

# Taming the Thames

**Believe that and you'll believe anything!**

Mike Samuels

I was asked recently if I was a "yachtie". Me! Me what sailed the squalls and tempests of the Regents Park boating lake reliving Swallows and Amazons.

Me that had the distinction of sailing my full rigged schooners so fast I beat the Isle of Wight ferry.

OK, I was rowing and the first I knew about the ferry was when his air horns nearly blasted me out of the water coz I was rowing right across its path!

Me what sailed from Old Leigh in Essex to Hullbridge in a 14' dinghy. A trip we'd planned to take 4 hours.

We cast off, ramming very few moored boats, and set our sails towards the setting sun.

Actually the sun was behind us, but it didn't sound so good, and you couldn't see it anyway as it disappeared after an hour as mist closed in.

So we headed towards our destination sailing serenely along the Essex coast.

Maybe 5 hours into our 2 hour journey I began to suspect that my seafaring mate was not the old sea dog he'd professed to be.

I was even more sure when he brought out his nautical map, an A to Z of London streets.

Give him his due, there was a blue line which said river Thames.

Then the rain started.

Not gentle little drops, but the sort of rain that fills a little dinghy in a matter of minutes...so we both sheltered snugly under a paper carrier bag.

We got wet!

By the time the rain had stopped, the skipper announced that we would not reach our destination in the time allotted, highly perceptive of him as it was now 9m and we'd been sailing for seven hours!

So much for two hours.

I forgot to mention that my mate, the skipper, was employed by Fords as scheduler...no wonder they had difficulty in making cars on time!

I did start to wonder if things were as planned, when a passing tanker called us on their loud hailer, and asked if we needed help!

We thanked them and said no, as we merrily sailed through the waves at the tanker's stern.

Such fun as the water leapt over our little boat. I now know what a car feels like in a car wash.

We sailed on, soaking wet, and shortly afterwards, the tidal Thames did what it does best, and changed tide, going out just when we wanted it at its deepest to allow us to pass over the mudflats and sail into Havengore Creek.

There is a notorious area at the mouth of the Thames called the Maplin Sands. Maplin Mud more like it. When the tide goes out, the mudflats appear.

And small boats which are caught out there tend to act in a strange way. They sink.

Discretion being the better part of valor, we decided to drop anchor and wait for the tide to come back in.

Anchor? Ever seen the wheels on a tractor? OK.

So we dropped the middle bit of a tractor wheel, which was tied to a length of string that he called rope, which was tied to the boat... and waited.

It worked, we stopped and, by way of celebration and relief, our intrepid skipper broke out the rations and we moored up to a mud flat.

Curry was on the menu which we cooked on a small primus stove.

Not an easy task as the boat was still half-full of water.

No problem said my intrepid sea dog friend.

We can get out of the dinghy and stand on the mud flat while we balance the primus stove on one of the two planks which served as seats.

Now I don't know if you have ever used a primus stove, but they are lethal.

Never let yer granny near one unless she's made a will.

The idea is that you put your saucepan full of food on a small ring on top of the stove.

Then you have to light the burner.

But in those days these contraptions from hell burnt paraffin.

No problem, just prime it.

So I started pumping this little lever to bring the paraffin up to the top and my mate had a match out to light the stuff as it appeared.

Now I know that sounds simple, but we were standing on thick mud in maybe 18 inches of water.

The boat was rocking as boats do in the gentle breeze.

But a gentle breeze in the Thames estuary is what you'd call a storm if you experienced the same force of the wind ashore.

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Old Leigh at Low Tide - Looking Towards the Maplin Sands.

Unimportant things like, we can't sail into Havengore Creek, our next point on what was turning out to be an epic voyage, until the tide is at its highest because of obstacles in the water designed to hole little boats just like ours.

He had forgotten to tell me that we were entering Ministry of Defence waters and the channel we were heading for passed right slap back through the middle of an atomic weapons research station.

Waters which are top secret, and admittance is forbidden to the unauthorised, a category which includes lunatic sailors.

