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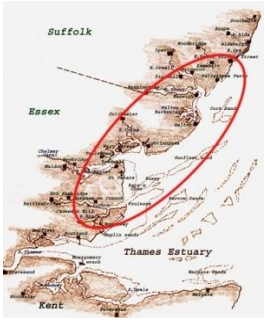
SWATCHWAY
MAGIC

PAUL ANTROBUS AND CHARLES SCOONES

With guest chapters by
RICHARD MATTHEWS and DICK DURHAM

Introduction by
BOB FISHER

PAUL ANTROBUS & CHARLES SCOONES
A collection of contemporary yarns around the East Coast Swatchways of Essex and Suffolk by water and land. Inspired by 'The Magic of The Swatchways' by Maurice Griffiths, first published in 1932.
Still magical after all these years.
Go there, be there and the magic is yours to enjoy



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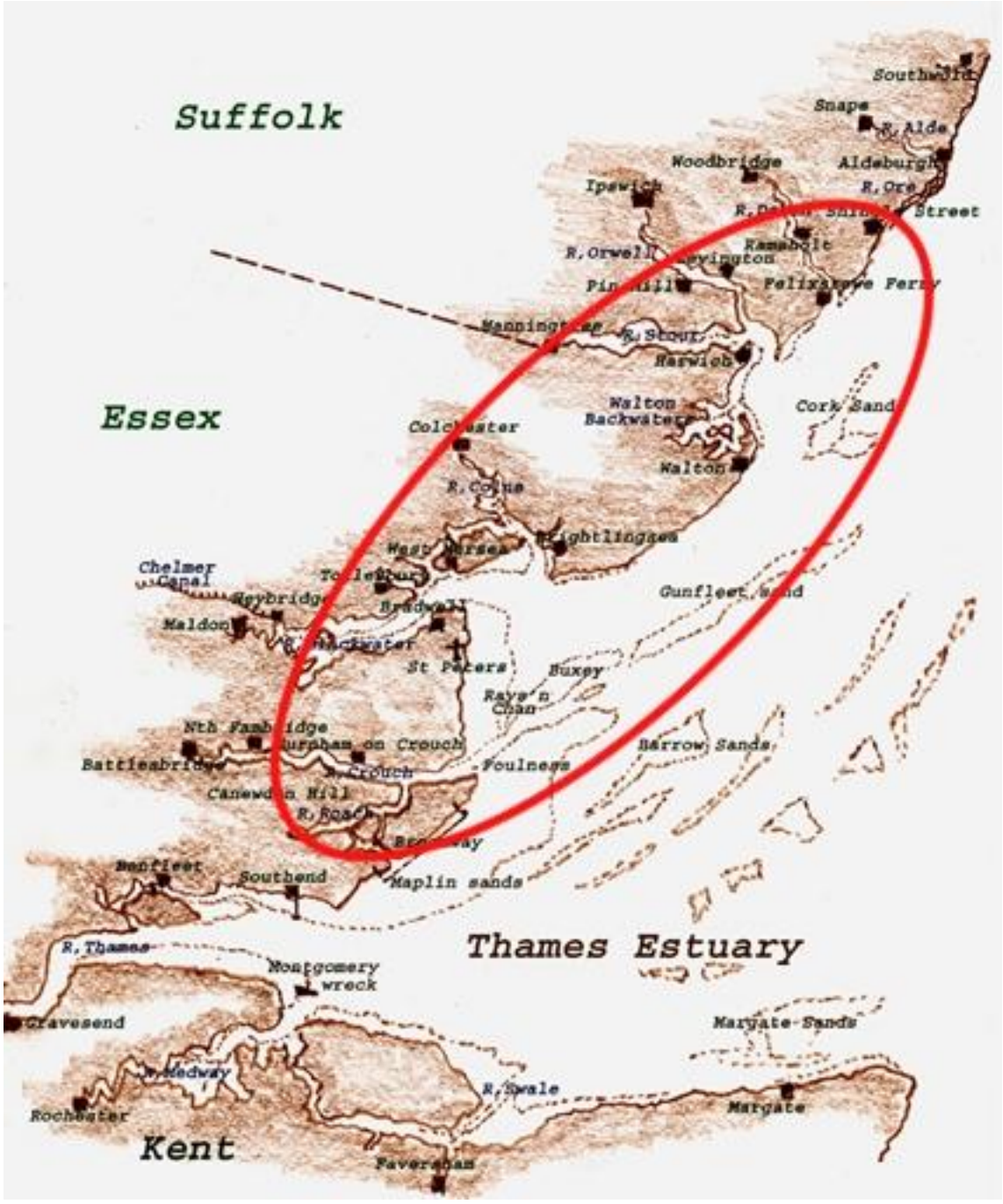

