

THE COVID 19 CRUISE

by Alastair MacKenzie

Sat June 20th Summer Solstice

Sunday June 21 st	LW Walton on Naze	0627
	HW Southend on Sea	1336
	LW Southend on Sea	1857

I seem to need to have a 'reason' to sail, an ambition such as going trawling or a Cruise. Summer 2020: where shall we go? Through the windy winter different opportunities have come and gone. Falmouth Classics and a fortnight exploring the Cornish rivers founders on our deciding to put the house on the market in April. Circumnavigating East Anglia! There's a thought! Open sea northwards and into the Wash, swirling with tides and sediment, sand banks and tricky channels. Then into the Nene to Northampton and on down the canal system to old friend Limehouse Basin. Civilised pub crawling with lots of safe spots to leave the boat for a few days if a house buyer turns up. Charts on the kitchen table, Waterway Guides beside the bed. A week of fair weather to Sutton Bridge on the Nene, eleven long days to London and then back onto salt water for four days, three if I push. Three to four weeks that can be broken into sections if I need to come home.

Along with an ever more detailed passage plan, FAITH could be more comfortable and efficient so under the stern-sheets a permanent locker for the stove appears, a bit Heath Robinson but functional. Heaven forbid, but there's a modern stowaway: a movable solar panel to charge the car battery hidden in a plastic box under the thwart. Garmin and DAB radio, a mobile that never runs down and even a laptop.

And then COVID 19 Lock Down.

As the iron grip of lock down tightens it less and less likely that we will get any sailing before the autumn, let alone a circumnavigation. No mid-summer cruise! Fitting out this year was perfunctory and despondent. The garden has benefited and it is a real relief to have some fresh vegetables coming in but I cannot feel at peace in the garden the way I do on FAITH. Some seeds have been as disappointing as usual, but the new-born potatoes and beetroot are fresh and tasty if rather small. Carrots twisted and feeding more carrot flies than can be counted. Brassicas even worse than last year. I lie awake longing, no, pining for the sea.

The seed, the tiniest spore, of an idea swells and begins to hatch. What if... Well, what if? If I managed to get away for a few days? I suppose I'd have to take enough food in case I had to self-isolate for two weeks. Could I manage to find enough non-perishables for that? What food? I'd have to eat it raw as I have very little gas left from last year. Where could I go in, say, four days? Drifting in the smoke of another winter pipe dream, hazy from lack of thought. What about starting on a long considered plan to navigate the extent of the

East Coast rivers? Where to start such a big project? So many 'whats' and 'wheres' but 'when' at least is sure: mid-summer.

So, what if? What if I start with Vange Creek, circumnavigating Canvey Island? Deep in the dark of the night I slip, eel like, down the Colne. Ebb tide to the Wallet Spitway or even Whitaker then the tide to carry all the way to Benfleet. That's a long haul in a little boat and if the prevailing SW wind blew half would be beating, but what if? Tide tables show that if I left Brightlingsea early on June 21st the ebb would carry me down and the tides would be good and big for getting up Vange, slip sliding and wriggling round the bends. On the other hand, what if I couldn't make it in a tide? Once past the Crouch there's no resting place until Southend, and that is hardly a restful anchorage. Sitting on the sand is quiet but if one is going to get up Vange on the flood tide, sitting on the sand until the tide is half up ...

Waking in the morning we, that is Linda my long suffering non-sailing wife and me, talk it through. Linda has always supported me in my Adventures, to the extent that I worry that she enjoys my absences, and starts helping me work out food lists. "Together we can do this," I say. "So long as we're not together," she responds.

Two weeks later FAITH is on the trailer, back roads down to Brightlingsea. The single road into the town is my main worry but there are no road blocks. Rather than make her presence obvious I launch her surreptitiously into the mud of the Colne Smack Preservation Society dock, site of the old Aldous boatyard, and park the trailer in a deserted corner of the Council park. It's good to see MN1, also OGA Register 1, FAIRY further up the dock. What a pretty little smack, sitting where she first touched the water. How sad to have the Dock full of laid-up smacks at mid-summer.

Saturday June 20th 2020

Another anxious drive, 'going to take exercise by rowing alone'. The roads are empty and I see no-one after Weeley Heath. The sky is blue and, miracle of miracles, the wind is in the east, just as it was this day last year. The difference is that this time I want to Go West(ish). Once I've lugged everything on board I move the car into Tower Street, lock up and slip on board and get everything stowed and tidy. The evening is warm, my belly is full of Linda's cooking and I toast the solstice with a wee Bowmore. As FAITH comes afloat on the rising tide I shift her down onto the pontoon and I slip into my bivvy bag, all ready to get off the pontoon at first light.