Waters full of anti-submarine obstacles designed to commit atrocities to steel hulls. Now he tells me!

Our wooden hull stood no chance, it was a breeding ground for woodworm, and the burnt bits from our cookery lesson hadn't helped.

No problem, says he. These shallow channels are a doddle at full tide. We just sit here and wait for the tide to reach its full level and sail in under the radar.

Radar???

I realised he was worried when a look of horror passed over his face. Worrying about the radar I asked. Forget the radar says he, we may have a problem.

A bigger problem than the army and the radar, and the boat bloody sinking, I asked.

Yes says he.

By now I am starting to regret bunking off Sunday School when I was a kid, and wondering if knowing the first verse of The Lords Prayer guarantees redemption.

Do you reckon our anchor rope is 4 metres long, he asked.

No idea I said, wondering if he was gonna hang himself before we drowned.

That's good he said, it's a 4 metre tide.

Tied to what I asked? Not tied, he corrected, tide. T-I-D-E. Oooo tide, I said. So what does that mean.

Well anything short of a 4 metre rope and we'd be swept into the creek where all the obstacles are, and they'd rip the bottom out of our boat.

We both jumped over the side as panic set in, to measure the rope.

Now there is this phenomenon on the Maplin Sands, which means that if you stand in 18 inches of water at low tide, over mud flats...that 18 inches deepens rapidly as the tide starts to come in. And mud flats are certainly not flat.

And not flat mud flats have bloody great trenches around them And these trenches fill with water quicker than any other part.

And at night the mud flats and these trenches full of water all look the same colour.

Anyway, as I said, we both jumped on to the mud around the little yacht to find out how long the rope was.

And disappeared!

We both surfaced at about the same time and swam back to the side of the boat.

Pulling our way round to the front of the boat, we tugged at the rope.

No slack. We had already run out of anchor rope.

No problem, back into the boat, float in on the tide, and try to push ourselves clear of the bottom tearing obstacles with the oars.

I say no problem.

Have you ever tried to climb back into a boat which is running with the tide, dragging its anchor whilst trying to stop your wellies floating off up the Thames?

Continued opposite...



Maplin Sand Towards Havengore Creek

Anyway, I'm priming, pumping and trying to hold this stove steady while Indiana Jones lights the paraffin.

Easy stuff, we got the flame going with no problem at all.

But, nobody told me to stop pumping.

The stringy bit was burning beautifully, and as I pumped furiously, the flame followed the paraffin down the stove, along the seat and into the bottom of the boat.

Did you know water catches fire? Neither did I, but the water in our boat was soon ablaze.

I bet you also didn't know, that burning paraffin spreads so nice and quickly in a sea breeze.

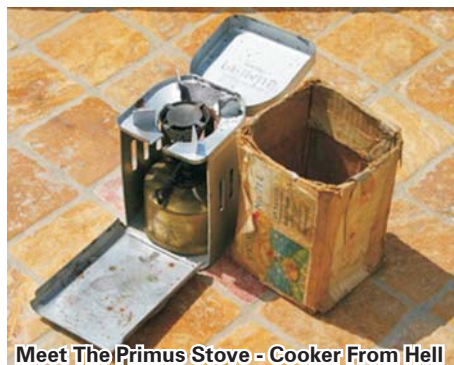
Try pouring petrol on a barbie, and you'll get the idea!

After having spent hours bailing the water out of our little dinghy, we now stood on the mud like two demented idiots tossing water back into the boat as we battled to put the flames out.

Then the rain started again, and far from putting the flames out they just floated higher, even the skipper from hell started to panic as our one little sail joined in the fun and caught light as the flames crawled up the ropes that were laying in the bottom of the boat.

Eventually we managed to control the inferno, and as we made a coffee from cold water from his flask, we decided to sit it out and wait for the tide to come in.

Now I'm not saying I was sailing with a nut-case, but miles from shore and sitting in 18 inches of water the skipper remembers silly things.



Meet The Primus Stove - Cooker From Hell