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In the years since the Second World War sailing has become a popular sport and past-time, enjoyed by many people from all walks of life. One highly influential figure in this transformation was Maurice Griffiths, a yacht-designer, small-boat sailor, journalist of distinction and sometime editor of *Yachting Monthly*. In 1932 Griffiths published his third book, *The Magic of the Swatchways*, which advocated cruising the creeks, rivers and inlets fringing the Thames Estuary.

Griffiths's book is arguably one of the most influential sailing books written in English, painting a powerfully compelling picture of these waters that penetrate deep into the countryside of an England most have forgotten exists. Both Paul Antrobus and Charles Scoones fell under its spell when young men, coming to love these bleak yet beautiful tidal waters.

Late in their lives, still active small-boat enthusiasts, they set out to see what remained of the magic so readily evoked by Griffiths and found that, despite the explosion of popular sailing and the existence of moorings almost anywhere a boat can float, even if only at high-tide, much of the magical quality of cruising these waters still exists.

In a series of voyages, assisted by the accounts and contributions of similarly inclined friends – including Griffiths's biographer – Antrobus and Scoones recount in this book their return to their roots as yachtsmen. It is a beguiling chronicle that persuades me, writing this in the depth of winter, to fit out my own boat and set off for a lonely anchorage where only the piping of the foraging oyster-catchers can disturb the tranquillity of a peaceful evening.

Richard Woodman.

SWATCHWAY MAGIC

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Introduction

Once a Bricklesey boy, always…

By Bob Fisher, veteran sailor, yachting author and journalist and born and bred in Brightlingsea

'Swatchway Magic' is about my roots, too, and I like the way you can dip into this book at any chapter for a short story and be encouraged that the sailing and the scenery are still all there. Great fun reading about it all again

For I am a 'Bricklesey boy' and justly proud of it, as are many others. As a small boy, I used to listen to the tales of the old men of the foreshore, gathered in the fishermen's shelter at the top of the hard. It was from them, men with 'Shamrock' or 'Endeavour' or other magical names emblazoned across their jerseys, that I first learned about the America's Cup - they had been there.

The most senior among them was the father of my mother's best friend, 'Lucky' Jack Linder. Jack had been aboard 'Shamrock III' when she raced the gigantic sloop 'Reliance' for the

Cup in 1903. His stories were fantastic to a boy of 10. These days, when I am in New Zealand, chasing the latest twist in an America's Cup story, I endeavour to meet up with his grandson, Robin Linder, who after more than 50 years in the Land of the Long White Cloud still claims to be a 'Bricklesey boy'.

My daughter recently gave me 'The Log of Velsa', published in 1920 and written by prolific author and playwright Arnold Bennett, wherein he said, "East Anglia, including North Essex, is as English as any part of England, and more English than most…Angles took possession of it very early in history and probably no place is more Anglian than Brightlingsea". He also said it is never pronounced as it is written, quoting, "Dr Edward Percival Dickin, the historian of the town, has found 193 different ways of spelling the name." In my probably later edition by the same historian, dated 1939, he claims, "the different spellings number 404."

Bennett also wrote, "Smuggling was an important industry at Brightlingsea, and to suppress it laws were passed making it illegal to construct fast rowing or sailing boats." Luckily, this had changed by the time I began my sailing in Brightlingsea in a variety of boats, from a 'converted' oyster skiff with home-made spars and sails to several years in the Brightlingsea One-Design class. Speed, however, began to rear its ugly head and I went for the new-fangled planing dinghies. The Hornet was my first love but I was game for anything fast and moved into catamarans with the late, legendary Reg White, a friend since we were pushed out in prams alongside one another by our mothers.

