

# Sailing With or Without an Engine

by Richard Crockatt



Map of Blakeney Harbour and Environs © Ordnance Survey

I should declare at the outset that I do not have an engine and do not intend to get one. On the other hand, I do not criticise those who choose to use an engine. I just want to add a few points to place the debate in a wider perspective in order to get beyond the polarised form the debate often assumes. I conclude my thoughts with a specific suggestion.

## The Boat

The decision about whether to carry an engine bears some relation to the boat you have. If you choose engineless sailing, you need a boat that is able to go to windward reasonably well to get you out of trouble and can be rowed without too much difficulty. Many cruising dinghies, especially the larger ones, cannot pass one or another of these two tests, with the consequence that an engine is close to being a necessity. The bigger Drascombes, for example, are not very handy to windward and take some rowing. In fact anything over about 16 feet makes for hard rowing. Having said that, one of my favourite sailing memories is of rowing a Drascombe Coaster on a quiet day up the Sound of Arisaig with my brother. That was a choice. We had an engine and used it on other occasions in our five-day trip in the Inner Hebrides. The moral here is: when the wind falls, other conditions permitting (tide, time constraints, etc), if you can row, maybe you should. There are real pleasures in self-locomotion.

## Where you Sail

My current sailing ground is Blakeney Harbour and the practical test here is: can I beat to windward out of Morston Creek (a narrow tidal creek, often busy with trip boats taking people out to look at the seals) against the flood tide to gain access to Blakeney Harbour? If not, then an engine is pretty close to being a necessity. The bigger boats moored in the creek such as the 17ft Norfolk Oysters all have engines and I can see why. They are good sailing boats but the narrowness of the creek makes tacking difficult for them. My current boat is a 12-foot Essex Smacks Boat with a good-sized balance lug rig which I keep on a mooring in the Creek. She goes to windward well, is handy in stays and, rows nicely with decent length oars of 7ft 6ins. On the few occasions when the wind isn't strong enough for me to buck the flood, I row out to more open water, pick up a mooring or anchor and set the sail. Generally, though, she is handy enough to sail out of the creek against wind and tide. The moral here is that your choice about whether to have an engine will be dependent to some extent on where you sail, coupled with your choice of boat.

## How many aboard?

I sail single-handed, am retired, and don't have some of the time constraints of those who have young children. I don't mind being late home or rowing for several hours if need be. I once had to row against the tide up the River Orwell for three miles or so to Woolverstone Marina, having missed the tide on a return passage from the Walton Backwaters. If I'd had young children with me it would not have been so much fun. To labour the obvious, family sailing is very different from single-handing.

(Left) Richard's 12ft Essex Smacks Boat, leaving Morston Creek LOA 12ft 3ins, Beam 5ft, Draught 6ins x 2ft 9ins, SA 82 sq ft Weight ± 250lbs / 114kg





(Above) Richard's Essex Smacks Boat (Right) Blakeney, 1912

## Sailing Skills

I'm convinced that, while there are many good reasons for having an engine, there is a loss in sailing skills if you use it whenever it is convenient rather than restricting its use to when it is necessary. Admittedly there is not a hard and fast line between convenience and necessity but we all sense when we are opting for the lazy solution rather than stretching ourselves a bit. This is most often the case when faced with a beat to windward. In a light wind in tricky waters, say the Norfolk Broads, it can be very frustrating to make painfully slow progress or even go backwards, but with persistence and application of thought and practice you can often make progress where initially none seemed possible. The same applies in tidal situations. In this connection, some experience of racing can help because racing involves getting the best out of the conditions, being alert to the minutiae of sail trim, wind shifts and the like. I am a dyed-in-the-wool cruising sailor but I have immense admiration for racers who know how to get the best out of their boats and the



conditions, as did the old-time working sailors, for whom I have equal or more admiration. The conclusion here is that it is easier to maintain and improve your sailing skills if you sail without an engine.

## Cruising Range

If you sail without an engine you are bound by conditions to a greater degree than those who carry an outboard. You have to think always what your options are if the wind and weather change suddenly or any number of other contingencies arise. You will sometimes have to settle for not reaching your proposed destination because of these conditions and contingencies. You may in fact find yourself giving up the idea of a 'proposed destination' and settling for the fact that your destination will be wherever you happen to arrive. In short, your cruising range may be smaller than for the motorised sailor.

On the other hand, sailing without an engine means willingly settling for these limits because of the pleasures to be gained from working in tune with wind and weather, pitting your wits against them and sometimes coming out on top. It's a fine balance. There have been times when I regretted not having an outboard, though such regrets are balanced by the knowledge that I am not well equipped to repair a motor which fails. Those confident of their mechanical skills have a significant advantage in this regard.

## Environment

Sailing without an engine makes a tiny contribution to environmental improvement but it exists nevertheless. With global conditions as they are and as they are likely to become in the next decades, anything which reduces carbon emissions is to be welcomed.

## A Suggestion

If you currently sail with an outboard, try sailing a season without one, if at all feasible, and report to the journal on your experience.

(Left) Family sailing, but no motor needed today, thanks

