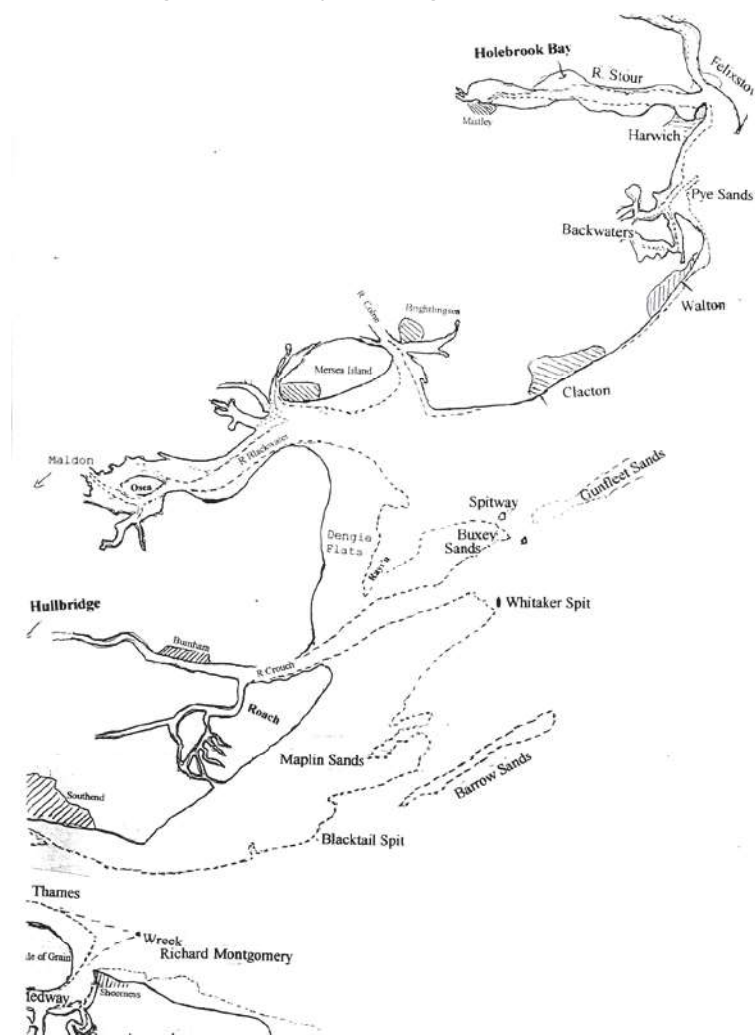


The Plan, by Ted Jones

Ted recounts an enjoyable cruise for which a plan would have been irrelevant – or even impossible to prepare.

Lodged your passage plan yet?' my friend asked with a grin. It was a little friendly banter rather than a real question because he knew what my answer would be. You don't really 'organise' – let alone 'lodge a plan' – in a 15ft boat, do you? Rather you take it day by day and go where wind and tide allow. My friend has a yacht about twice *The Genie's* length, with a huge diesel capable of thump-thumping it along in any direction should the wind prove too light for sailing. By contrast my Sunspot is really only a 'dinghy-with-attitude' complete with a 2hp for those windless days. But, naturally, there was a plan of sorts. Northerlies were forecast for the whole week, and it had been a couple of years since we'd got as far south as the Medway, so where better to have as a hoped-for destination? Apart from this, my aim was to put as many miles under the keel as I could in the few days I had. *The Genie* seemed to need a romp in the same way children need to run and jump for sheer joy when let out from the confines of a classroom.

So when I let go that Sunday morning, we headed south to round Walton Pier - only 7 miles away - but it took a staggeringly long time. The forecast had been for F3 - 4, but in the event it struggled to make a F2. A quick change of 'passage plan' was called for. So we sailed west along the Wallet to pass Clacton rather than to the southwest. Hopefully we'd make the Colne to anchor overnight and would have stronger winds by morning. For the most part, I sat on the lee side, heeling the boat, endeavouring to induce some sort of shape into the sails, but the sea was restless and shook them, like a dog that's just caught a rat. We needed a little more wind. Half an hour of tuneless whistling brought one brief spurt just before Clacton Pier. Suddenly we were making 4 knots, but it dropped almost before I recorded it in my log and *The Genie* continued her curmudgeonly progress, with slatting sails. Eventually I anchored her for that night in the Colne. So much for planning, I thought, but despite the light winds we'd covered 18 miles in 8 hours.



Next morning, Monday, the breeze seemed to have a little more force in it and we stood out to the south east, taking the ebb to the Spitway - a gap between the Gunfleet and the Buxey sands which stood between us and the Thames. But approaching low water the wind dropped again, leaving us wallowing and unlikely to make it through before the flood arrived to carry us back. Like the legendary narrow boat skipper, I cried to heaven 'We need more steam!!'