I spent most of the summer of 1967 on a sabbatical leave from the BBC, working with Reg to develop the Tornado. It was important for his business, Sailcraft, that we had it as close to perfection as possible for the trials at Sheppey to select a boat suitable for international racing. Reg and I sailed the prototype to a clear victory. The Tornado was chosen and later became an Olympic class at the Montreal Games in 1976 where Reg and his brother-in-law, John Osborn, won gold medals.

Their triumph prompted a riotous open-topped bus tour of honour around the town and two MBEs awarded in the next honours list. It is bizarre that for the UK home-based Olympics in 2012, the multihull category was dropped completely from the Olympic sailing classes. But the history isn't lost.

The catamaran ethos was strong in Brightlingsea from the beginning of the 60s, begun as I remember by Roy Bacon who sought Reg's help to build his first boat. The progress was fast into the C-Class cats and with them, the International Catamaran Challenge which became colloquially known as the 'Little America's Cup'.

Originally GB v USA match races, like the original America's Cup proper, GB won continuously from the first in 1961 until 1968. Reg took the helm from 1963 to 1966 and again in 1968 with three 'Hellcats', two 'Emma Hamiltons' and then, for three occasions from 1966, with 'Lady Helmsman'. I was fortunate enough to be his crew in 1967. 'Lady Helmsman' sported a wing mast/sail rig. Now all the talk for the America's Cup proper is of catamarans and wing masts so 'Oracle Racing' is hardly breaking new ground. It's just 45 years too late - or the 'Brightlingsea boys' would be in there with a strong chance of winning!
I wrote my first book, 'Catamaran Racing', with Reg White. It is alleged that he told the publisher, Ken Parker of Cassell's, "I'm virtually illiterate, but legitimate. Bob, on the other hand, is literate and a bit of a bastard." On such introductions are great works created!
As I stood at the memorial to Reg at the top of the hard in late December - 'Reg's Rock' they call it - I paused to wonder what Arnold Bennett would have thought of Brightlingsea today. I looked to the fishermen's shelter, newly painted, for reassurance that the past was not all lost and then at Grandfather Percival's Anchor Hotel, which no longer serves beer or offers casual accommodation to the traveller. On the other side, the shipyard and its slipways have been replaced by flats and houses.
And then I cast my eyes towards the Creek and Cindery Island and my own plentiful and happy memories came flooding back. Bennett would have approved of what I saw, looking seaward, at least, and I suspect so would have Maurice Griffiths.
In our youth we spread our wings by going to local regattas and open meetings at West Mersea, Stone and Tollesbury in Hornets, Enterprises and Fireballs. They were always great regattas, particularly the Tollesbury Gooseberry Pie Fayre, and we were a boisterous gang of crews at the evening parties.
Although I moved almost 40 years ago to live on the South Coast, to sail elsewhere and to write books about the America's Cup and the chronicles of the Whitbread/Volvo round the world races, when I return from time to time to Brightlingsea I get that same feeling that the writers of this little book are talking about…home.
Enjoy the reading! Better still, get to the Swatchways they write about and enjoy the magic at first hand.
Bob Fisher
December 2011

The prologue

Intertwining Swatchways yarns – where to and why

Paul Antrobus travels across eight decades

This compendium was inspired by Maurice Griffiths' famous book 'The Magic of the Swatchways'. Charles and I are not trying to recreate the sea passages he described 80 years ago but simply to revisit the territory to see for ourselves if the magic is still there.

We cover the same Essex and Suffolk coastal waters in modern, comfortable boats - under sail, under power and sometimes reconnoitering by road - going to all the places MG sailed to. But he stayed aboard mainly while we venture ashore to enjoy the pubs and sights and entertainment that now abound there - maybe always did.

Much has changed in sailing boats since MG wrote 'The Magic of the Swatchways'. In that narrative, MG sailed the area in several different yachts, mostly around 32ft, mostly gaff rigged, some yawls, nearly all much loved but often with serious faults in their sailing ability. MG and his crews loved solitude and took on many challenges, not always working the tides as they should. They would beat into big seas off Clacton against the tide, for instance, taking forever to clear the pier and not making any real progress until the tide turned, but seemingly unable to turn away from the wind.

