

# Full of eastern promise

Dispelling a reputation for fog, mud and uninspiring landscapes, the rivers Crouch, Blackwater, Orwell and Deben are a challenging and unspoilt destination.



There was a mutiny on board *Darius* when I told my wife Karen that I would like to go to Vienna for our summer's cruise. She said she would like a more restful trip for a change, one that did not involve negotiating several hundred locks.

As usual, she had her way and we settled on a leisurely cruise up the East Coast to Lowestoft, to be followed by an exploration of the Norfolk Broads. For *Darius* this would be returning to home waters as she was built on the Norfolk Broads and had spent most of her formative years on the Essex rivers.

Mentioning our plan to several members of my boat club in Dover, they looked at me with incredulity.

"Why go there?" they asked. "It's all mud and tide watching, flat land and fog."

"Hang on!" I replied. "There are thousands of boats moored there, not to mention the hire fleets stationed on the Broads, so it can't be that bad."

## DIPPING INLAND

Our first port of call would have been Ramsgate, but with our two Belgian Shepherd dogs, it is a

no-go zone due to its byelaw prohibiting animals in the marina, so we carried on towards North Foreland.

Crossing the Thames Estuary kept us busy, weaving between the many sandbanks. From Tongue Sand Tower we ran through the North Edinburgh Channel, then into Barrow Deep, via SW Sunk beacon, and round East Barrow

Sand before heading towards the Whitaker Channel and the River Crouch. Entering the Crouch, we had to be alert to the many yachts darting across our bows.

Burnham-on-Crouch Yacht Harbour makes an ideal centre from which to explore the Crouch and the nearby River Roach, but you must time your run upriver and back correctly to avoid running out of water.

The marina is also handy for shopping, with a Co-Op supermarket nearby, and Burnham's elegant High Street and quayside about 10 minutes' walk away. The price of diesel here was a shock at 36p per litre, but that was to seem cheap when we saw it being sold for 55p per litre at hire stations on the Broads.

## BASKING IN THE BLACKWATER.

As the crow flies it is less than eight miles from Burnham to Heybridge Basin on the River Blackwater, but we covered over 30 miles getting there in *Darius*. At high water you can take a short cut across Buxey Sand, but we decided to play safe and head for Swin Spitway, then swing north west through the 'gate' to wallet Spitway



Blackwater Marina, a drying marina with at least 10ft of soft mud, is in many ways a typical Essex haven.

buoy. At neap tides, you can lock into Heybridge Basin only during the hour leading up to high water. We had booked a place with the harbourmaster, Colin Edmond, who gave us an arrival time. We were 15 minutes early and had to wait until the red light on the lock side turned to green before following the short, winding channel, marked by withies, up to the lock.

In the basin, we were told to tuck ourselves into a space next to the lock, opposite the recently completed toilet block. Electricity has been laid on at the quayside, operated by tokens purchased from the lock-keeper or at the Old Ship Inn, by the lock.

Unusually, the Chelmer & Blackwater has remained in the ownership of a private company. Small boats with an air draught of no more than 6ft 6in (1.98m) can navigate the 13 miles up to Chelmsford, the license being incorporated in the mooring fee of £ 10. The company provides a daily service along the canal to a Tesco supermarket at Heybridge, but we took the dinghy to do our shopping.

After an idyllic week at Heybridge, we locked out under clear skies and only a hint of wind. We had intended to make the 42-mile run to Ipswich, up the River Orwell, but as we headed down the Blackwater, on a whim we turned to starboard and followed the winding buoyed channel up Lawling Creek to Maylandsea, and the drying Blackwater Marina. The harbourmaster, who called himself 'Buffer', allocated us a mooring at the head of a pontoon.

The scenery round here is unspectacular, but there is an air of peace, quiet and relaxation. Holiday laziness was gripping us as we went the short distance to Tollesbury Marina, and tucked up in Woodrolfe Creek. This creek dries out too, but the marina has deep-water berths behind its entrance cill.

