

# Ode to a Snap Shackle, or the Ship's Boy Earns his Keep,

by Ian Hylton

## *River Crouch to the Isle of Sheppey via Havengore Bridge*

Exhibiting the fickleness of a child with a new toy, I had been neglecting our *Wayfarer Outlander* throughout the season, in favour of the *Shearwater* sailing canoe. Cobnor Week however had been the golden opportunity for *Outlander* and I to reacquaint ourselves and I had thoroughly enjoyed the *Wayfarer's* performance, particularly upwind, in a variety of conditions. Flushed with this enthusiasm my son William (aged 8) and I planned a weekend on the East Coast.

I had circumnavigated the Isle of Sheppey in the canoe a few weeks earlier and found the sight of the Essex coast viewed from Kent to be enticing. Our return visit would see us launching from Burnham Yacht Harbour on the River Crouch, navigating the Roach to Havengore and thence under the bridge and across to the Medway. All going well, the plan was to make it into the Swale in time to ride the late afternoon ebb east towards Harty Ferry for the night before returning to the Crouch the following day via the West Swinn and Whitaker channels. This would be a total of 55 nautical miles or so over the two days, but Cobnor had reminded me that the *Wayfarer* had the legs for it.

For what on the face of it is a flash yacht marina I have always found Burnham Yacht Harbour very welcoming to small craft. The launch fees are reasonable and the parking is included. If only the ramp were a little more dinghy-friendly. Launching at mid-day on the Saturday, an hour after low water, I managed a controlled glissade as the boat descended on its trolley whilst I hung on to the painter and slid down the muddy ramp in a defiant crouch acting as a human drag brake. In hindsight I should have wrapped the rope around the car's towbar and controlled its descent that way.

As we left the shelter of the harbour it was apparent that while it was still only an hour past low water the flood was already well established. There was a moderate S – SW breeze though and under full rig we were able to broad reach through the moorings

pushing up an impressive bow wave that did not reflect our modest speed over the ground.

Turning south into the Roach with the flood now behind us we beat up and through the Middleway and east of Rushley Island before trying to pick up a mooring just south of Suttons Boatyard. By this stage the flood, which was still running south, was so strong we struggled to grab a mooring and ended up anchoring.

Despite letting out plenty of warp it was clear that we were dragging, albeit slowly, and I suspect the 2.5kg plough plus several metres of chain were simply not heavy enough to sink through the loose mud on the bottom and bite into something more substantial. There was time enough to grab something to eat though and for William to don his



new drysuit in case the Thames proved a little wet and cold. This was to be a fortuitous decision, but not for that reason.

Passage through Havengore Bridge is only available two hours either side of high water, during daylight hours, when the firing range is not in operation. With high water Sheerness at 17:00h I called the bridge at 14:55h and the bridge keeper confirmed that we could pass. Approaching the bridge we watched the barriers drop and a row of cars start queuing from both sides as the bridge rose to let us through. The bridge keeper shouted down to ask if we would be returning that evening and I confirmed that we would not. As I looked up to shout the reply I noticed the luff of the mainsail looking rather creased and untidy – the snap shackle attaching the head of the mainsail had come undone!

All right, I confess – what had really happened was that I had not secured it properly. In mitigation I would like to be able to say it was a first offence, but the truth is I had done exactly the same thing during the round-Hayling Island challenge only a few weeks earlier.

We managed to claw out of Havengore Creek under genoa and drop the anchor. I then lowered the rig so that the top of the mast and the miscreant snap-shackle were a mere 15 feet or so from the transom. Now I accept that it is wrong for a child to be punished for his father's crimes, but there was no way William was going to be able to drag me back into the boat, if for any reason I could not manage it. I also recalled the words of the captain in Arthur Ransome's story, *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, when his only criticism of the character John

*Evening, Leysdown-on-Sea*



Photographs supplied by the author

*William to the rescue*

was for leaving the boat to buy petrol when he could have sent one of the crew in his place.

With this sage advice ringing in my ears I tied a rope around William's waist and, casting a glance about for any NSPCC patrol boats, ordered the boy overboard. Keen to put his new drysuit through its paces he was surprisingly enthusiastic and within a minute he was shimmying back down the mast with the wayward halyard triumphantly held high.

The flood was taking us west but though we were back sailing within five minutes the late afternoon breeze had died to almost nothing. At one point I began to worry we might be swept into the stakes that run out from Shoeburyness. To make it into the Swale before the ebb set in we had a small window of perhaps two hours at the most. With the breeze we had had earlier we would have had a fighting chance but it was soon clear that we were not going to make it. The wind did fill in from the SW again to perhaps a F2 and this was enough to take us across the Thames shipping channel. There were several large ships anchored in the Thames and as we crossed the channel they started to swing round to the west in clear indication that we had missed the flood.

Reviewing the chart we decided to ride the ebb to Leysdown-on-Sea, on the north east end of the Isle of Sheppey. We could take the ground there, sheltered from the prevailing SW wind, and be well positioned to take the first of the ebb the next morning out into the Thames estuary. The last of the jet skis were being recovered as we landed at 18:30h and as the water ebbed away we dried out on a firm gently sloping beach (left).



*Approaching the Red Sand Towers*

Leysdown was an interesting place: it is a row of amusement arcades and fast food outlets to serve the large holiday home population. We sat on a park bench and ate fish and chips while we watched the tattooed and pierced patrons strutting up and down the pavements.

At 06:05h next morning we sailed out, wing on wing, heading for the Red Sand Towers. These World War II relics were constructed as part of an anti-aircraft barrage to protect the Thames Estuary and London. I imagine they cannot have been considered a threat otherwise they would not have survived, but they make an interesting sea mark, looking like a group of alien visitors in the morning gloom. We were across the estuary and into the West Swinn channel by 08:40h and the ebb well and truly powered us along. I was ticking off the buoys in

rapid succession. At 10:22h we passed two Thames barges, sedately punching the tide while they waited for the flood to take them up the estuary. The flood would also take us back to the Crouch by way of the Whittaker Channel, and as we turned west it set in nicely. The SW wind was freshening and I decided to heave to and pull down a reef. We then pushed on upwind, taking a bit of spray, but nothing that could stop William dozing off in the shelter of the foredeck.

The tide that we had had to punch the day before was now threatening to carry us past Burnham and rapidly up river.

I would like to visit the upper Crouch again sometime, but I was ready to go ashore now. We gybed and dropped the mainsail then performed what I felt was very smart ferry glide under genoa only, into the yacht haven, crabbing across at about 45 degrees to our actual direction of travel.

The slipway was there to greet us in all its muddy slippery glory. Having learnt my lesson on the way down it, William held on to the boat while I backed the car down to haul her out the sensible way, on the end of long tow rope. At least that was one mistake I was not to repeat.

*IH*

*The Red Sand Towers*