Unlike many boats today which are efficient on all points of sailing, they were hard to reef, hard to handle and recurring tales involved getting very wet below. "What a night that was!" was an oft repeated phrase. Every trip seemed to present testing moments but there were always periods of optimism and, especially, extreme pleasure expressed at the anchorage made and comfortably tucked into. "The smell of sizzling from the galley..." is a theme that always seemed to make a bad trip OK.

MG recorded a comment he made in conversation with one crew: "There's something mysterious about these deserted creeks and tiny islands that you never get in the Solent. There's scarcely a sound, is there?"

In these same creeks we still find peaceful anchorages or noisy, convivial pubs ashore where chatter dominates rather than piped music. The old salt in the Butt & Oyster, Pin Mill, says, "We've seen changes but what we do is much the same - we go sailing," and the stories flow. The tides still have to be worked. The places are as pretty as Constable paintings. The foreshore teems with life as the tide recedes and returns with lapping ripples.

This is our personal collection of stories of the Swatchways, not necessarily sequential or chronological but interwoven with each other like a Turk's Head knot to create a picture of these waters as we find them now. We describe how we navigated some of our voyages, buoys and all, but not as a pilot guide. For that and safe sailing you can't do better than a current edition of 'East Coast Rivers', published as part of the Wiley Nautical 'Cruising Companion' series.

The places are as endearing as ever. The people still have real life yarns to tell. The ancient Broomway across the Maplin Sands still links Saxon-time sailors to us. Accessing the magic is now easier than when MG did it. Explorers can make their own way how they please, by sailboat or motorboat, by trailer sailer or rib, launched at a strategic point anywhere along the way - or by road.

Because, rest assured, you don't need a boat at all to be able to enjoy the Swatchways. They are definitely for everybody. Their magic is in the creeks, the banks, the nature and the sounds of the local wildlife and many of the best places can be reached by car and still take in the views, the local scene or a decent pub.

To get there, be there and enjoy the magic is the aim. Carpe diem. Still magical after all these years.

"Where be the magical Swatchways, then?"

Many people who have read MG's book, or have at least heard of the Swatchways, even those living around East Anglia and the Essex/Suffolk coast, ask this question. Yet MG knew and knew what they meant in 1932.

We knew it, too, 50 years ago. 'The Swatchways' was a well used term by the good old sailor boys of the East Coast who mentored us as kids. What they said and what MG created as the title for his book coincide. They provide the definition of a coastal sea area made up of the rivers and creeks that abound between Foulness Island and the River Crouch to the southward and Aldeburgh to the north, embracing the Crouch and Roach, Blackwater, Colne, Mersea Quarters, the Stour, Orwell, Ore and the Alde, penetrating to the very limits of their high-tide navigability.

Along the way are many little bays or creeks to explore and anchor in peace and quiet and many a place to stop for a run ashore - or, nowadays, to rest in a marina that seems to nestle right into the marshes thereabouts. Tidal, but that's what opens up the upper reaches and provides a good percentage of the motive power to get there or back again.

Muddy at low tide but with a fair spattering of sandy beaches. Birds and seals abound. Fish to be caught from the sea. Cockpit cocktails, supper on board…or launch the dinghy and head

for the light glow of a friendly pub ashore. On at least one of our stops, the village curry house was only a minute or two away from a deep-water mooring basin! MG may not have approved - or would he?
The Swatchways are not secret. They are accessible, beautiful, still there to be shared after all these years and still magical.

