights out of me despite a single row of reef points and a furling jib. We stayed ashore on days when I'd have happily taken the Mirror out. Our new reefing gear has this sorted. What the Wayfarer did for me was to teach me to SAIL. I could row the Mirror out of virtually any situation, quickly, easily. I was doing what the yotties do, literally motor sailing (but with oars). The Wayfarer HAS to be sailed. It will do exactly what you ask but you can't fight it. Ask it nicely and it will deliver.

At first I found the Wayfarer very slow to weather. We had too much sail up and were pointing too high. Feel the helm balance through the tiller. If it's tugging you need a sail change. If it's not tugging in any sort of wind you're moving fast. The Wayfarer is really good on the wind if you give it a chance. There's precious little under 30 feet except racing boats that will beat us to weather in a force 3. That's not a boast, it's just how a Wayfarer is. Gybing was another thing. It terrified me at first (and the mainsheet came off a few times...) Now we just do it, it's fine. I still haven't really got to grips with sailing backwards, a useful downwind skill in a tight spot.

And the downsides

The Mirror fitted in pretty well with the DCA fleet and we sailed in company quite a lot. The faster Wayfarer really needs more water for a good days sailing and we often sail from further afield. One of the big factors was also loneliness which I think is a big factor in keeping DCA rallies together. With Sarah this is not a problem. I do miss the old days sometimes. The Mirror hung around and eventually got a new centreboard case and stopped leaking. The thing that amazed us both when we sailed it again was what a truly delightful and sensitive boat it is to sail, perky and responsive to any setting or trim you alter yet stable and forgiving. The Wayfarer in comparison is a thug.

Launching

Wayfarers are scorned for being difficult to pull out by hand. We don't even try. The trailer is a manufactured road base with a home made trolley fitted with docking arms and a jockey wheel. The trolley goes under the boat and is tied on at the stem head. A rope is tied from the trolley to the trailer (still attached to the car), then we drag it out with the car. There's a big winch on the trailer to pull the trolley and loaded boat on and then we derig.

Rowing.

We started off with the 8 foot oars which I bought for the Mirror. The Oar collars were in a really bad place and we put new ones about 6 inches nearer the blades which was a big improvement. We bent one of the normal 3/8 inch iron rowlocks so use the bigger half inch type. You have to beat the crutch bit down a bit for the 45mm oar collar. It's OK if you bend them gently. The great breakthrough was the sculling oar. People try sculling with rowing oars but the geometry is all wrong. A proper sculling oar will have an aerofoil blade to create lift, a curve or bend in it to self feather and a lanyard to keep the handle end down. The lanyard was a late addition and has massively improved the efficiency. We row doublehanded, Sarah on the normal oars with me on the sculling oar. Sarah never has to turn around to steer as I take care of that. As powerful as a two horse outboard for the first 3 minutes. Sculling's easy and fast but only with the right setup.



Sarah rowing the Wayfarer with the sculling oar.

Rig

One of the big advantages of the Wayfarer over many cruising dinghies is that they are raced. Sailmakers have developed strong efficient gear to make these boats perform. To enhance heavy weather performance we have stripped the rig to the bare minimum. Navigation lights are at deck level, we carry no masthead buoyancy, sail insignia or club burgee, not even a funny little widget to keep forestay and jib halyard apart . (The Mirror too has lost it's "block of foam" masthead float)

Tension

300lbs on the shroud. Equal tension on forestay and jib luff.

Mast rake

So it looks right in the photos

Mainsail

Polyester, as per racing sail but from a very ordinary grade of sailcloth. One set of reef points tight up under the first batten. Second set tight under the second batten. We had this sail made by Trident UK. A fresh new sail is a beautiful thing and we love it's plain pure white appearance, something you never get with second hand mainsails. Remember, most sails (can be made to) fit most boats. Polyester thread is cheap and second hand sails turn up for very little money at times.

Jib

Choice of two. Either can be hooked between furling drum and top swivel. Both have extensions top and bottom to give **exactly** the same luff wire length for easy changes on the water and to keep rig tension constant.

Working jib 2.8 m Enterprise racing jib.