It is a busy place, with an excellent bar and restaurant and a well-stocked chandlery store, but it was walking with the dogs along the top of the dykes that made our stay so enjoyable. An old lightship is moored in the main creek and boats of all descriptions lie higgledy-piggledy up various inlets.

## **INTO THE NAZE.**

After several days here we continued towards the Orwell, but on the way made yet another detour, into the Walton Backwaters. This maze of islands and drying creeks, etched into the surrounding land, lies tucked behind Walton-on-the-Naze.

You approach the Backwaters from the small red and white pye End buoy, from which, once found, it is a straightforward run in to the entrance at Stone Point. Inside the point there's a popular anchorage off a shingle and sand beach. Lunching here, but keeping an eye on the tide and on several bathers, we relaxed in the warmth of the sun before going the short distance to Titchmarsh Marina, which we would use as a base for further exploration by dinghy.

We took the precaution of radioing the marina as we approached to find out the depth over the cill, but there was plenty of water and we motored straight in.

Family-owned, Titchmarsh Marina is a friendly place. The only drawback for us was the distance away from

Walton town centre for shopping. At the head of the nearby Foundry Creek, closer to the town, lies the long-established Walton & Frinton Yacht Club. We stopped for a meal and learnt a great deal about pilotage in the Backwaters from the club's members.

### **IPSWICH STOPOVER.**

At last we were heading for Ipswich. Harwich Harbour, and the Felixstowe wharves in particular, were buzzing with activity, so we kept to the recommended yacht route shown on the chart, which basically meant keeping out of the shipping channel.

As we headed up the Orwell the scene changed dramatically to one of a quiet, tree-lined river. At Pin Mill, home to several Thames sailing barges, little had changed since our last visit here, over 20 years ago.

At that time Ipswich Dock, at the head of the navigable river, was primarily commercial and we had to be content with a berth at Fox's Marina, inconvenient for a visit to the town. But now, after calling the entrance lock, we headed on up to the dock.

After a short wait we were called forward by the lock-keeper, entering with a trip boat carrying children from Chernobyl who insisted on offering us sweets as we rose together in the lock. There are two places to berth in the dock: Neptune Marina, to starboard as you enter, and the two-year-old Ipswich Haven Marina, to port. We had reserved a berth in the latter.

Ipswich Haven Marina has all the facilities a boat owner could need, including a 70-tonne hoist, a well-stocked chandler's and immaculate toilets and showers. The restaurant serves breakfasts, and if you telephone an order in advance of your arrival they will deliver to your boat once you have berthed.

It is only a short walk from the marina to the town centre, which we had hoped to visit, but thanks to some heavy rain and an unexpected visit from a fellow Moonraker Owners' Club member, we only managed a brief stroll before nightfall. From where we were moored we had a good view of the colonnaded Customs House on the opposite side of the dock.

### **DELIGHTFUL WOODBRIDGE.**

We were sorry not to stay longer, but a good weather forecast, for a change, persuaded us to push on. We headed back down the Orwell and then up the coast to the River Deben.

I had telephoned John White, the harbourmaster at Felixstowe Ferry, at the entrance to the river and he was most helpful, asking me to contact him on the VHF when I arrived at Deben Fairway Buoy, which I did.

Because it was neap tides, and fair weather, we had a bigger than normal window of access into the river, over its notoriously shifting bar. We were told we could get in two hours after low water; normally it would be have been no more than three hours either side of high water - and since we were there the channel has shallowed, and shifted quite dramatically, restricting access still further.

Under John's direction over the VHF, with Karen steering and my eye glued to the depth sounder, we made our way to the green Haven Buoy. From here we steered towards a red can buoy, but John warned us to keep 25 yards off it, and then we headed for the narrow entrance. To starboard we could see the sandbanks and the waves still frolicking over them, and then we were safely in the river. Passing the ferry, I gave John a wave of thanks.