Charles Scoones travels from the other side of the world

The clear deep waters of New Zealand are probably as different and as far away as it is possible to go from the Swatchways - the Hauraki Gulf has been my sailing playground for the past 30 years. But it was a sudden deluge of rain unique to Auckland that chased me into an antiquarian bookshop one day and, drifting into the maritime section, I came across an old copy of 'The Magic of the Swatchways'. The rain had long stopped and the sun was steaming the footpath by the time I emerged with the book in my hand.
I was weaned on the same creeks and East Coast rivers that Maurice Griffiths describes so well. I soon found the chapter in which he took his first sail on the little barge yacht 'Swan'. The words brought back strong memories for me as, not long before moving to New Zealand and newly married, I had been the proud owners of 'Swan'. In the years since, I often wondered what had become of her…by now she would be over a century old, if indeed still afloat. It was not long before a twist of fate was to provide me with the answer.
In recent years I have been drawn back to England regularly, spending the summer months exploring the inland waterways by narrowboat and then escaping back to the Antipodes when the days grow short and the leaves turn brown and crunchy.
Inevitably, during these sojourns in the old country, sailing mates from way back would drag me without too much resistance for a pint or two in some of our old East Coast haunts.
It was in the Ship Inn at Levington that I had one of those 'I've been here before' feelings, as I ducked below a blackened beam, and then again in Maldon when, down a narrow street, I glimpsed for a second a row of barge topsails.
I found that the magic was still there, standing on the Hythe at Maldon, running my eyes over the same restored sailing barges alongside with their unique smell of tar, linseed, and tanned canvas. There was the chuckle of the ebbing tide around the huge rudders and leeboards.
How would it feel to revisit these waters, I wondered, or had it all changed?
My childhood memories were of car journeys down the Southend Arterial road to Burnham-on-Crouch on a Friday evening, wedged in the back seat with smelly tanned canvas sails and coils of hemp rope. My weekend world was the fo'c'sle of our family yacht 'Bonita'. A

converted Falmouth Quay Punt, she was a deep-draft, gaff-rigged yawl, more suited to the Cornish coast than the shallows of East Anglia.

I learned by a kind of salty osmosis from my father how he worked the tides, the tell-tale look of the water over mud or sand, how the new flood crept up against the last of the ebb along the shallow edges of the river, about the seasonal equinox tides when we eased into the mud berth for the winter and how to lay on coats of varnish in the few dry springtime hours.

During the family summer cruising, I would be gone for hours in the dinghy, rowing up imaginary Amazon rivers and often leaving mum and dad stranded ashore or, worse still, aboard, till beyond the pub closing time.

Dad eventually resolved the issue by buying me a boat of my own, 'Jacandor', a rugged little 14ft clinker dinghy.

With a boom tent, primus stove and a little Seagull outboard, I explored the length of the Crouch and Roach rivers. Mates would come along at weekends and we eventually explored far beyond Shore Ends. I think that little boat helped me later through the dangerous teenage years.

Back then, Maurice Griffiths was a name I knew as something to do with 'Yachting Monthly' magazine. I don't think I read much about the Swatchways. We just cast off with soggy paper charts in plastic folders and let the winds and tides be our tutors. Along the way, we would rub shoulders with the old salts in the pubs and, for the price of a pint, we learned when to take the tide over the Rays'n (Ray Sand Channel) and when not to and where to find a 'lee'. We listened to yarns about the sailormen, smugglers and privateers. We slowly became 'East Coasters'.

All the while that I was sailing out of Burnham, Paul Antrobus was sailing from Brightlingsea, also in Essex. Our sailing careers eventually crossed as crew aboard a grand old Fife racing yacht 'Evenlode' and, although we probably didn't appreciate it at the time, it is clear that we shared a fascination for the Swatchways.

Wind the clock forward to recent times when Paul was staying with us in Auckland. The America's Cup was still in New Zealand hands. Paul was browsing through my copy of Griffiths' book. "You know," he said, "the magic is still there. You can still do all that."

"OK," says I. "Maybe it's time to revisit the Swatchways!"

Prologue ends

Chapter 1

Barging down to the Swatchways
St Katharine Docks to Maldon

Once a busy commercial dock in the Port of London, St Katharine Docks is now a vibrant marina just a heaving line's throw downstream of Tower Bridge. Not the Swatchways by any stretch of the imagination but important nonetheless as it is directly accessible from them up the 'London River', as Swatchways sailors call the Thames.

For many East Coasters, St Katharine Docks is the limit of navigation for a passage up the river. For us, it is a perfect starting point to set off downstream to the Thames Estuary and to head north beyond Harwich, in search of the old Swatchways magic.

