

# To Norfolk via France

## From Ipswich to Blakeney via Boulogne

Every autumn I sail from Blakeney to Ipswich where *Resolution* spends the winter in a secure mud birth at Orwell Yacht Club. Each spring we make the return journey. Much as I love Blakeney harbour and the North Norfolk coast, cruising and day sailing opportunities are rather limited by tidal restraints and drying harbours. I find myself wishing that I had spent a little more time exploring further south. This year I had some free time and this little cruise was the result. **Steve Leigh**

### 14 May - A false start

I had scrubbed *Resolutions* bottom yesterday. We floated off the scrubbing pad and got underway by 1200. A light wind on the beam strengthened as we went down the Orwell until we were doing 6 knots (SOG) with a push from the ebb.

I anchored in Walton Backwaters for the night. It was lovely: sunshine followed by a massive full moon, the company of seals and terns, a peaceful anchorage in Hamford water. The only fly in the ointment was that my aged GPS had lost about a fifth of it's screen. At first I thought it would make

no difference but it did. I had been havoring over replacing it with a small modern unit, now my decision was made. Back to OYC in the morning - it is right next to Fox's chandlery.

### 15 May: Off again

Up anchor at 0830, sunny, warm but no wind to speak of. Motored out of the Backwaters. By 10.15 approaching the Stour, there was enough breeze to sail, making 3 knots up the river with the flood. By 12.50 we were tied up on OYC's waiting pontoon. Nipped to the chandlery, coughed up for Garmin's smallest chartplotter, fitted it and we were off again by 1400.

Anchored off Levington by 1600 ready for an early start tomorrow.

### 16 May: to Wivenhoe

A visit to Wivenhoe had been a goal for a while. Last year we were beaten by weather. This year it was a "breeze". Up anchor at 0745. Sunshine again, no wind to speak of so engine it was. By 0830 there was the start of a breeze but bang on the nose as we headed for the corner at the Naze,

once round we should be able to sail.

By 1000 Naze tower was abeam and our course, now more southerly allowed us to hold port tack.

