

Bumbling on the River Chelmer and Blackwater

23-30 May 2011

Brian and Sue Casey invited the East Coast Shrimpers to take part in a late spring regatta being held at Maylandsea Sailing Club. Maylandsea is a small village on the south side of the River Blackwater about ten miles east of Maldon.

For some time Gillie and I had dreamed of exploring the River Chelmer which runs from Chelmsford through twelve locks down to Heybridge basin. The last stretch is a canal leading to a sea lock into the Blackwater. The Caseys' invitation provided us with just the right opportunity.

We arrived at Maylandsea early evening on Tuesday and were met by Brian who suggested that since the creek dried out at low water we delay the launch until the morning. So we parked the boat and car by the clubhouse and turned in for an early night.



We launched at 6am on Wednesday two hours before high water and motored with the rig down up to Heybridge basin. There was enough time to make a cup of tea and have some breakfast on the way to the lock and then to be let in at 7am by the lock keeper, Martin.



The lock gate lights were still red when we arrived at the channel mark opposite the basin but within five minutes turned to green to let us in. Martin greeted us with a friendly smile, provided us with a key for the lock paddles (£66 deposit) and a set of instructions on how to operate the locks.

We set off now in the canal which looped around Maldon and joined the river at the second lock, No. 11. Moored boats lined the river banks for most of this stretch and we noticed that there was weed building up from the banks leaving a narrow channel in the middle of the canal clear. Already we were getting glimpses of the countryside between road bridges and a Tesco store which had its own quay on the river front.



Each lock was left with the lower gates closed and the upper gates open. This meant that we had to close the upper gates, let the water out by opening the paddles on the lower gates, open the lower gates and motor BC into the lock. Then close the lower paddles, close the lower gates and then open the upper paddles to fill the lock. Opening the paddles was very hard work and Gillie found that some were too difficult for her. Opening the top gates allowed BC to proceed out on the upper river and continue on our way. The first lock took about half an hour but we soon got into a routine and were managing to get through the rest in half this time.



It was a gorgeously sunny day and in spite of the hard work in getting through the locks we were enthralled by the river and countryside. The only snag was the amount of weed that



we passed through. Much of it was loose leafed but there were also patches of very dense fingers of fine weed. These floated to the exact level of the propeller. Once caught they very quickly wound a thick band around the propeller which caused the engine to stall. The motor then had to be removed from its well, balanced on the cockpit seat and cleared of the weed.

We found that the water cooling inlets also had to be cleared. By the time we had reached

Paper Mill lock, No. 7, we had taken the engine out six times. This was the first lock where there were signs of life. Visitors were attracted from both the road and river to a tea room, situated adjacent to the lock. There were a large number of boats moored along the banks and in a marina located by the side of the island which separated the lock from the weir. A member of the Essex Waterways helped us through the lock and the upper lock gate was closed by a group of children.



It was getting close to lunch time so we decided to stop at the next lock, Little Baddow, No.6, to have our sandwiches. This turned out to be in a beautiful setting with a mill house and pool adjacent to our mooring. After a leisurely lunch we set off hoping to reach Chelmsford by evening.



We passed through two further locks and were heading for the bridge which would take us under the A12. As we got closer the noise of the traffic grew louder until it was almost deafening.

Then calamity struck! The engine got clogged by weed and I noticed as the revs dropped off that there was no cooling water coming out of the exit hole high up at the back of the engine. We anchored in the middle of the river and took the engine out to see what could be done. The intakes were not blocked which meant that some obstruction had penetrated into the upper parts of the engine. I knew that we could not continue without solving this problem so after some discussion I rang the Seamark Nunn who had serviced the engine. Their first reaction was that I had probably burnt out the impeller. This was very bad news! After a little more questioning they suggested that I should start the engine when it had cooled and while it idled poke a piece of wire into the outlet and wriggle it about in the hope of clearing any blockage. While we waited for the engine to cool we considered what we could do if the engine was caput. We were in the worst possible place to get help and would need to get back to the previous lock for any chance of sorting it out.

Feeling very down hearted we placed the engine back in the well and connected up the fuel. I pulled the starting cord and the engine started first attempt. I stretched round to the back of

the engine and poked a sail makers needle into the hole and almost immediately water started to jet out. What a relief!!