The day we are there, the rally for the Association of Thames Yacht Clubs has just ended but their spaces are quickly being taken by new entrants through the sea lock - sailing yachts, motorboats and the Harwich-registered Thames sailing barge 'Adieu', joining quite a number of similar Thames barges already resident there.

The river here is tidal but the dock, by definition, is not so vessels have to lock in and out, mainly at above half-tide level. With the bridge over the dock raised, spectators ashore get great entertainment from watching the boats going in or out.

A Thames barge leaving that way stirs the imagination even further. You really feel you are off on a great trading voyage again, not just for a jolly around to Maldon.

We manoeuvre our vessel towards the lock and, as the footbridge across the entrance is raised, a small crowd gathers to watch us squeeze in.

As a Thames barge, we have traditional style, a tall mast and top-mast and crew in slightly dirty jumpers, apparently de rigueur on a barge, and industrial Caterpiller boots. We look like seafarers from a bygone age all right. No yachting shoes, whites or captain caps here.

Years ago, a friend of mine, a crew on the shiny white, classic racing yacht 'Evenlode', managed to get an invitation to sail in a Thames barge match (bargees don't call them 'races'). He was very cocky about it and set off to the Butt & Oyster, Pin Mill, to join up with the rest of the crew, complete with reefer jacket, old but still smart ex-Navy holdall and his peak cap set at a jaunty angle. Into the pub he pranced, but his sartorial elegance was met by disdainful derision. He never did get aboard!

Perched high in the St Katherine's lock in our suitably theatrical and work-stained garb, it is easy to picture the old days of the trading square riggers coming in and out here. And we

imagine the onlookers, so close and interested in us today, as relatives turned out in their finest to wish us ‘God speed and a safe return!’

The lock begins to empty and we are gently lowered to the river, not far as we are leaving at top tide to turn to port to take the ebb and head downstream.

Our destination is Maldon. At the effective limit of upstream navigation of the River Blackwater, it’s an ancient waterfront town just a jog away from Tollesbury and Heybridge Basin, haunts well documented in MG’s narratives. Of course, you can go visit by road. But the only real way to go is to arrive aboard a Thames barge.

The passage from St Katherine Docks is a delivery trip to get repairs for ours following a prang in a barge match. These vessels are made of huge 10in by 6in planking but a T-bone collision, even at only three or four knots, can still do damage and the sheer size of the timbers means specialist skills required to mend ‘em. Those skills reside in Maldon.

In barge matches, although the sailing rules of the road are perfectly well known, there is also the “we Essex men never give way to a Kentish man” issue. It may all happen in slow motion but these matches are fiercely contested. Ask the Essex skipper why this is their way and he will say, “‘Cos the Kentish will never give way to an Essex!”

There is no wind so we are motoring. These days, Thames barges have engines but they race as sail ships so only a small auxiliary engine is fitted. Ours gives us a maximum five knots through the water, barely enough to stem the current, so these big 90ft-plus stately ladies still have to work the tides to get where they want to.

We pass the lock to Limehouse Basin on our port side. Here there is a marina, the Cruising Association clubhouse and entry to Regent’s Canal and the Limehouse Cut. Both link to Paddington Basin to connect with the Grand Union Canal or continue to rejoin the Thames upstream at Brentford lock. (The route is popular with narrowboats to avoid most of the tidal hazards of the Thames and get back to the river, heading for Oxford to rejoin the central canal system from there. A wonderful waterway for another day…)

Some of the most popular East End riverside pubs were once warehouses and private quays for barges in the 17th century. We pass by the Grapes at Limehouse and the Prospect of Whitby at Wapping, named after the barge ‘Prospect ’ which regularly plied from Whitby, North Yorkshire, to London to unload there. The pub is now a famous tourist attraction with good ales, a classy restaurant and fine river views. But the ‘Prospect’ herself and the wharf as a working wharf are long gone and sadly there is no way to moor alongside, even if the tide is up.

This part of the river is lined on both sides with little sandy beaches where East Enders of years ago used to bathe and harvest wild oysters for free.