Sunday June 21st 2020

Flat calm at first light of dawn with mist on the water, magical. The moisture is not only in the air; everything is drenched in dew. Breakfast with the 'Foggy, foggy dew' singing in my head. FAITH is still well afloat but there's no ripple to 'plink, plunk' along her chines. Who would want to sleep on a morning like this?

I scull out to the Dock mooring buoy. Despite the mirror reflections there is wind in the forecast and I tie one reef in. The tide is running hard now, rippling

round us, swirling and gurgling under the pontoon, and I have to scull hard to be sure of clearing the yacht club jetty. Pausing to catch my breath (I'm not as young as I used to be) the beauty and the stillness of the creek fills me. At moments like this it's easy to see that everything reflects God's glory.

In the River there is breeze, south of east, and it's a long and short beat down Colne. By Point Clear there is weight in the wind and the reef is a relief. I sit inboard and duck when the occasional wave bursts over the weather bow. Sun glitters in the wind and I can see white water out by Colne Bar. FAITH Sits easy with her sheets loose and I lash the jib tight down and take a half reef, the for'ard four pennants. Less sail and better visibility. If I push too hard we'll take a lot of water over the lee bow.

Past Colne Bar buoy the ebb is racing and the seas steeper, breaking here and there but I have enough power to steer a route through, picking my way with as much care as I would do on a necky bit of glacier, follow this line, then that snow bridge and backtrack along there. And back track it feels like, beating slowly out toward the Spitway. Past the Eagle there was less need to feather the sail and spill wind and a couple of tacks later up went the jib again and FAITH began to thrash her way to windward, spray dazzling in the sun.

Dead low water springs and white water breaking on the dark humps of the Buxey to the south are a stark reminder of the dangers of this coast. The Garmin claimed that we'd covered nearly twelve miles by the Wallet Spitway, only seven and a half in motor boat, and nearly three hours gone. Never mind, I'd been early away and the sailing was champagne, Spitway buoy in sight and the Wallet Spitway bell, that can be so melancholy a joyous peal, the seas less and more than five knots over the ground. Half past six and the tide was slacking, taking a brief breath before pushing the flood all the way to London town. Swirling sediment in the rough tideway giving way to Swin green. Life is good and I nibble a precious biscuit, revelling in the escape from Locked Down land.

Leaving the Spitway bell astern we were full and bye, cutting the corner to the South Whitaker, threading between the Whitaker and No.6. A guilty thought crosses my mind: not only am I playing truant to the Lock Down but I am now eight miles from dry land and my insured limit is only three. Maybe that could be three miles from the sands exposed at the lowest spring tides, I hope. Extraordinary to imagine walking just a few cables from where we are, out of sight of land. No need for the half reef now and FAITH is surging fast across the waves. The Thames tide is a conveyor belt and we're romping at well over six knots. Here we are, crossing the mouth of the sailing Mecca, Burnham on Crouch, on a Sunday morning and not a sail in sight although, to be fair, it is a bit early for most folk. That's COVID for you. Just how much will ever come back to 'normal'?

Not long after eight o'clock, South Whitaker abeam, the warm wind is easing and I shake out the reef and race along on a broad reach. High above a thin layer of cirrus is moving in from ahead: harbinger of a change in weather?

Now I'm ticking buoys off, thirty-five minutes to the NE Maplin, twenty to Maplin Edge and on, ever onwards. Far away across the Maplin sands I can hardly see the thin line that should be the low lying Dengie, soon supplanted by Foulness Island. I've been at sea for four hours now and my mind wanders away to last year's Adventure when sister Elspeth and I motored across from Queenborough in a flat calm, surprised by the Broomway appearing out of the featureless seascape actually where we sought it. The other seeker, a Marsh Harrier, that met us as went through the Havengore Bridge that was already dropping as we rushed through.

Time for memories, but keep the focus on the unity of boat and helm. The sun is hazy now and the wind dropping, veering slowly. We're slowing down and still have twenty miles to go. Tethering the tiller with shock-cord I go forward, several trips, to set the asymmetric reacher and drop the jib. That gives us an exciting knott extra. Biscuits, two, and water to celebrate. Time passes in its own concertina way.

A mile ahead I think I can see, coming and going, the next tiny black buoy. This one is a milestone, Blacktail Spit. This marks the formal end of the West Swin and we are in the Thames proper, our track curving further and further west. It's been South-West since the Maplin, another clanging bell and from here on it clicks on round, South-West by West, West-South-West. In a small boat compass points are easier to see than tiny numbers. In the Thames and it's only nine o'clock. My back and my hands say it's much later than that. Blow biscuits! Time for some celebratory chocolate.

