

Going With The Flow, by John Hughes

Exploring up the Dee estuary from Liverpool Bay. A piece for 'Join the Club' in *Water Craft* magazine, Issue 94, July / August, 2012

All photographs ©John Hughes

On a clear summer's Friday evening after a week at work in a grimy city, the need to get out on the water becomes urgent. My mooring is on the north Wirral coast and, as with most moorings in Liverpool Bay, it floods only within about two hours of high water, so in order to have a good weekend's cruise and be back to work refreshed on Monday morning, timing is important. My boat *Star Catcher* is a 17ft Wharram catamaran with simply an open trampoline on which I set a tent to sleep, but with good stowage space in the hulls.

On this Friday at the beginning of July 2011, I slipped the mooring at high water at midnight. The weather was fair with a clear sky and no moon, although it was not really dark, especially on the northern horizon, but there was no breeze, not a breath, and I have no engine, because the catamaran moves with the slightest of zephyrs, so I paddled – directly out across the top of the East Hoyle Bank towards the open sea. This sounds awkward on a catamaran but in fact it works tolerably well: I paddle from the side of one hull, well astern where I can easily control the tiller, and the effort I imagine is like propelling two well-laden canoes.

The Bank shelves gradually and from the shallowest depth of a foot and a half it took an hour of steady work before the lead-line showed four fathoms, sufficient to anchor and still be afloat at low water in the morning. The night was pristine and the lights of the Bay were spread out in a great arc extending far down the Welsh coast to Colwyn Bay.

There is a great natural wonder in our coastal waters, which few of us ever appreciate unless we take to sea in small boats on summer nights: the marine bioluminescence. It is endlessly fascinating how any slight disturbance of the water causes



this spectacular emission of light. I sat entranced for a while gazing into the water, watching how the west-going ebb, gaining in strength, was sparkling around the anchor warp and creating twin furrows of light streaming from the hulls. In darkness the emissions appear white, but later, with the recovery of colour perception in the growing light of pre-dawn, the emissions are seen as electric blue.

Other than 'bioluminescence' or 'noctiluca' do we have common language terms for this phenomenon? I understand that fishermen in the southwest called it the 'briming', and locally I've heard it referred to as the 'plume', but are there other extant words?

The grounding of the hulls at 0530h was almost imperceptible but I was awake in an instant and, wading knee-deep, was able to drag the boat into deeper water. I felt chilly, having simply slept under the stars without the tent (it was 13°C) but, warmed with coffee from my flask, I set sail at 0610h to a light land-breeze, bound westward to the mouth of the Dee estuary.

The advantage of starting the day's sail at low water is to be able to take the flood up the estuary to explore the upper reaches.





Seals on West Hoyle Bank

A prominent seamark was visible ahead, standing out on the West Hoyle Bank 2NM NNW of Hilbre: the remains of the *Nestos*, a freighter which in 1941 grounded in fog whilst attempting to enter the Mersey. Various parts of encrusted metal dry at low water and on this morning (LW Liverpool 1.5m) I was able to sail in between the boilers and the steering quadrant with 4ft of depth.

Entering the estuary by the Hilbre Swash, the starboard HE4 buoy marks the entrance to the Welshman's Gut, which used to be a low-tide navigable channel through to the Point of Air on the Welsh shore, but now forms merely a bight at low water. It is an interesting anchorage to spend the night in settled weather, sheltered in the lee of the W Hoyle Bank, sharing the company of a colony of seals that hauls out here. I landed on the bank for a run around on the sand to warm up and to breakfast in the growing warmth of the sun.

The deepest passage across the estuary is diagonally in a line from HE4 towards Fflint, which in the light SE breeze I could just about lay on port tack with the help of the flood. Sailing was relaxed and enjoyable in the sparkling sunshine flanked by the pleasant scenery of the Clwydian hills on one side and the sweep of the Wirral coast on the other. But upon closing the Welsh shore near Holywell conditions started to become more lively: I was having to change tack more frequently, the water was becoming agitated and the breeze was freshening. However, there seemed to be no sign of this breeze in the trees on shore, yet the trees were moving past at surprising speed. I was being carried by the tide flowing up the main river channel towards the canalized stretch that leads to Chester.

The canalization – an eighteenth century attempt to stop the relentless silting that had all but killed the port of Chester – irrevocably changed the course of the river, diverting it away from the string of small

ports and villages along the Wirral shore, now all but land-bound by flat leek fields and salt marsh, leaving unchanged only the meandering line of the Anglo-Welsh border to mark its former course.

One of the ports on the Wirral shore was Parkgate. In the eighteenth century this was a fashionable bathing resort and also a principal port of embarkation to Ireland - Händel stayed here in 1741 on his way to a winter season in Dublin where he first performed his *Messiah*, and Emma Hamilton, Admiral Lord Nelson's consort, used to bathe here. Parkgate now is a sleepy village most popular with birdwatchers, large numbers of whom gather on the few days of the year when exceptionally high spring tides flood the marsh almost to the old seawall causing a myriad of birds to congregate at the water's edge.

Parkgate was visible eastwards across the marsh beyond a wide area of open water and I bore away in that direction to escape the strength of the flood. Here was stillness, the heat of the day could be felt, and I soon encountered shallows. Sounding with my paddle, I found a channel where the tide was perceptibly flowing through a broad gap into the saltings; I reasoned that the water must be flowing



Approach to Parkgate



through to somewhere so I followed, and at each branch in the channel I followed wherever the main stream took me. Parkgate came ever closer until I could clearly see the occasional car on the front, and the branches in the channel became ever narrower until I could see that if I went any farther there would be insufficient width to turn the boat around. The marsh was delightfully peaceful, the only sounds being of insects and birds – the largest flocks of shelduck I have ever seen. I turned back just before the tide turned. Any breeze there had been had died, so I paddled, and when I felt too hot to paddle I swam, pulling the boat along with me.

At the edge of the saltings a sudden ruffling of the sails signalled change and within a short time the sea breeze got up, almost with a bang, for suddenly it was blowing fresh from the NW. I hove-to to shorten sail then commenced a wet beat down the estuary through the uncomfortable chop that sprang up on the ebb. Off West Kirby the breeze had moderated and it was exhilarating in the sparkling afternoon sun to round the northern point of Hilbre and come to anchor at half-tide in the gutter close in to the east side of the island and there let the boat dry out.



Star Catcher on the beach at Hilbre

In the evening, sitting cooking at the mouth of my tent, enjoying the last rays of sunshine, a lone yacht – a Silhouette – came to anchor in the foot of the gutter (*Left*). This was unusual; I'd rarely seen another boat anchor here – I expect to have the place to myself – so it was natural in the morning to stroll down for a chat. The couple aboard had motored 30 NM down the Mersey from Fidler's Ferry near Warrington but had never explored round the Wirral coast to the Dee before, because they had lacked the confidence, being unsure of the lie of the sandbanks. But then they showed me the pilotage notes they were using, complete with sketch-chart, which they had downloaded from the internet and which described the anchorage at Hilbre. They said they didn't know the author, pointing boldly to his name at the top of the page – and there was my name! They had downloaded my own pilotage notes! It was a strange coincidence. Naturally I felt pride, but also the heavy sense of responsibility of publishing information that someone might use as a basis for navigation.

The Silhouette set out motoring back to the Mersey as soon as she was afloat, and I followed half an hour later under sail with light NW air. I was back on my mooring by noon and home in time for Sunday lunch feeling pleasantly tired but refreshed. It had been a varied and engaging cruise and I felt recharged, ready to face another week at work. *JH*

