



# Cruising in small boats

## The River

The river, always there, 12 feet from the door onto the small patch of lawn, slow moving, silent unless stirred by equinoctial gales, the focus of my early memories.

The river carried our furniture from the bridge and our drinking water from the standpipe. Wherries passed carrying piling materials or dredging spoil, most stripped down as lighters but some still with a mast to be used as a derrick. Hire boats began to appear as the country recovered from the after effects of war. One grim week in February animals and people were ferried past rescued from their isolation on mounds that the "53" East Coast flood had not covered.

The surrounding country was low with marshes that flooded in the winter. Skies extended in a great arc with only the odd willow, High's mill and Martham church tower to break the full hemisphere.

In a cut into the lawn floated Pip our flat bottomed rowing boat. Pip and my parents' bikes were our link with civilisation. I learned to row in Pip some time before any formal schooling. I impressed a visiting Aunt by rowing her up wind and then using an oar to steer her back while she held up her scarf as a sail.

When not in use Pip tugged at her mooring lines impatient at the lack of action. The feeling was mutual. I shared her urge to be away and going somewhere. The noise of ripples slapping under Pip's flat bottom was a constant reminder that the transport and the highway were just there waiting to be used. Both the river and Pip had a catalogue of smells which changed with the seasons.

In the dark months they augured damp and decay. In the spring whiffs of paint and tar gave notice that boats were coming out of storage and being smartened up for the new season. In summer scent of reed and meadowsweet drifted

from the road. Those smells were powerful and ever present to the olfactory senses of a four year old.

Pip was joined by a Snipe sailing dinghy. The Snipe was of heavy construction and had been built pre-war – but she expanded my world considerably. We could now reach Hickling Broad and Horsey Mere which seemed like great seas to me. Martham Broad, though smaller, was rich with nesting birds and water lilies. Marsh Harriers wheeled over vast reed beds. The river below Potter Heigham Bridge remained a mystery. The hassle of mast lowering was a disincentive to my father and he much preferred the wild spaces above the bridge to the clutter of bungalows near and below it.

At age 16 I returned as Captain (and re-builder) of the Snipe from the South rivers to re-visit my old haunts. This meant planning, and undertaking, a passage across Breydon Water and through Yarmouth. Being largely self taught there were many lessons to be learnt in a trip of such length. One painful lesson was that mosquitoes have no problem penetrating a land tent lacking a sewn-in groundsheet.

## Hollowell

For anyone who shares my passion to see what is round the next watery corner, be it coast or river, you will be pleased to hear that it is not now necessary to build your own boat and teach yourself. More gentle introductions are available to the Hollowell sailor.

Boats are available for hire. Don't, however, assume that a boat should be used without scrutiny. The condition will only be as good as the last user saw fit to leave it in. The last user might have been cold, wet, tired and demoralised – and less aware than you about what is "sound".

Courses (level 1 and 2) are readily available. These give an excellent grounding, but you must not delay in using and developing your new skills.

Hollowell has some corners to go round, some shoals and underwater obstacles to inadvertently go aground on and weed in the summer. It also has a tiny river and it is possible to get a small boat almost up to the road. It is thus a sort of cruising ground in miniature.

You can of course, go off with a picnic and anchor somewhere sheltered to enjoy it – but do tell the rescue crew, so that they don't interpret a static boat with no sail as a casualty. While we do run shore based picnics for the junior courses I hesitate to recommend these for adults for fear of running foul of the Landlords restrictions and upsetting fishermen.

Lots of cruising/seamanship skills can be practiced on our sheltered piece of water such as: collecting a man-overboard, stopping the boat on a buoy, lowering and raising sails afloat, sailing to windward on jib alone, heaving to, adjusting the rig to suit conditions, sailing backwards, approaching a pontoon, reefing under way. These can all be learnt from reading books (the RYA manuals give enough information on most of these) and practicing.

