

Julia at the helm as Peter Duck
exits the River Deben



To Holland with teenagers



Julia Jones, the owner of Arthur Ransome's *Peter Duck*, reprises the author's North Sea crossing with a band of young adventurers

PHOTOS: JULIA JONES UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. PHOTO ABOVE: BOB AYLOTT



The younger crew members (left to right: Archie, Ruth and Bertie) enjoying the North Sea crossing

WE did mean to go to sea – in fact, we always do. Whether or not we actually succeed is a different matter. Every summer, we find a week, negotiated months in advance, when my brother Ned and his daughter Ruth join me and my two youngest children aboard *Peter Duck*, for our annual, semi-feral holiday.

Ned and I are perfectly content to hop gently from river to river, but as the children have grown older the pressure to 'go somewhere' has increased. This increase, unfortunately, appears to be in inverse proportion to the amount of time that can be spared from exams, work experience, and pop festivals.

Synchronising the diaries of five strong-minded individuals to achieve seven clear days is an exhausting feat that too often has resulted in us neglecting to consult the Weather Fairy. I think of the weather sometimes as the bad fairy not invited to



Julia's brother Ned works out the best course to take for West Hinder beacon

'We wafted across to Oostende with guitars, joshing, and copious amounts of fizzy drink'

the christening. She usually allows us to get on board and leave the comfort of our River Deben home waters before arriving with a thunderclap so that we have to spend the best part of our precious week trapped in some dreary marina listening to the gale warnings.

Peter Duck is not a large yacht. She is 28ft long and was built for just two people, the author Arthur Ransome and his wife Evgenia. With four crew and myself on board she is decidedly snug. The crew also have a fondness for immensely noisy games of cards and I find myself forever battenning the hatches and saying: 'Sssh, remember we've got neighbours.'

However, last summer, we managed to outwit the Weather Fairy by designating one July week as 'the cruise' and a second week in August for Ned and me to collect *Peter Duck* from wherever we ended up.

We felt our way out of the Deben in the early morning dark, telling everyone (the Weather Fairy included) that we were heading across the estuary to Ramsgate. The youngsters slept until midday, after which Ned and I were ready for some elderly shut-eye on the side decks, which, miraculously, were bathed in sunshine.

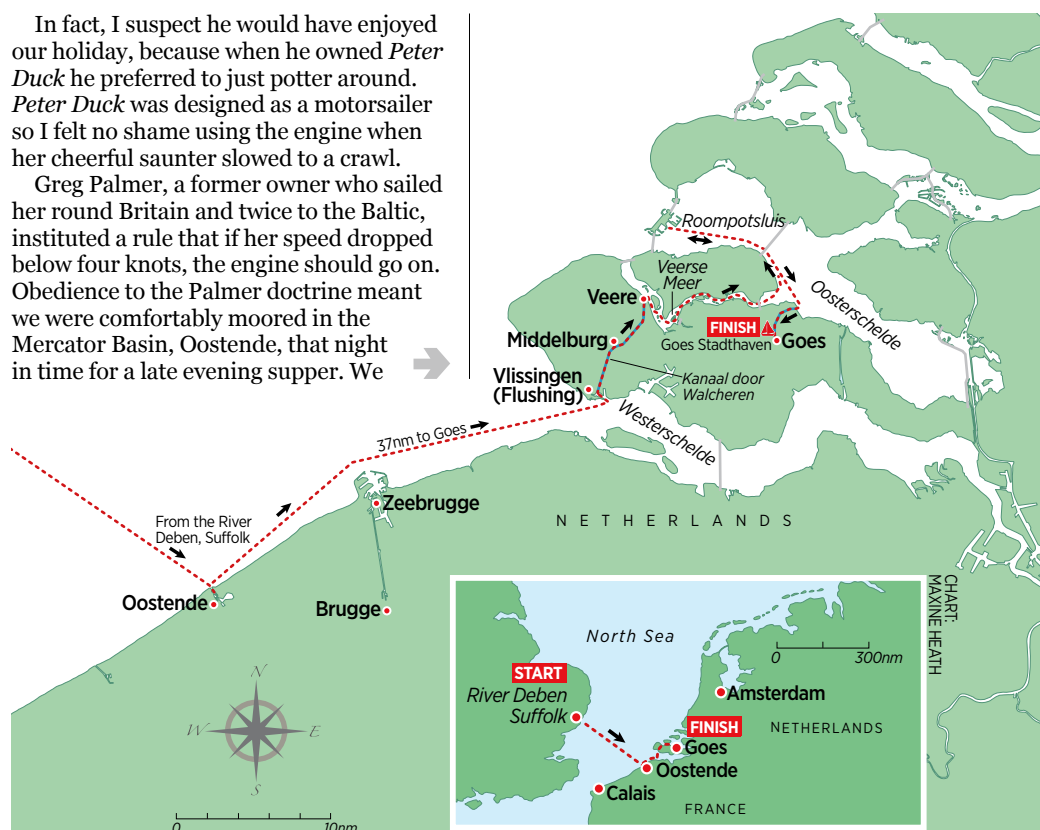
Ned set them a course for the West Hinder beacon and we wafted across to Oostende accompanied by guitar-playing, teenage joshing and the consumption of copious amounts of fizzy drink and pasta. Nothing could have been further removed from the terrifying night-time ordeal to which Ransome subjected his characters when they unwittingly crossed the North Sea in *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea*.