By 1150 I was off Clacton Pier doing 4 knots and at

**Steve Leigh's  
Marcon Trophy  
winning log**

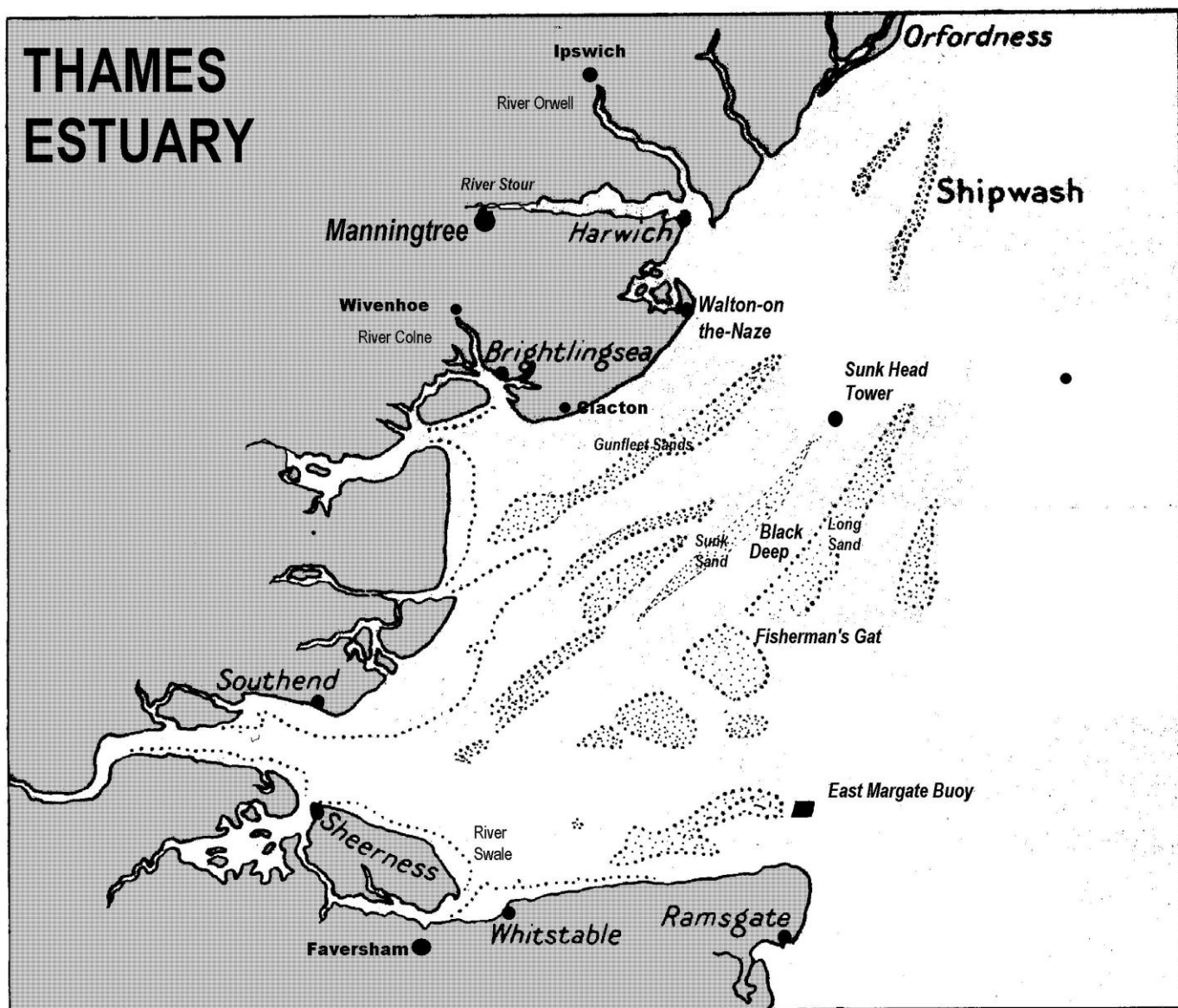
1300 at the Inner Bench Head buoy, at the entrance to the River Colne. I headed up river on a dead run with little wind, so engine was on again. By 1450 we were tied up on the visitors pontoons at Wivenhoe SC, basking in the warmth of the sun and the friendly welcome.

You can stay free for 2 days on the visitors pontoon (which dries for several hours on each tide) at Wivenhoe and if you find a club member you will be given a fob to access the club facilities. The town itself is "charming" with a chip shop, pubs, supermarket, bookshop and railway station. As you approach, the river winds through ever lush greenery until at the final bend a few moorings and a working sand-barge dock are revealed. The pontoons are just before you reach the huge sluice gates.

## 17 May: A visit from the Mayor

Another lovely day marking the relaunch of a beautifully restored Wivenhoe One Design dinghy. A small crowd gathered round the boat. As glasses were raised and speeches begun, I caught sight of a rather attractive lady arriving on a bike. Getting off quietly she winked at me, said "I've been here all the time OK?". Got her chain of office out of her rucksac and slid into the crowd so she could do the business when required. I think we deserve more Mayors like this.

I planned to leave at high water to anchor in Pyefleet Creek for the night. The tide was still racing through the pontoons at predicted high water and I foolishly decided to reverse out of





**Wivenhoe on the River Colne**

the berth with limited space to manoeuvre. As I turned to head for the main channel, I nearly got pinned on my neighbour's transom. I managed to get pinned to the end of a finger pontoon instead.

Out of the people who were still watching the WOD on her maiden voyage an intrepid woman emerged and helped me manhandle the boat back into a berth so I could leave bows first( turns out she was the Commodore of WSC). With a mighty roar of the engine I was away, so much easier with the pointy end into the tide. I was slightly embarrassed but grateful for meeting two charming Essex women. Later I found a lovely peaceful anchorage in Pyefleet and had a good night.

### **18 May From R Colne to R Swale**

(from here on this record becomes more impressionistic).

With time in hand and an unfamiliar passage to make I decided to set up a route on my new chartplotter with waypoints to guide me through

the maze of sandbanks in this part of the Thames Estuary. I had a bit of a fright in the morning as the rudder seemed to be firmly held in mud when I came to weigh anchor. Pulling hard on the chain whilst getting a push from the engine did the trick in the end and we were underway by 0820.