While the scenery is lovely, there comes a time when you have visited all the corners several times, practiced the seamanship bits, become familiar with your boat and the way it handles and now feel the need of a new challenge. This is, of course, why a lot of us race. As you gain confidence in boat handling it is a natural progression to try and sail more efficiently.

While I bought my Wayfarer for cruising I now spend more hours racing it at club level than I do cruising it. It is simply so absorbing finding out what makes it go and adding the spur of light hearted competition.

**However, if cruising is your main interest, then you need to start looking at other places to sail.**

**Read on-**



## Associations & organised cruises

Some dinghy class associations organise cruising events, guidance and instruction. Wayfarers, Wanderers, Drascombes leap to mind. There is also a Dinghy Cruising Association not based on any class.

My involvement is limited to the Wayfarers which I know to be very supportive. In March every year there is a winter cruising conference (which has been held at HSC) but is now usually at Notts County just up the road. This is a busy day of lectures, presentations and practical demonstrations. Cruising boats are set up for examination and their owners take pride explaining how their particular set-ups work. To have your own ideas copied is actually very flattering.

The Wayfarers also offer a range of cruises from lake to river to estuary and to sea. There are usually some day sails across the Solent with rescue boat cover from Lymington which can act as a confidence builder for beginners. Another good introduction is the week at Ullswater with day sailing to various destinations on the lake. The Broads would be the next logical step. Soft banks are largely forgiving and tides, whilst gentle, need to be allowed for and thus impose a need for simple passage planning.

With my background it should not be a surprise to hear that I take on the organisation of the annual Broads cruise for the Wayfarers and alternate most years between South and

North rivers – although two years ago, by way of a change, I did take them right round the Norfolk coast from Lowestoft to Wells.

Another of my commitments is the Wayfarers Cruising Skills Course (which happens to be run at Hollowell). This is basically a practical seamanship course but with some elements that don't appear in the RYA books. For instance I have never seen bridge shooting or rolling up a beach on an RYA syllabus!



Mike and Helen on the broads



## Where after that?

For dinghy cruising I guess that Frank Dye has set the limits with his cruises to Iceland and Norway.

For mere mortals (Frank is a bit beyond that) coastal cruises usually afford the most pleasure. I certainly prefer something to look at rather than big expanses of nothing. Wuffa has visited the Inner Hebrides, cruised the English coast from Humber to Cornwall, explored most of the Thames and Trent, enjoyed an exciting trip down and back up the Severn and been to many other places. These other places include many immortalised in Arthur Ransome's books.

By way of self preparation for all this I at-

tended navigation evening classes as far as they went and I still take every opportunity to join organised cruises in exciting places (like the Severn) and take advantage of other people's local knowledge.

The boat is old and nothing very special but I do keep a close eye on the rigging, hull structure and buoyancy. This includes a crude check every year on the buoyancy tanks by immersion

The first element is the will to do it. Thereafter you need a sound boat and the means to tow it, the ability to sail instinctively (which comes with practice) and then go where you will.

## Rutland Cruise

For many years I have organised a day cruise for club members on Rutland Water. We assemble at the day sailing centre, launch and, weather permitting, sail up both North and South arms. In the South arm we anchor in a sheltered spot to brew tea and eat nice things. We sail as a group, individually or as "buddy" pairs as people wish. The distance sailed is enough to be well out of sight of our start point.

Windsurfers (with long boards) are welcome.

It is possible for people to ship as crew with an experienced person. For 2010 I will try a pairing arrangement to link the less confident with experienced sailors. I will kick this off in mid summer.

We work together to launch and recover, especially with the heavy boats like Wayfarers.

If you want advice on trailing, I (and many other old hands) will give that freely (provided that you organise and rehearse things a sensible time in advance).

If you are an experienced and instinctive sailor it could be possible to negotiate hire of a club boat – but, if you have a real ambition to cruise, you should definitely be doing it in your own boat; a boat that is familiar and that you maintain at a level that gives you confidence that things won't break.

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