In the story, the 'engineer' on the bank reputedly replied, 'Sure the horse is doing its best!' Clearly my two horses were needed and we motored the short remaining distance, went through and caught the flood down the next channel – the Whitaker – again wallowing for a while.

Eventually the sea breeze filled in from the southeast and although for a while it rose enough to suggest it might push us round the next obstacle – the Whitaker Spit – I didn't trust it and when it dropped again, we continued our half-drift, half-sail into the Crouch, eventually arriving, and anchoring for the night in the Roach, having covered yet another 18 miles in another 8 hours.

Tuesday saw a somewhat stronger blow from the north, but again I felt unsure of it. We could have caught the ebb out, rounded the Whitaker Spit and headed south along the Maplins towards Kent, but instead those

doubts persisted, and were reinforced by the fact that the lifting bridge at Havengore Creek was out of action. It meant the short cut, knocking over 15 miles off the trip, through which we might have passed either going or coming back, was unusable. Our only route remained the longer one, and in uncertain winds...? All of which made me choose to sail up the Crouch instead.

This proved interesting just the same. The big plastic-fantastics were in Burnham, but the smaller and more interesting boats were further up river. We worked our way up as far as Hullbridge where the light breeze became fragmented by the surrounding trees and the tide had not risen enough for us to go further. So here we turned and retraced our steps, again with the wind eventually becoming southeast as the sea breeze took over after a dead period. We continued down the Crouch, passing several possible overnight anchorages. I had half-formed a plan to go out and through the Rays'n Channel and into the Blackwater. But not tonight. It would be half ebb by the time we arrived, meaning there was only slightly less than a slim possibility of getting through!

I continued sailing. The SE breeze held steady and it grew dark. I eventually picked out the winking Crouch Buoy, the place where I needed to turn north into what remained of the gap between Buxey Sands and the Dengie mud. I headed *The Genie* into the shallows and anchored. She took the ground quietly half an hour later at 2300h. The shore hereabouts is very low-lying and it seemed surreal to be anchored with nothing in sight except the remote house light and the winking buoys. We'd covered 35 miles in 13 hours.

I took a last look round after a Pot Noodle evening meal and saw something moving on the mud. Reaching for the glasses I found it was a pair of giant herring gulls. Presumably they'd come out here for the worms, but it may have been for something else. They saw me and froze until I ducked below again. If it wasn't worms, I hoped I hadn't interrupted one of those romantic moments.

I turned in at 2330h and slept soundly until the returning flood joggled me awake at 0430h on Wednesday morning. The 'plan' for that day was to get through into the deeper water beyond – only a mile or so – then anchor once more for a breakfast and a further sleep before continuing. However, when I set sail at 0500h to head north, I found the best breeze I'd encountered all week, and from the northwest as well. This meant I could close-haul my way through the Rays'n and then tack into the west and continue up the Blackwater. Always provided the breeze held of course.

And it did! *The Genie* loved the F3-4 and hustled her way along. One or two dashes of spray landed on my unwashed face and helped to keep me awake. I don't think passage plans can accommodate sudden changes of fortune like that can they?

Once right through to the north, I hove to for a quickie breakfast after which *The Genie* continued west up the Blackwater until, around Osea Island, the breeze began to falter. And about this time I realised I was tired so, seizing the moment, I nudged *The Genie* into the shallows off the island and anchored – treating myself to a wash, a 'proper' meal and a snooze.

When I awoke, the sea breeze had once again filled in. The tide would soon be sufficient to take me on up to Maldon. However, the forecast for tomorrow was now up to a F5 and I wondered if I should spend time going further up or instead head back where I would be better placed to jump off on that trip down the Wallet towards base. I had to pick up my wife from the airport in a couple of days and didn't fancy too rough a passage. A F6 – which it could well become at times, if coupled with an onshore breeze – would need two reefs and give us quite a battle. There was no hint in the forecast of what lay in store for the following day. It could be better – or it could be worse. Clearly, the weather was changing, so I became determined to go back while I still could, just in case it did worsen. Accordingly, I returned and anchored *The Genie* that evening in the Colne again at the eastern end of Mersea Island, having covered some 28 miles in 11 sailing hours.

Early next morning, whilst the tide was still making, *The Genie* was underway. It looked a delightful day with a comfortable north-westerly breeze and we ran south, goose-winged, to enter the Wallet half an hour later and catch the east going ebb. The lightish wind continued as we reached along but I noticed it gradually veered and the sheets came in little by little until, after Clacton, a couple of gusts hit us and I knew we'd soon need that first reef. A few swipes later, I pulled it down and as the land fell away to the north we came close on the wind. Very few tacks were needed at first, but by Walton Pier, the wind had veered into the NNE – firmly in my teeth in other words – and the seas around the Naze became very nasty. Great holes appeared, set at intervals like tank-traps, and *The Genie* dutifully fell into them, each time with a resounding shudder. By now we should really have had the second reef in to accommodate those stronger gusts, but since each seemed relatively short lived, I simply eased the mainsheet as they hit and struggled on. It was a daft decision in retrospect. In those sea conditions, that second reef would have been the very devil to put in if the strength of the gusts had remained constant. However we got away with it, but it was a wet trip.