The next three hours were spent under engine as both breeze (SSE) and tide were against us. By 1150 we were at S. Whittaker Buoy and our new course towards Maplin Bank allowed us to close reach on port, peace at last and good progress. Closing the Southern shore, once past the Red Sands Forts, landmarks seem rather scarce and I experienced an attack of plotter thickens syndrome. I had set Columbine SHM at the entrance to the Swale as our final waypoint but as we continued on Port tack, the distance to destination reading started to increase. Employing my finely honed analytical skills I calculated that the tide must have turned early and was pushing us Westward, away from our destination. All I could do was sheet in and sail

as high as possible, we might have to tack to make our Eastings at this rate. After quite a while sailing close hauled and watching our distance to destination slowly increasing, I had a proper fiddle with the plotter and light dawned. I had accidentally dragged the route back towards the middle of the estuary after Columbine. So we ended up uptide and upwind of Columbine in the end when the buoy came into view at 1540 and ended up running towards the entrance of the Swale. Lesson learned - double check your routeing.

### Three men in a boat

Still rather featureless to the eye, the plotter clearly showed the channel to be followed and we picked up Pollard Spit buoy. Just as we passed the buoy I heard faint shouts. They were coming from a dory about 200 metres on our starboard beam. I could make out people waving too.

The ebb was setting in and the wind was behind but getting lighter. I started the engine and went to see what was needed. As I approached the dory I could see three people aboard. A big one wearing shorts and with a very sunburnt back. A middle sized one who was sensibly dressed and fiddling with the outboard, and a small one, a lad of about 13, also dressed for the beach.

I held station close by and they told me that they had been fishing all day but now couldn't start the engine. Did they want a tow? Yes please. I passed a long warp and exchanged quick instructions with middle size who was the skipper and off we

went. Progress was quite slow against the increasing ebb but now the chart plotter really came into its own making it easy to stay in the channel whilst keeping an eye on the tow. It seemed to take an age but as we got properly into the Swale I shortened the tow so we could talk again. The dory had no alternative means of propulsion, not even a paddle, but the good news was that their vehicle and trailer was at Harty Ferry, where I was hoping to pick up a mooring. Middle size asked if I could get them into shallow water. I said I'd do my best and asked that they be ready to release the tow sharply so I could get away before I went aground. All arranged and it went pretty smoothly. Although middle did disappear completely when he first jumped off he held on and the boat and crew were retrieved safely.

By 1850 I was safely on one of the Faversham YC moorings in a roaring ebb (I guess at least 4 knots). No time to smugly congratulate myself for superb seamanship blah blah, I had a thoroughly humiliating experience trying to pick up a mooring in that strong stream. After five failed attempts using my usual method of a line a bit shorter than the boat led from the bow to the