The result of this fright was that we decided to curtail our trip up river and return to where we had lunch and moor there for the night. On our way back I realised that we were quite close to where an old school friend lived. In fact we could see his house from the river. I rang him and arranged that we would walk over and spend an hour or so catching up on news. There was a path across the fields which led us quite close but the last part meant crossing a field of rape which turned out to be quite a struggle. Many of the stems had interlocked making it very difficult to push ones way through. We were given a refreshing drink of his home made beer and learnt what was going on in the clockmaker's world (my friend had built a copy of John Harrison's regulator which is on display in the arcade of the Norwich Castle Mount shopping centre). The sun was still shining when we left and the return walk across the fields back to the boat made a pleasant end to the day. We were surprised to find that a group of canoeists were playing a game of water polo in our little patch of water.



Thursday brought a change in the weather. Clouds from the south west soon brought rain and this was how it was for most of the day. Gillie spent the morning sketching whilst I read a novel. We had arranged to meet up with friends who lived at Woodham Walters and I telephoned them to explain where we were moored and invited them to join us for a picnic lunch aboard and a small trip in the boat if the weather improved. I went out in the rain to meet them at the T junction near the mill. A fox wandered down the middle of the road while I waited. They arrived in good time and after parking their car in a lay-by we walked back over the little wooden footbridge and across the lock gates to BC. Gillie opened up the cabin to welcome them and we scrambled into the cabin to get out of the rain as quickly as possible. We celebrated with wine over an enjoyable meal.



When we had finished it was still raining and we decided not to go for a motor down the river. Instead they suggested that we spend the evening at their house. They would come to collect us at 6.30pm and return us to BC after supper. It turned out to be a great evening

starting with hot showers and a good clean up. Very much refreshed and well fed we were returned to our small abode on the river.

Friday showed a distinct improvement in the weather and we decided to motor to Heybridge Basin for lunch with a stop off at the Tescos which bordered the canal. Gillie pointed out a Green Woodpecker on the way. We arrived at Heybridge soon after 1pm and after a sandwich lunch set about rigging BC. Our original intention had been to lockout that evening, pick up a mooring in the river and motor up to Maldon to do some shopping while the tide was up. Instead we decided to stay the night and go out on the morning tide.

Saturday was looking windier and we were pleased we had decided to have a comfortable night in the basin. The lock opened at 9.15am and was handled by the previous lock keeper, Colin and his wife, Margaret. They were very chatty and suggested that we moor up against the Thames barges when we got to Maldon. There would not be enough water at the visitors' pontoon (a nasty trap). We motored straight up to the town from the lock knowing that we would not have much time to stay afloat. We checked the depth at the visitors' pontoon and it was already very shallow there so we turned the boat round and moored up against the outer Thames Barge.



The main street of Maldon is quite attractive and working our way to the top of the hill we bought some postcards and the Saturday Telegraph (to do the crossword). We returned to the boat without delay and set off for a sail to Pyefleet. This was with wind and tide and although over fifteen miles only took us two and half hours.

The wind had steadily increased in strength and we decided not to go right into the Pyefleet Channel but to anchor off Mersea Stone at the east end of Mersea Island where there was more shelter. While we had lunch we rang Brian Casey to find out if there would be any racing the next day. The forecast had changed several times over the last few days and the only information from the club was that if the wind was reasonable on Sunday there would be a race. This meant that we had to get back to an anchorage within half an hour from Maylandsea. This would allow us to motor there the next morning with enough time for the start of the race at 10am. This was bad news (especially for Gillie) as it meant a beat back with the tide (ie wind against tide). We dressed up in full wet weather clothes and set off on a most uncomfortable battle against a force 6 gusting 7. We motor sailed which made the journey faster but more uncomfortable with spray reaching the top of the mast and drenching us in the cockpit. It was over three hours before we reached the moorings off the Marconi Sailing Club. I then made an error in choosing a mooring too close to the mud (we went aground at four in the morning and tipped over for two hours!).