A Sprintsail barge came south as we left the Naze, running before the breeze, minus her topsail – always a

sign of strongish winds. And just astern of her, a Harwich-bound yacht proved just how strong it was. She went over at an extreme angle in one of the very localised gusts and one of her bilge keels became clearly visible out of the water. Yachts are made to survive in these conditions, but not to sail like that. I looked at my own wake and realised how much leeway we made when heeled. Not good.

Gradually, as we gained more searoom the holes became fewer and better spaced and each board took us further north towards Harwich. We lost the ebb after a while but that didn't seem to impede our progress too much and eventually we were inside Landguard Point where we picked up the flood which took us through the harbour.

I had expected a fair wind along the Stour but after the usual 'Heinz winds' (57 varieties) through Harwich itself and then under the high ground of Shotley. I found instead that it had gone back into the NW leaving me close on the wind after all. Again, there had been a plan in mind, to get as far up river as I could, but tiredness cut in and once round the corner into the protective shallows of Holebrook Bay, I decided enough was enough and let go for the night. We had come 26 miles in the 9 hours.

One thing I learned. One of my bags of gear had been foolishly left on the side bench, and under it was some of that rubberised matting supposed to prevent things from sliding about. Nevertheless I had expected it to be dumped onto the cabin sole, but amazingly the bag had stayed put throughout all the rough and tumble around the Naze. 'The matting works', is the message.

I didn't hear a forecast until waking on Friday morning and learned that the breeze would be W - NW and about F3. Perverse isn't it how one can struggle through as I had only to find that if I had chickened out, I'd have been better off? Friday's wind, together with the later tides would have made it an easy passage. But some eggs never hatch do they, no matter how long you sit and ponder? And the sail had been challenging, exciting and successful. What more could I ask?

I hauled in the anchor and took a grand tour of the Stour, nosing into all the shallows and even finding a couple of possible meeting points for future DCA rallies which I hadn't previously known about. And when the ebb started to run, I ran with it, out through Harwich and down towards the Walton Backwaters. That fair wind gave me a faster trip than expected, even over the foul tide waiting for us outside and we arrived in the marina earlier than planned. I didn't waste the time gained though. One look around *The Genie* and all the mud, accumulated over the week, was enough to make me reach for the scrubbing brush. She looked quite spry by the time I left her ready for next time, which hopefully, won't be long. Maybe then I'll be able to make a passage plan – and stick to it!

Overall, there had been a couple of tedious days when the sails slatted more than they pulled – or so it seemed – and I would have wished for better, but there had been a rough and exciting day to act as a balance. And there'd been some new things. I'd also achieved the second part of my 'plan' in the six days by sailing for over 54 hours and covering almost 150 miles, with probably less than an hour's motoring. Hardly record breaking, but ... it was great to be back with my little Sunspot again after a leave of absence whilst I tried out a larger boat, *Magic*. TJ

DCA North Norfolk 2008, by Len Wingfield

Norfolk is popularly dismissed in one word: 'flat'. (In other words boring!) In fact most of the countryside is undulating, with substantial cliffs and many lovely old villages. The North Norfolk coast provides superb dinghy cruising with its five unspoiled natural harbours and other creeks, yet apart from our distinguished members the Dyes, it seems to have been largely neglected by the DCA. This year at short notice three DCA members made a group visit. They were: Steve Bradwell with 13ft 3ins Enterprise, cruising sails, no motor; Roger Bamford with heavy 18ft National, Wayfarer mast and mainsail and 3hp motor; Len Wingfield with 14ft heavy dayboat built by Woodnutt circa 1958, reduced Bermudan rig, no motor. VHF carried on all boats. Roger's 18 ft National was described in Bulletin 197 pp4-13, and Len's 14 ft. Woodnutt in 178 p42.

We launched from Brancaster Staithe hard. (National Trust, a minimal £5 donation is requested. In the quieter months free parking allowed. Camping ashore in the reserves is strictly forbidden but discreet bivouacing by the Norfolk Coast Path would probably be overlooked.) Hawk 20s and 'Oyster' gaff riggers are much in evidence here, some for hire from the chandlery. Although the hard provides launching at almost any time, shallows downstream preclude getting to sea after half ebb, and fast currents can present problems at half-flood.

With high water at 1730h our first evening was limited to a short harbour sail before sleeping in our boats