Slowly letting a three square ration melt, square by square, I savour the luxury and lounge, cushioned, against the transom, legs stretched on the sternsheets. Less need for repeated slapping on of sun cream now the cloud is denser, though still high stratus, and the wind, like our course, is veering point by point, dropping as it does. FAITH is slowing but the tide isn't and the GPS still shows the speed over the ground as nearly six knots. Ticking more buoys off, South Shoebury, thin grey line of land is closer, Shoeburyness in sight and the course due West. Shoebury, a huge container ship in the Yantlet taking the tide up-river. West Shoebury and Southend's pier is in sight.

By West Shoebury we are taking the slip-road off the mighty Thames and looking for the shallow creeks of Leigh. Without an indicator to show our intentions we quietly turn northwards, passing the pier just after eleven. The urban development of Southend on Sea seems to go on for ever, uninterrupted from Shoeburyness to Leigh.

The pier is a good marker for the opening of the Ray Gut and we follow the buoys along, almost parallel to the shore but slowly closing. We must be very visible from the shore and I'm not at all sure that I should be here. Use the outboard? That's noisy but less ostentatious than tan sails with FAITH written across it in big letters. Empty mooring buoys show that we are In Hadleigh Ray. Neither side of the creek looks far away and I feel very exposed. Luffing into the tide I pick up a buoy. The mast needs to come down to go under Benfleet bridge so I may as well do it now. There's less than an hour of tide to

run and no time to lose. Sails down, mast down onto its crutch and outboard onto the bracket on the transom. Slip the mooring and away in less than ten hurried minutes. Keeping close to the north side of the creek in the deep water I enjoy the green rurality of the northward view, a stark contrast to the densely packed housing of Canvey island nestling under its tall chimneys. After the streets is a golf course, empty. It looks tidy so I assume that it is still being manicured even if there is no play. Suddenly the saltings have narrowed down to a river and the Benfleet Sailing Club goes sailing past. The red brick bridge looks low and I knock the mast crutch out, trying to catch the mast to soften its fall, and duck. There is room enough, but not much to spare. The second bridge is no higher... but no lower. Despite throttling back it all seems very fast.

From here on the channel is more suited to wriggly eels than boats but it is a big tide and plenty of water if we hold the middle of the creek. Another bridge appears round the corner, the A130, not a vehicle in sight. The creek winds and wiggles through the low land. A Marsh Harrier, no, look at the wings, it's a buzzard, quarters the ground. The creek is much wider but the chart tells me that that is an optical illusion, the saltings are covered by the tide. There are few pointers to where the deeper water is but we get through without fouling the prop and there is the last bridge of what is now East Haven Creek. A concrete monstrosity but I suppose it serves its purpose. I lift my hand to touch its underbelly as we slither through and out into Holehaven Creek.

We swing round to starboard, holding close to the shore to avoid the nameless island in the creek. Ahead there's a small quay. I hadn't expected this. From the look of it there must be gravel pits behind it, rather like the Prior's up at Wivenhoe. I had thought the East Haven Creek bridge a monstrosity but it was as nothing compared to the high dull grey tidal barrage looming over the saltings in front of us. Swinging left and right again we come to it. Happily it is open despite the spring tide and through we go. It is all very flat here, even the trees seem stunted and low. The only verticals are the electricity pylons, counter marching in some complex pattern across the fen like flats.

Across the creek from the Veolia waste site Fobbing Creek opens out, enticing but not today, then Parting Gut. Fine names for muddy cul-de-sacs. "Here there be moorings", a few small motor boats afloat but the rest still sitting dejected and unvisited in a small boatyard. I like the look of Timberman's Creek but hold on up the Vange: that after all is the target. Narrower and skinnier the creek winds through the featureless levels. The starboard side is RSPB land and there are frequent hides, some fresh and angular and others worn and hunched against the southwesterlies Excitement is seeing a barn, a lorry park, full. A small creek leads up to it and I wonder whether it started life as a bargeman's quay.

All too soon I have to start worrying about turning, especially as the tide is beginning to slide away down stream so, ambition achieved, spin her on the outboard and head back. This time I can turn up into Timbersmans Creek, nestle alongside the cant edge and wait for this fine vessel to gently sit down

on the mud, out of sight and hopefully out of mind for Authority. The Garmin tells me that we have covered forty seven miles, all before lunch. Well, before a late lunch. Average speed over the ground of just less than five knots. Now, that's what a good getaway vehicle should be able to do.

As the tide runs away I get the mast up ready for the tent and spread it along the boom. There's no need to do more just now. A beer, squirreled away weeks ago, a sandwich and time to pray and drowse in the solitude.