Then the river's 'newest' hazard comes into view, the amazing Thames Barrier at Woolwich. It was built to prevent London flooding in the event of a very high tide coming upstream from the east and meeting excessive rainfall water coming down the length of the river from inland and the west.

Since opening in 1982, it has been used in anger 78 times for tide surge and 41 times for rain flood. There are scheduled monthly servicing closures, usually for three hours, so passage-making needs checking. Some say the flood risk has been enhanced by global warming, others that Britain is slowly tilting in the earth's crust so that London is more or less 'sinking' while Scotland rises.

On our passage we have to call up Barrier Control on the VHF to seek passage permission. We pass gracefully through gap number three, slightly disappointed to be motoring, not under sail, but no doubt more prudent. A modern motor barge, the 'Nigel Prior', is on her way upstream with building sand from Fingeringhoe, a Swatchways village up the river Colne, just short of Wivenhoe. We will visit there and see more of the Prior barges later.

Below the Barrier, the Thames, so pretty upstream at Henley and Marlow, becomes bleak and industrial in stark contrast. Luckily, dusk is beginning to fall and the ebb is about to end, so in traditional style we run ourselves gently on to the mud on the south side around Thames Mead/Shadwell, dropping the hook into it with enough chain paid out for the expected 14ft rise to the next high tide. That is when, six hours later, we will set off again with the ebb. Six hours off now for a beer, some supper and a short sleep.

The ship lifts and gently rocks us in slumber. Then we sense the barge turning to the new ebb and we all turn-to to weigh the anchor, hauled up slowly with the original pole-worked windlass. Hard work, but traditional. Luckily, the newer boat on which we shall explore the Swatchways later has a neat electric-power winch and this, we vote, is one of the 'good' elements of modern progress.

Still no wind, still dark, so on goes the little engine again.

We cross now to the Essex bank and scrape by Southend Pier. Less industrial now but still quite a bleak open vista with few contours. Another J J Prior motor barge passes us, also taking the ebb tide downstream and well inshore so we guess heading for Fingringhoe via the Swin to Wallet Spitway. Our plan is the same, but at a slower pace, to hit the Swin at low tide and then turn to port again, back on ourselves to take the flood up the Blackwater to Maldon.

Daylight now, sizzling bargee's full breakfast tucked away and the next landmark is the entrance to the Havengore, the short cut to the Rivers Roach and Crouch. We will explore this another day when the withies of the ancient Broomway path are clearly visible.
The Essex bank recedes away with the channel now a mile offshore. From a distance, we follow the contour of the uncovering mud bank with a careful eye on our depth line, by way of the West and East Swin, swinging to port around the South Whitaker buoy and across the Whitaker Channel entry to the Crouch.
We reach the Swin Spitway buoy and, as we go through the channel towards the Wallet Spitway, yet another Prior barge, fully laden, passes us in the other direction to take the flood back up the Thames.
These barges are flat-bottomed to make them shallow draft for getting to the very top of little creeks at high tide and for sitting on the mud as it ebbs, then flows, loading their cargo in the intervening 12 hours.
The Prior barges carry sand and gravel for construction. In the past, the cargo was often hay to feed the horses key then to London's transport system, drawing Hackney cab people carriers, hearses, carts, carriages, brewers drays (very vital) and suchlike. The horse droppings were then brought back to fertilise the crop-growing land. Perfect recycling and the pace of life and loading set by the tides in those days.
There is a breeze now and the tide is with us so we drop a leeboard and set the main and foresail for a gentle broad reach. With no keel, our leeboards are dropped on the lee side to give lateral resistance to the power of the sails that all sailing vessels need to convert wind power into forward motion.
We sail upstream past the now mothballed Bradwell Nuclear Power Station. Since first generating electricity in 1962, this is one building which hasn't lasted the passing of time or usefulness that barges have done and wasn't there at all when MG sailed this way.
The power station now stands as a permanent landmark to guide the sea traveller. But when its many glass windows pick up the dramatic hues of a typical East Coast sunset, the casual watcher can easily be forgiven for imagining a that UFO or some other extraterrestrial object has just landed!
In the River Blackwater now, we leave Osea Island and the entrance to West Mersea to starboard and a couple of bends further up, hey presto, there are the small boat moorings and the charming houses and Jolly Sailor pub on the Maldon shore. With Thames barges already stacked side by side on the quay, quite a crowded scene greets us as it comes into view.