Storm jib 1.1m (approx) cut down Laser 2 racing jib

Either jib can be goose winged with a 6 foot jibstick.

Storm jib fits along the boom as a water sail.



A good deep second reef is essential.

Tent

Very simple, a plastic tarpaulin thrown over the boom had eyelets fitted along it's skirt for ropes that go under the boat. Each rope has a hook and a loop so when the main halyard pulls the boom up, the tent automatically tensions, nicely, evenly. One door front, one back. You can hem plastic tarpaulin with duck tape and then sew velcro to it to keep the doors shut. We don't have a scissors crutch for the boom to sit on. Halyard tension and tent tension kept it under control in a force 7 just fine. The doors can be tied open for warm nights. We have a thing known as a boom gutter. This is a piece of tarpaulin 11 feet long and a foot wide. It is tied under the boom if it rains to carry any drips away from us and down the mast. A series of small lights tucked into the furled sail let us see. If we have to move in the night we can use the sculling oar without taking the tent down. This doesn't work in strong winds though.

Bunk

There is a piece of half inch ply cut to fit on edge between the centreboard case and the aft locker, the same height as the side benches. It is held in a groove formed by tiny battens glued to the boat. We then have 4 boards 4 feet long and 16 inches wide which is the base for our bed, virtually the whole cockpit. We like carry mats (2 each) for a mattress. We tried polartech fleece sleeping bag covers which magically carry any moisture away from you. For the really cold weather, duvet covers sewn back to back make an excellent sleeping bag. Load each duvet cover up with duvets then climb in down the middle, not forgetting the fleece cover. Sleeping at this higher level means we can cook in bed. Essential in the cold. Clothes / bedding storage in dry bags.

Anchors

11lb plough with 6 feet of chain.

6lb Danforth with 6 feet of chain

Warps tied to chain with figure of eight loops. Additional warps added with figure of eight bends, tied off around the mast with an anchor bend. Our favourite way of setting our main anchor is to chuck it over the windward side as we (slowly) sail along. The moment the anchor sets let the sheets fly. The boat will stop and spin round head to wind and you can take the sails down. We can then at our leisure row the kedge in. For peace of mind, we always set both anchors at night. Anchor light put up each night, tied to the shroud at spreader level. We try not to dry out. It's hassle, not good for the boat and you'll not move a boat this size on the beach. We carry 4 warps each of around 10-15 metres and a 44 metre length of 8mm nylon anchor plait which is the most nightmarish tangly rope ever but just sometimes we need a long length with no knots in it.

Cooking.

This is where crew are worth their weight in gold. A good boat suitably reefed can be sailed singlehanded but who will cook the food? We have a stainless steel mixing bowl with the bottom cut out which makes a super windshield. Sarah likes veggie food and there are some "hippyburgers" on the market which are quite palatable. We've messed about with a little pressure cooker and even managed to cook an apple crumble in it by using it as a steam oven.

Harbour daysails

From the start I have been "skipper", though not necessarily by choice. For less challenging trips it is often fun (and very good training) to take a boat each. Sarah has bought an 11 foot Lune pilot and sold her Mirror. The Lune Pilot is a little keelboat with a lugsail and jib. The Mirror is back. I've been working on a cutter rig for it. The normal rig is supplemented by another jib on a bowsprit. Early indications are that the light weather performance is much improved and it still sails quite close on the wind. I've also tried the half size jib for stronger winds and wish I'd used it more in the past as the gap between reefed main with jib and reefed main only is a big one. Changing the headsails is best done early before the water gets too choppy. Then reef the main, last of all drop the storm jib. I still believe dropping the main in strong winds is a mistake. Once it's down it is hard (or impossible) to hoist again. You need the main to sail close hauled. Lee shores are bad places! I recut the "cutter" jib and both our storm jibs from second hand sails, all successfully. Learning to make sails at home is a skill worth developing,

The Young Flood Stand

This is when the flooding tide in the Solent rivers stops. It is recorded in tidal diamonds at the mouth of the Itchen and the mouth of the Thorney Channel four hours before high water. This is an immensely valuable phenomenon for getting out of the rivers. It is a good time to leave Chichester for a trip west and the last chance to leave the western Solent for a trip east. Tidal curves in the almanac do not appear to accurately represent what really happens on the water. If you haven't floated before the Young Flood Stand you're probably going to have a long wait.