Faversham Creek

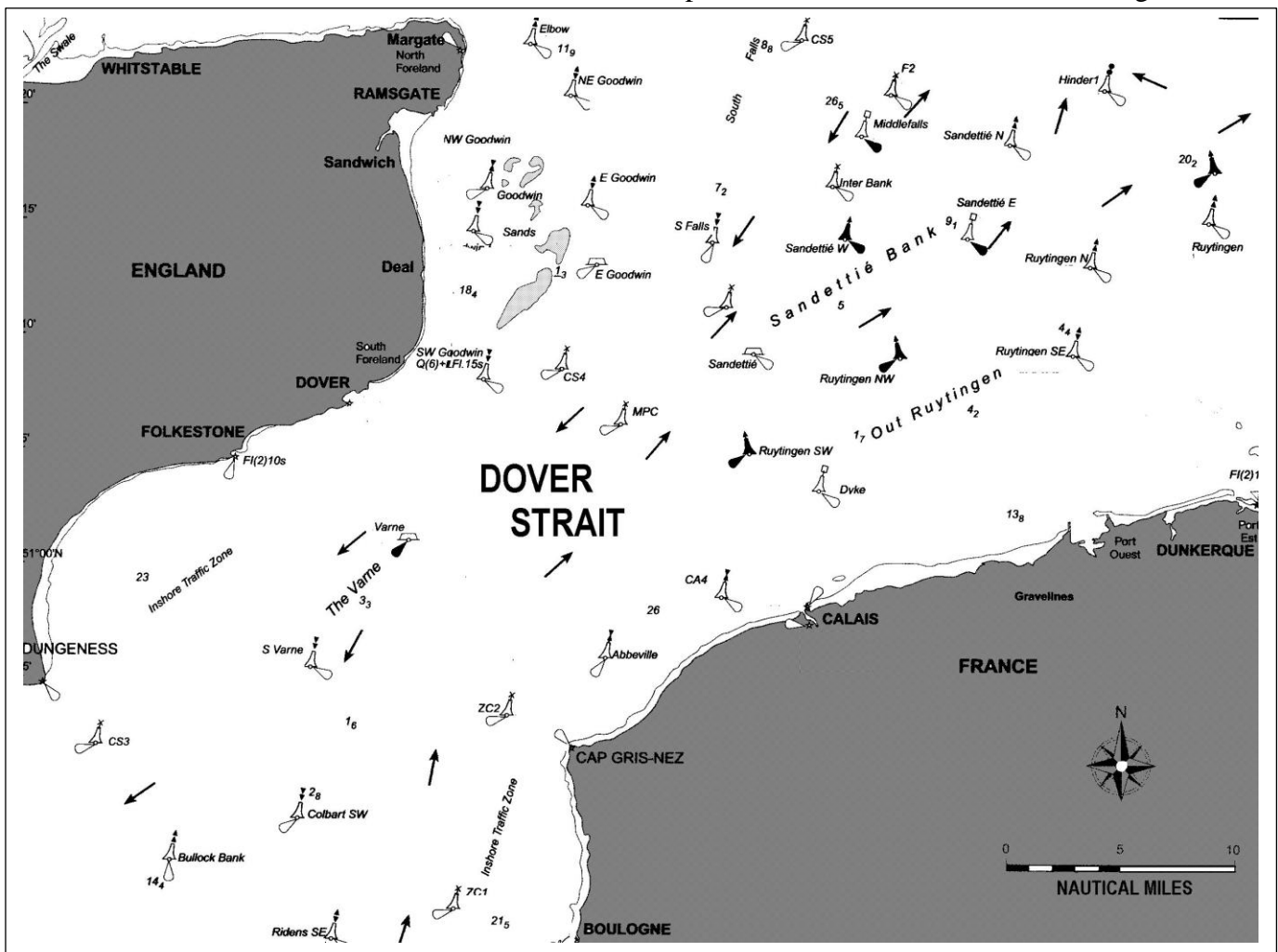
cockpit and placed through the mooring ring (fine so far) I found that my lack of a third hand was a real handicap as I tried to steer with one, hold onto the tail of the rope with the other and operate the throttle with the missing one. Some pain was experienced before I was forced to let go on a couple of occasions as the boat yawed wildly as soon as the bow was cocked into the tide. It finally dawned on me that I was standing on the solution. My 25 metre towing warp was in an untidy heap in the cockpit. Genius. Worked first time with no trouble at all, the extra time before it came under tension made all the difference.

Next day I took the opportunity to explore ashore. I pulled my inflatable well up the slip at Harty Ferry, there's a big tidal rise and fall. It's a nice walk from there to Faversham creek and a lovely muddy smelly boaty place it is. Rickety poles and pontoons line the far bank with all sorts of boats nudged into the soft mud

alongside. As the town is approached rather more "respectable" moorings start to appear, Then there's a pub and a bridge across what is left of the creek. The town lies beyond the bridge but from here you can also walk down the other side of the creek which is a fascinating mix of caravans and boats, a boatyard and then where the creek divides another (and nicer) pub set in splendid isolation and with a great garden.

## Two men in a boat with guns

Back on the boat after lunch I was relaxing with a book on my bunk when I heard a boat approaching followed by a voice asking if anyone was home. What a sinister sight- a big black RIB with two big black uniformed men carrying big black submachine guns hovering off my transom. They turned out to be nice enough, just doing their job of protecting our shores (from what I do not know- undesirables could describe me). Once they had established my provenance and chatted about the delights of



Wivenhoe they left. Interesting contrast with the fishermen from yesterday I thought.

