

Walton Backwaters

25th - 27th May 2013

Walton Backwaters had been suggested as the venue for a Shrimper rally at the late May Bank holiday weekend. A windy, cold May drew to a close, and no-one had expressed any interest in a trip to Walton - not surprisingly. The forecast for 23rd May weekend was particularly bad with high winds and low temperatures, and we were considering setting up other plans for the weekend - then the weather forecast changed. Friday was still going to be grim, but from then on things were set to improve.

We delayed our departure until Saturday midday when we could get out of Mel Skeet's boatyard. It was a quick sail down the Deben, even against the tide, with a brisk North Easterly. In spite of the cold wind, there were good fleets of dinghies all down the river: handicap racing at Woodbridge, a Wayfarer Open Meeting at Waldringfield, and 30 to 40 Youth Training at Felixstowe Ferry. We hugged the shore across Felixstowe Bay to keep out of the tide and made good time to the Backwaters.

We made our way to Kirby Creek, dropped anchor not far from a smart 36-footer and had a warming cup of tea. Two men passed us rowing back to their yacht, and as we greeted them they said they hoped our anchor would not be fouled on the many chains lying at the bottom of the creek. We decided not to worry about that problem until the morning. The Telegraph crossword and sudokus kept us happy until the gin and tonic came out as the sun dropped down below the yardarm.

The wind was slowly moderating from the Force 5 that it had got up to, and it was a pleasant evening. The same two men came out in their rowing boat and provided us with intriguing entertainment. They rowed to the shore with various ropes and hoses and seemed to be delving down to the mud from the stern of their tender. Then the younger man returned to assist from the bow of the yacht, while the older man slowly made his way to the shore again, dropping a new galvanised chain on the way, while doing complicated manipulations with various lengths of rope.

Peering out of our portholes while we had a tasty supper of eggs and bacon, we wondered if it all might have something to do with the surrounding oyster beds. We finished supper just as the two men seemed to be finishing their operations, and Rob shouted out inviting them to come aboard for a drink. 20 minutes later they rowed across and settled in the cabin with glasses of wine. We discovered that they had been laying a new mooring for their yacht, apparently quite tricky with the increasing number of tube worms making the bed very slippery for anchoring.

Howard, the owner of the yacht 'Steno', was an interesting man and very active and sprightly, though he must have been well over 80. He had completed several circuits of the British Isles single handed, and raced across the Atlantic three times, and he recounted many amazing stories. He had rights to a property on Horsey Island but spent most of the year away on his yacht. He mentioned an incident in his youth when he had just bought a brand new car. He was driving across the Causeway and forgot that the tide was coming in, and had to abandon the car and walk his wife and small baby back to dry land. The car was later pulled out by tractor, and after extensive work on it, he sold it to a friend. Some time later when it was parked on a hill in Ipswich, the brake failed and it caused quite a lot of

damage to other cars on its way down! Daniel crewed for him when he could get away from his work in London. I think he was French. They invited us back to 'Steno' to join them with some gin, but it was getting late and we refused.

It was a cold uncomfortable night, and it wasn't until 1 in the morning that I roused myself enough to put on some more clothes. Rob followed suit, and we had a reasonable remainder of the night.

Sunday was still cool with a brisk 3-4 North Westerly wind, but it was a little bit warmer and the sun shone. We had a late start, waving goodbye to Howard and Daniel as they set off for a sail. We were now starting on an expedition that Rob had dreamed of doing for a long time. He untied the forestay so we would be able to lower the mast to get under the power cables, and we set off for Beaumont Quay - fortunately no trouble raising the anchor. We motored our way out of Kirby Creek and along Landermere Creek. Just past Landermere Quay we found the entrance to Beaumont Cut and drifted in with the rising tide. Safely under the power cables, we reached Beaumont Quay and tied up against the big blocks of stone that had come from the old London Bridge (demolished in 1831). It was a beautiful, peaceful spot, sheltered from the wind and warm in the sun. It was difficult to imagine the hubbub and activity that must have gone on before the quay closed in the 1930s, with Thames barges arriving from London with their cargoes of manure, returning with produce and animal fodder. The bones of an old 42-ton barge, the 'Rose', lay in the water just beyond the quay.

We walked a little way along the wall of the cut, but then returned to 'Bumble Chugger' to retrace our steps - we wanted to catch the tide to cross over the Wade Causeway to Walton and Frinton Yacht Club. It was spring tides we we had no trouble getting round and past Titchmarsh Marina and up to the yacht club. If we hadn't been warned by Howard, it would have been a big shock to find the yacht club being totally demolished. We tied up to a boat in Bedwells Yard and did some careful balancing on planks across water channels to get round to the temporary yacht club. Apparently the old club house was getting rather rotten and was in danger of falling down. We found the place buzzing with dinghy crews coming in after their race, all very friendly, and we joined them for a drink sitting in the sun.

Before we could be stranded by the ebbing tide, we set off for Stone Point where we planned to have lunch. Originally we were going to meet up with Ben and Gilly FitzGerald in the evening - they were going to sail up to the Ferry from Woolverstone on Saturday and back to the Backwaters on Sunday. It was just as well that they had telephoned in the morning to let us know that their plans had changed and they would not be able to meet us, as after a slight miscalculation we found ourselves aground at Stone Point. So not only did we have our lunch there, but a very pleasant afternoon and evening lazing in the sun, all at a slight angle, listening to skylarks and cuckoos and watching a harrier gliding overhead. We hoped to move around 10 and drop anchor for the night along the Walton Channel.

We had our egg and bacon supper and played one of our fraught games of Scrabble. The evening slowly drew in, and as our cabin light had run out of gas, we had to finish our game by torch light, with Rob easily being the winner. The water still looked a long way away. We had a long wait in the dark, cold cabin until at last we got 'Bumble Chugger' moving and motored her out into the deeper water, finally getting to bed just before midnight.

A relaxed start to Monday morning. We set off at 9 with the sky blue and the sun shining, but the wind still very cold. The tide was against us as we left, and it was difficult getting round the end of Stone Point with the water running at 5 knots and the channel much reduced in size. We had to motor sail until past the mouth of the Orwell, with the wind a lightish 2 -3, but it had moved round to the South East and was steadily strengthening, so we had a quick trip back to Woodbridge and arrived at Mel Skeets by 1 pm.