

Grebe's Expedition to the Wash – Mike & Val Sherwen

The Wash is really the British Waddensee (or Wading Sea!), as tempting for exploring shallow creeks as the German Waddensee was in *Riddle of the Sands*. The North Norfolk harbours are also ideal Shrimper land, which we found last year, reaching Brancaster. With SW prevailing winds, an average beam reach from the Deben is probable, though luck and patience have given us dead runs both ways, both years!



We left Melton on the 2nd July 2011, leaving Felixstowe Ferry very early on Sunday to use all the tide to Lowestoft. Apart from off Kessingland, where the shallows extend a long way out, we hugged the coast to Lowestoft. The Royal Norfolk and Suffolk YC is very grand but friendly, and its pontoons are right in front of it, just inside the entrance. After some civilisation, we left on the next tide (in fact before it, which was pointless!), on the next long leg. Yarmouth's wind-farm harbour, Caister lifeboat station, the Cockle, Waxham reefs, Happisburgh Light, then Cromer Pier is the next headland.

However, there was still Sheringham to pass, and the cliffs messed up our southerly breeze. Blakeney Church became visible but was still miles away, and the tide turned off Cley. It was also dusk, so we motored and finally picked up the Wreck beacon, which is the only lit mark at Blakeney.

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Close by is the Fairway and we turned into the growing ebb. To our amazement, our old 4hp got us past the point where we anchored snugly last year, and up into the 'pit' where we picked up a mooring just inside the old lifeboat house, twelve hours from Lowestoft. We could only just see the starboard marks in the gloom - pity they weren't still black!!!

We were watching the forecasts very carefully and managed our trip using windows like that. However, we had to wait several days before we could move again. For North Norfolk harbours, what matters is not only wind strength but also direction - they become unfriendly with a whiff of northerly. Our stormbound periods were, however, pleasantly spent - walking round Blakeney 'pit' at low tide, or catching the frequent Hopper buses along the coast. We actually walked most of the Coast Path.

Eventually, we had SW4 to get along the coast and possibly to Kings Lynn. We were off Scolt head at 0600, but by Hunstanton we had force 5 and a big black cloud. The prospect of the 15-mile beat was daunting, so we anchored off Thornham and reflected. With the forecast, it was now or never, so we went, finding a gully called the Bays through the unmarked Gore sands off Hunstanton to face a wind-against-tide beat past 'Roaring Middle'.

Grebe did really well, with very little water aboard, then the wind eased by afternoon so that we were searching for wind over the Peter Black sands outside the Lynn channel. For nine hours the tide had been with us, but it was now turning so we motored up the Ouse channel to find a boat to lie beside at the Ferry.

The Ferry man allowed us to stay there and also offered us a lift across to the Ouse Amateur SC, beside the ferry steps, where we were well received; but there were no facilities there, not even a pontoon! Despite wishing to have seen the medieval town, we left on the morning ebb.

A real Wash day of sun and light airs, so we anchored near a bank in the Bull Dog Channel, five miles from the Ouse mouth, and swam and watched seals. So many seals, sliding down mudbanks like lifeboats! It was strange to see distant churches and trees on most horizons, with buoys and posts all over, even the odd ship waiting for Sutton Bridge.

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Gradually a sea breeze filled in and we tracked across the Seal and Thief sands towards the Nene mouth. At dusk we found a chart position of 'yacht moorings' near 'Kerr' and anchored close by.

However in the early hours the wind blew northerly against the ebb and we were thrown about somewhat, so at dawn we sought shelter in towards the river. We soon realised, however, that a large bank of the Holbeach bombing range, with its marooned distant ships - the fluorescent battered targets - was giving us shelter.

So we anchored again in 5 foot in a shallow bay just east of 'Mac', about two miles from the mouth, which turned quiet and idyllic as the ebb continued. Later we swam and rowed about the sandy expanses, with only one RAF bomber for company.



Nene mouth to ourselves and the RAF

With light airs that afternoon we motored into the Nene, past Peter Scott's east lighthouse, then up the drain to Wisbech, rapidly pushed by the tide. Apart from the odd cow on the bank, the real delight on this leg was to get Sutton Bridge to swing open for us - built in 1895 and still going strong. Well, I like Wisbech, which was fortunate as the weather turned against us for a few more days, but it was cheap and had all marina facilities.

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We studied Fen drainage history, waited with a dozen narrow boats trying to reach Boston by sea, and visited Elgood's Brewery.



Eventually , a day of workable wind was forecast so we left Wisbech on the 15th and found our sheltered bay again in the last of the northerly F7. A bit rough at high water that evening, but then we were ready for a dawn start towards Gibraltar Point, the Holy Grail (and limit of the Inshore Forecast area). The Wash ebb pushed us well, and gannets were flying past blue sea and sky, but the wind had weakened and the forecast was bad for the next day. So instead we headed back east towards Hunstanton with Thornham our target.

The tide was not helping now, but we anchored off Thornham at low water. I rowed ashore to survey the tiny creek with a shallow gully across the beach. We waited as long as Irving's Guide had said, but we went in with breakers either side of us. Local boats also had trouble - due, they thought, to the remains of the strong northerlies.

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In the creek we found a staging with an old inflatable on it. It turned out not to have been used for years, and served us as a big fender. The storm broke overnight but we were snug with our tent and big fender. We did more walking, with surprisingly little rain landing on us, and finding shelter in the 'Lifeboat' when it did.

The next weather window allowed us back to Blakeney on the 19th, where we stayed overnight, to minimise the distance for the last push back to Lowestoft. You can get shelter at Blakeney Point at most states of tide, even if the 'pit' is inaccessible. Blakeney Town is very shallow, but Morston has easy access. It really helps to have morning and evening tides on this coast to use a day to the full, and we left at 8 am. The tide was with us but the wind fickle off Sheringham as we watched the puff from the steam train and heard its whistle a mile out to sea! Luck was with us here as the wind turned NE, giving us a beam reach after Cromer. It weakened in the afternoon, however, and in the near calm we anchored overnight off Caister in 12 foot, waiting for the next flood, surprisingly just as we had done the previous year!

Next flood at 8 am saw us on a dead run past Yarmouth, with a dolphin spotted off the bow, and right on to Southwold by 2 pm. After a pleasant evening in the Harbour Inn and Sailing Club, we sailed out of the harbour and tacked downwind off Aldeburgh doing 7 knots! We were home – after three weeks.

Mike & Val Sherwen – *Grebe* (101)