## 20 May: Onward to Dover

Leaving with the ebb at 0600 the plan was to get round North Foreland and then decide on Ramsgate or Dover. Forecast was E or SE 4 to 5 so on the nose again - at least until we rounded the Foreland. As it turned out by 0700 we were making good progress sailing in about 10 knots of wind and able to hold starboard tack and point in the right direction.

After a couple of hours of variable wind we were off Margate on a flat sea sparkling in beautiful sunshine. How relaxing I thought, only to be taken by surprise by a big squall off the land. As the boat rounded up, my hat went over the side never to be seen again. After a couple more squalls the wind seemed to settle at 15 to 20 knots and a more southerly direction which was fine for now but would be less comfortable once at the headland. At 1130 I hove to to reef. The wind had continued to build and we were going to be beating. There followed 90 minutes of lumpy, windy, wet sailing but as we got to Deal Bank - well round the corner and the sea flattened, the wind moderated to a steady 15 knots and we were making 5 knots plus in the right direction.

By 1400 we were approaching Dover harbour along with a thunderstorm and lots of ferries so it was engine on and sails down. Harbour Control asked us to wait outside the Eastern entrance for four ferries to enter and one to exit and then ushered us in the big boys gate. By 1600 we were berthed in the marina and the rain had stopped. (£21.60 for the night).

I had a wander round and went to the RCYC bar for a pint (lovely building and view, carpets fit for a king). The man behind the bar had raced Hornets when I too was sailing them at



Varne lightship with Cliffs of Dover

Folkestone and although we didn't recognise each other we had several mutual friends from that time. This man was also extremely helpful with advice for tidal timing for an easy channel crossing.

## 21 May: The Ferry Glide to France

The last time I had crossed the channel in *Resolution* I had been impatient and set off too soon in the tidal cycle. I had wanted to go to Boulogne but wound up off Calais with the prospect of a long and uncomfortable beat to get there. So Calais welcomed me- a bit grudgingly- there is only one entrance and lots of ferries- basically you have to follow one in. I enjoyed my time there though. This time I stuck to the local advice and planned to start my crossing at HW-1 (09.50).

We slipped our lines at 0900. Outside the harbour the wind was very light and it was quite foggy. I was worried. We motored roughly SW towards the Varne lightship but not yet in the Traffic lanes. I called the Coastguard for his view on the visibility for the crossing. He had reports of 2 to 3 miles mid channel and the sun was vaguely detectable so I felt reassured and decided to go. By 09.40 we were approaching the TSS, time to steer 130 degrees to cross at right angles. Still no wind to speak of so



**Boulogne harbour**

motoring- now for the Tillerpilot- but no, the delightful machine was sulking because it had been rained on yesterday. So, hand steering and keeping a lookout, the time passed slowly.

By 11.30 Colbart NCB was on our starboard beam, we were crossing the “central reservation” and visibility was beginning to improve. I turned the engine off at 1215, reaching on port tack at 5 knots plus in about 10 knots of wind. At 1300 I had to dodge a couple of E bound ships but the tide has done its magic Boulogne was directly ahead. By 1400 it was raining and the wind had dropped so I was back to motoring 4 miles out. By 1600 I was moored to a pontoon in a nearly empty Boulogne marina (€15.88), soaked through and cold but jubilant.

### **Boulogne: reasons to be cheerful**

The marina is in a brilliant position, the facilities are good and it is relatively inexpensive. Because it is no longer a ferry terminal the crossing is much more relaxing than that to Calais where one can feel persecuted by the constant stream of ferries. Boulogne is a fine town to explore by foot but you can also hire a decent bike for €5 per day from the place on the bridge by the marina (fantastic value but they do want a large cash deposit).

If you like fish you are in luck. The small boats unload directly to stalls on the fish market which

is opposite the marina. Big fishing vessels use the other harbour which has massive infrastructure for handling big catches. You can try land yachting on the huge beach. I did. It was great fun and not too expensive (never tried it before). And of course you can fill your boat up with wine. I reckon if you buy enough the trip pays for itself. Some may think that is faulty logic but I know but it works for me.