The final missing pieces

Hilsea creek

On my charts this isn't shown but on the O/S map there is a trickle of mud between Langstone and Portsmouth Harbours. We've been through here twice, both times from the Langstone end. A series of very low road and rail bridges cross this waterway which runs alongside the A27. The final low bridge takes you into a large lake near the M275 junction. I recommend hoisting sail at this point, the final bridge is a long way away and pretty high. We got under it near the top of a big tide with the Wayfarer's 23 foot mast although I think it was a bit marginal. Both times we went through this creek we left Langstone harbour at high water and by the time we were out the other side the tide was in our favour. Some of the bridges were so low we couldn't get under them until the tide dropped a little and of course the railway bridges carry high voltage electricity. If approaching from the Portsmouth Harbour end I would attempt to start 2 hours before high water in the hope of getting through before the tide rose too much.

Portsmouth Harbour Entrance

For small craft there is a "boat channel" to port as you enter the harbour and you must use this channel. There is also a rule that boats with engines must motor in and another (unofficial?) rule of no tacking in the entrance. Our experiences have mainly been of choppy water, useless winds (tall buildings) and power boats tearing about. The harbour is well patrolled by MOD police who like to keep the traffic moving. We narrowly missed getting towed in by them by tacking away at the last moment then the tide swept us in and away. A fair tide is essential. What Portsmouth Harbour does have is a deeply dredged approach. We got out of there in a force 5, close hauled and wind against tide. It was rough for sure but at least there was no bar to have to cross.

Fareham creek

For an interesting sail the westernmost channel offers some potential. As you enter Portsmouth harbour you are in a deep channel and there are huge mooring buoys for large workboats. Further up the water becomes shallower and moored yachts are either side of the channel which meanders somewhat. Towards the top it dries and a high water landing is recommended. A good place for a lunch stop is the low wall alongside the car park immediately to the north of the public slipway. This can be identified by The Westerly Shop immediately to the south of the same slip. Whilst we were there a few dinghies launched, went for a brief sail and recovered. Fareham slip would be a worthwhile place to cruise from if parking costs are reasonable.

Hurst and Keyhaven

The creek behind Hurst Castle actually empties into the Solent a long way north of the Castle, a shingle spit separating the creek from the sea. What this means is a very sheltered anchorage with a clean shingle beach to land on and good deep water even at the bottom of a big tide. The channel does weave about but is pretty well buoyed and leads through moorings to Keyhaven. Here there is a club pontoon with (If I remember correctly) a members only sign. We landed here anyway and one of the locals was interested in our sculling oar. Where we really messed up was in failing to recognise that all the local dinghies had disappeared until it was almost too late. Unable to tack in a narrow channel with shallow water we had to row for about a mile into a strengthening wind until we rounded a bend and could get some sail up.

Beaulieu River

Well, apart from some really insignificant waterways like Kings Quay Creek and Pitt's Deep this is the last of the Solent rivers. The harbour authority are famous for charging large sums of money and the harbour entrance is patrolled by bored teenagers in ribs signwritten "Beach Rescue". If you go tearing past Beach Rescue under sail preferably with a fair tide they will probably leave you alone. Stopping near the harbour entrance is not recommended. We made this mistake. We'd overtaken another DCA boat out in the Solent and stopped at the river mouth to let him catch up. Beach Rescue really upset the pair of us. We got an interrogation relayed over walkie talkie to some official and then they followed us half a mile up river. Eventually we got really hacked, told them what we thought of them and they left us saying "Sorry mate, only trying to help". It wasn't a happy scene and that's the second time they've hassled me. As for the harbour authority we never did have to pay although we never landed and kept moving during daylight hours. There are plenty of long reaches in well marked channels and Bucklers Hard is very picturesque. There are perhaps less moorings around than in other places in the Solent. I spent the trip nervously looking out for the harbourmaster.

Our sailing area