On Sunday morning the wind showed little sign of abating but we decided to try and make the start if there was to be any racing. We hit a snag when I tried to start the engine. It would not fire. I decided to check the sparking plug and was surprised to find a spare one in its box lying in the bottom of the engine housing. I replaced the existing plug with this and the engine started immediately (it turned out that I should have changed the plugs when we first used the engine after its winter overhaul). While we motored up Maylandsea creek the wind appeared to drop and when we arrived outside the club it was down to force four. We moored to a buoy just off the clubhouse and filled Bum Chug with some of the heavy equipment that we would not require for the race. The rescue boat came up to us and we got a lift to the shore towing Bum Chug. We then transferred the contents of Bum Chug to the car. Brian met us at the club and said the race was on. He gave us a piece of paper showing the course and bought us cups of tea. We signed ourselves in for the race, had a few sips of tea (which was too hot) and rowed back to BC with ten minutes to go before the start. We quickly got the sails up and set off leaving Bum Chug on the mooring. We managed to get a reasonable start amongst the Sandhoppers (similar to Squibs but with twin keels). Brian and Sue made the start but a bit late. It was a run down to the Blackwater and we soon realised, seeing them catching us up, that we needed to get out of the adverse current. Once we started hugging the shore we kept ahead and to our surprise were also keeping ahead of one of the Sandhoppers. This was not to last long. As soon as we changed course up the Blackwater on a fine reach their relative speed increased markedly and we were soon left far behind. By now the wind had risen to force 6 and we had to spill much of it letting the main flog. The course took us up to the end of Osea Island and then back the way we had come to a buoy downstream of the

Maylandsea creek. We then had to beat up Maylandsea Creek back up to the club line. The beat was a survival leg. Any advantage that we may have gained down wind was completely sacrificed, and to make it worse we were beating against a strong ebb! We battled our way to the club line and may have been the last boat to finish. After picking up the mooring we rowed to the shore to sign off and have a welcome sandwich and cup of tea. Brian and Sue had decided that the wind was too strong and motored the last mile. We went to help with their tender as they



came ashore and were surprised to learn from Brian that we had only a few minutes before we would be trapped aground in the creek. We jumped into Bum Chug shouting that we would be back in the morning and to our relief just made it down the channel. We returned to the Marconi anchorage and found a mooring that would remain in deep water at low tide! Later, while we were relaxing in the cabin, we had a good view of a Thames Barge beating up the Blackwater. It was being sailed, without engine, extremely well in the very windy conditions. The channel was



quite narrow and it was making very smooth short tacks. The wind started to drop in the evening and we had a very comfortable night.

Monday was our last day and after breakfast we made an early start to motor up the creek to give ourselves more time at the club before the race. We arrived too early! The mud extended several yards beyond the slipway. So we picked up a mooring in the channel and waited for the tide to come in. Within twenty minutes there was enough water and we rowed ashore. Apart from signing in and learning the course we had to make arrangement for getting BC out immediately after the race. I drove the car around to the trailer and connected the two. The course for the race had been decided and we were to sail around Osea Island. The wind was ideal, force 3 to 4, and the sun had already broken out. It was going to be a good day.

In fact the race was a bit of a procession. It was an all-in-handicap with all shapes and sizes of dinghy, including a 505 and a Mirror, as well as the Sandhoppers, Shrimpers and other small yachts. We had a reasonable start a little ahead of Brian and Sue and our lead steadily increased throughout the race. A Wanderer, sailed single handed with mainsail only, shadowed us for much of the race and on two occasions we had to call for water as the man helming did not appear to know what was going on. He eventually finished on the mud while beating back up the creek and had to be rescued. It turned out to be quite a long course and by the time we got back to the club line the water was rushing out. There was no time to lose to get car and trailer onto the slipway and retrieve BC. We just made it with a bit of scraping. We had just driven the car and trailer back up on to the grass by the side of the club when Brian and Sue appeared motoring back to their mooring with the sails down. The wind had eased and they had found they could hardly make ground over the ebb so sadly had decided to retire from the race. It was a great pity.

We spent the next thirty minutes de-rigging and packing up the boat and then were called in for prize giving. It was the right conditions for the fast dinghies. The 505 came second and a new single hander with wings won the Trophy. We were given a bottle of wine for winning the Shrimper Class (!?). Brian and Sue then laid on a splendid barbeque and we feasted on lamb chops and sausages. We met up with a couple who were also Whittles (Kevin and Amanda). They were keen sailors and had won the Saturday race in a Sandhopper.

After giving our thanks to the organisers and Brian and Sue we set off on our way home. It had been an energetic and eventful week – overall very enjoyable.

rtw 4/6/11