### **25 May: Back across the Channel**

Time differences! I had already missed my first land yachting session because I was still on English time. Now, just as I cast off at 0600 I realised that I had got it wrong again and was leaving 2 hours earlier than intended. *Tant pis*, carry on. At the harbour entrance there was a strong NE tidal set so things looked good: sunshine, clear skies, and a SE wind of about 10 knots.

By 0920 Colbart was abeam, we'd been making good speed on a very broad reach tracking across the TSS on 310 degrees at 5 knots plus. By 1000 we were passing the Varne lightship and by 1040 we were about 3 miles off Dover: a speedy and satisfying crossing. I decided to carry on to Ramsgate as we were still carrying the tide and going well on what was now a dead run.

By 1450 I was tied up in Ramsgate marina (£20.72). The plotter tracks showed that outbound and inbound tracks across the channel were nearly identical. Marvelling, I resolved never to ignore local tidal advice again.

### **26 May: Ramsgate to Harwich**

Getting the timing right for a Northbound passage from Dover or Ramsgate to Harwich always seems harder than when going the other way. Today was no exception. From my log- which is quite hard to read in parts – I reconstructed the following synopsis. It was



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coming up to springs so I needed to be at N Foreland 1 hour before HW Dover (0920). I also needed to be at the far end of Black Deep by 6 hours after HW (about 1640).

I set off at 0820 and eventually picked up mooring near Levington on the Orwell at 2230. Engine hours were about 12. Was I wet and tired? Yes. Do the words Black Deep engender fear and loathing in my heart? Yes.... (it's not the first time that I've experienced a miserable passage up this aptly named channel).

Some good news though. The Tillerpilot seemed to have partially recovered though with evidence of stroke damage. It could hold a course but only responded to the port turn button. This called for some ingenuity when wishing to alter course to starboard

The day progressed along these lines. Leaving Ramsgate as we turned our head towards N Foreland the wind was about 12 knots on the nose (roughly NE). By 0840 the wind had increased to 16 knots but port tack put the tide on our lee bow and sent us in roughly the right direction. So with the engine off we were doing 4 to 5 knots but slamming a bit into steep seas. I tacked at about 1000 to avoid a wind farm. And I soon put in a double reef in 20 knots and rolled in half the genoa. Things were then much better - doing 6 knots plus but at 1130 the engine was started again to help shape a course to Fisherman's Gat.

We were getting pushed too far to the west and now progress was much slower. The course change to take us through Fisherman Gat allowed sailing again but when we turned into Black Deep at 1400, 25 knots of wind was bang on our nose again and steep seas were being kicked up by wind against tide. I saw no real alternative to gritted teeth and motoring into the wind. Three and a half hours of bashing along and we finally reached the end of Black Deep and could shape a course for Harwich but although the angle was better we still needed to

motorsail to keep upwind of the breaking seas on the end of Sunk and Barrow sands.

By 1900 we had squeezed past the end of Gunfleet Sands. The sight of the Naze tower beckoned us onwards.

The wind began to moderate and seas were much flatter but the tide was setting us down to the south, then it started to rain hard and as the visibility reduced the misery increased. It finally stopped raining as we picked up a mooring. The peace was blissful and the hefty lump of Bukh engineering that had been hammering away for hours now radiated comforting heat into the cabin as I removed my soaking oilies and prepared a quick meal. Then sleep. The last entry in the log reads "Life is beautiful".

## **27 May: Back to Orwell YC**

The forecast Northerlies were not encouraging after such a hard day so I decided to go up the river to the club and drive my car home. In the end though I just unloaded the wine and prepared to set off for Blakeney in the morning if the forecast was better. It was, and I did, finally picking up my mooring on the morning tide of the 31 May, having stopped at Felixstowe Ferry, Lowestoft and Sea Palling on the way. But that's a story for another day.

Reflecting on my unfortunate experiences with Black Deep I realised that on both occasions it was the wind direction that was the dominant factor. Having the tide with you is all very well but wind over tide in these restricted and shallow waters is always uncomfortable.

Add to that that as the tide starts to push south and the sea flattens it becomes difficult to keep on track for Harwich once past Black Deep, a long and arduous passage is almost guaranteed. How much more pleasant it would be with the wind aft of the beam. Next time I'll know better even if it might not be possible to wait for the right conditions.

**Steve Leigh**