I rang Woodbridge Tide Mill Yacht Harbour to book us in and to check at what time we should arrive to get over the cill at the entrance. Our rate of progress would take us up there too early so we fetched up on a vacant mooring buoy near the Ramsholt Arms.

The channel up the river is well marked, but a careful watch is required to spot some of the buoys as the deep-water channel is quite tortuous.

Tide Mill Yacht Harbour and Woodbridge's delightful waterfront proved to be well worth our white-knuckle entry to the river. The Tide Mill itself is unique, being the only tidal mill in the country; the yacht harbour occupies the mill pond from which water was channelled to turn the wheel when the tide went out. Alas no flour is ground here anymore, but the machinery is still worked during the mill's occasional openings to the public.

### **BOUND FOR THE BROADS.**

It was a wrench to leave Woodbridge, but the Norfolk Broads beckoned, so we headed back down the river and turned north along the coast.

We had thought about entering the River Ore but an apparent lack of alongside moorings, a necessity when you take large dogs with you, dissuaded us. We passed Orford Ness and Aldeburgh and soon the white dome of Sizewell nuclear power station hove into view, standing out against the flat landscape.

Four hours after leaving Woodbridge we slid past white rocket-shaped towers marking the entrance to Lowestoft. Inside the harbour we took the sharp turn to port into the Royal Norfolk & Suffolk Yacht Club basin, where we spent the most expensive night of our cruise, paying £20 for berthing and electricity.

## **CONFOUNDING THE CRITICS.**

So, had the pundits at our local yacht club been correct in their damning of the Essex and Suffolk coast? Yes and no; there is indeed plenty of flat land and mud, but this can have advantages, such as being able to take the ground in some of the unspoilt creeks quite safely, even in a twin-screw motor cruiser. And the abundant wildlife ensures that cruising up the East Coast rivers is never boring.

Of course the tides do have to be carefully watched, and carefully worked, but that only adds to the air of adventure as you nudge up a remote creek like some intrepid explorer.

## **FACTFILE**

### **CHARTS**

**Admiralty** 1607 'Thames Estuary, Southern Part'; Leisure Folio 5607 'Thames Estuary, Essex & Suffolk Coast'.

**Imray** C1 'Thames Estuary'; C28 'The East Coast, Harwich to Wells-next-the-Sea'; Chart pack 2000 'Suffolk & Essex Coast'.

**Stanfords** 5 'The Thames Estuary'; Chart Pack 4 'The Essex Rivers'; Chart Pack 6 'The Suffolk Rivers'.

### **PILOTS & GUIDES.**

'**East Coast Rivers**' by Janet Harber (Nautical Data). '**The East Coast**' by Derek Bowskill (Imray).

### **MARINA FEES.**

Generally about £15/night, £18.70 at Norfolk & Suffolk Yacht Club in Lowestoft.

### **FUEL.**

Diesel cost 38p/lt at Burnham Yacht Harbour and 32p/1t in Ipswich and at Titchmarsh Marina.

### **CONTACTS.**

#### **Burnham Yacht Harbour**

Tel: 01621 786832. VHF Ch80. **Heybridge Basin**

Tel 07712079764. VHF Ch80. **Blackwater Marina, Maylandsea** Tel: 01621 740264 VHF ChM(37) **Tollesbury Marina**

Tel: 01621 869202. VHF Ch80. **Titchmarsh Marina, Walton Backwaters** Tel:01255 672185. VHF Ch80.

#### **Prince Philip Lock, Ipswich Dock**

VHF Ch 68.

#### **Ipswich Haven Marina**

Tel: 01473 236644. VHF Ch80. **Felixstowe Ferry harbourmaster**

Tel: 01394 285745. VHF Ch8 ('Odd Times'). **Tide Mill Yacht Harbour, Woodbridge**

Tel: 01394 385745. VHF Ch80.

#### **Lowestoft Harbour Control**

VHF Ch14.

**Royal Norfolk & Suffolk Yacht Club, Lowestoft** Tel: 01502566726. VHF Ch80.