The river here is narrow, confined by the quay and the vessels to port but to starboard it is just marshes and river bank mini inlets. We brail up the mainsail and carry our 50 tons of way with the now gentle tide until halfway along the jetty, then luff up to starboard and plant our bow firmly into the marshes. The tide, still flowing upstream ever so slowly, takes our stern and this stately 90ft giant just turns in her own length. As we come nearly straight across the river, we back the jib, the bow falls off the marsh bank and swings off through the direction of the tide so that we gently crab across the stream towards the barge we are to moor alongside, already on the quay.

Well, that is how it is meant to be done! The skipper does actually have the little iron mate in tick-over and after we drop the jib he gives her a tiny nudge ahead, making sure we are properly lined up with the boat inside us. Then finish the brailing for a harbour stow. The young trainee mate is supposed to do this, climbing up the ratlines and tying in the ropes around the top sail and the high gaff. But ours is scared of heights so the skipper demonstrates for us. Wrap the sheets round the staysail in a fancy fashion so it hangs like a small sausage clear of the deck – that's the correct way to do the job.

Prominent on the quay is a red-painted old sea mine, converted to a collecting box. There are many such mines in the small ports of the Swatchways. This one is for the Shipwrecked Fishermen and Mariners' Royal Benevolent Society, founded 1939. The engraved message on it reads, 'There is sorrow on the sea.'

But not for us yet. Our barge passage is now over and it's time to let the crew get on with preparing for repairs. We are well into the Swatchways proper - and ready for more.

(Separate panel near the start of this chapter)

Saved for the nation

Fifty years or so ago, London very nearly lost St Katharine's altogether. With the migration of large shipping docks further east, it fell into disuse as a commercial dock and developers (and probably some councillors) wanted to knock down the old warehouses, fill it all in and build over it.

At that time, the 60s, London had no city-based marinas for private sailing yachts, nothing to match the dock at the Royal Maas Yacht Club, Rotterdam, where most of the fleet in the annual Harwich to Hook of Holland sailing race headed. It was a tragedy, a travesty even, that London had nothing similar. Luckily, the opportunity was spotted in the nick of time, articles appeared in papers and 'Yachts & Yachting' magazine and the dock was 'saved for the nation'.

St. Katharine's, in the heart of London's financial district, has developed into a thriving marina the size of eight football pitches. It is a huge asset to the capital, a pleasure for boaters arriving from the Thames upstream or those coming from the east coast or Holland, France, Germany and Belgium.

It also provides a delightful tourist walk, with the Tower of London and Tower Bridge right next door and a large hotel overlooking it all. The historic buildings in the dock have names that recall the trade that used to go on there, like Marble Quay and Ivory House. Many people live in flats in the converted warehouses, too. There are restaurants, shops and offices and a good pint to be had from a selection of real ales and international lagers in the Dickens Inn, plus a decent pub menu to feed off.

Thank goodness the campaign succeeded. Heritage once lost can never be regained.

The MV 'Havengore' is based there. A former Port of London Authority vessel, it's famous for transporting Winston Churchill's coffin along the Thames from Tower Pier to Festival Pier for the train journey from Waterloo to Bladon, Oxfordshire, for the private burial of the great man.

Among very ship-like houseboats in the inner dock is the 100ft 'Flamant Rose', once owned by French legend Edith Piaf. Still luxuriously furnished in Parisian style, complete with gold plated bath and cream leather upholstery, the 'Little Sparrow's' film-set style yacht was, they say, her special place for secret trysts with her lover.

St Katherine's has become home base to many historic Thames barges and to other smart sail and motor yachts on a semi-permanent basis. Some barges just moor up, some offer on-board entertaining without leaving the dock, some do the same with a short river trip included. But most are just waiting for the next barge match date, sitting out the winter and smartening up what little varnish work there is.

End of chapter 1