Moored up safe and sound in the Mercator Basin marina, Oostende

In fact, I suspect he would have enjoyed our holiday, because when he owned *Peter Duck* he preferred to just potter around. *Peter Duck* was designed as a motorsailer so I felt no shame using the engine when her cheerful saunter slowed to a crawl.

Greg Palmer, a former owner who sailed her round Britain and twice to the Baltic, instituted a rule that if her speed dropped below four knots, the engine should go on. Obedience to the Palmer doctrine meant we were comfortably moored in the Mercator Basin, Oostende, that night in time for a late evening supper. We





Refuelling at VVW Schelde, a small and friendly marina in Vlissingen

had dodged the Weather Fairy.

We spent the following morning stocking up on shady hats and sunscreen, then lying on Oostende beach watching ludicrously over-zealous lifeguards attempting to pen the mass of sweltering swimmers into a single designated area.

We were away in the early morning mist, up the coast towards Vlissingen. Despite a windless start, we enjoyed some sailing later in the day, but didn't get our tide calculations quite right and spent longer pushing the ebb than expected. We needed diesel and found it in a small, friendly marina, VVW Schelde, which also had an open-air café, where cards could be played and chips enjoyed while I hurried to a chandlery to buy a map of the canal system. The marina is near the first bridge on the Kanaal door Walcheren. It was already evening when we entered the canal, assuming we would spend the night in Middelburg. In fact we carried on and arrived at the Veerse Meer in the dark. What bliss it was not to bother with a marina but simply to drop anchor and turn in.

Someone in the Vlissingen marina café had warned us that the Veerse Meer is so tastefully preserved that it's impossible to buy so much as a litre of milk in the town. We hadn't believed them, but they were right. This almost tideless area would have made a perfect *Swallows and Amazons* setting. It's full of small, wooded islands with landing stages. And for those of you who've always wondered how Ransome's adventurers managed to deal with the problem of bodily functions I can tell you that we watched a small motorboat



The Veerse Meer is populated with small, wooded islands



Passing through a raised road bridge on the Kanaal door Walcheren



PHOTO: BOB AYLOTT

Julia was kept busy making sure her brother, niece and two sons were well-nourished

chugging from island to island, pushing a lighter laden with portaloos.

We spent an idle day reading, rowing ashore and jumping over *Peter Duck's* stern to escape the blistering heat. The sailing next morning was idyllic – almost too idyllic. Such is the extent of human perverseness that as we beat gently from wooded shore to wooded shore, enjoying the sight of other holidaymakers enjoying their camping, kayaking, swimming and dinghy sailing, we began to yearn for a bit more space – even for a bit more weather.

The Oosterschelde gave us room to breathe. We set the genoa and reached for the Roompotsluis in perfect conditions, at which point the younger members of the crew retired down below. My friend, marine illustrator Claudia Myatt, has a cartoon I particularly enjoy. A smug parent is standing on his yacht holding forth to someone on the quayside about fresh air being 'so good for the children'. The yacht's name is *Game Buoy* and a glimpse into the cabin reveals his two children hunched over their electronic devices, thumbs frantic.



Archie opts for an energetic way of escaping the blistering August heat on the Veerse Meer

Until last summer that's exactly what we would have expected. At the end of our 2011 holiday there had been a disastrous dinghy-related incident in which all of the Pokemon games had gone to the bottom. So how were they managing to escape the character-building fresh air this time?

Well, they managed to get hold of a copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and hoots of laughter would peel up the companionway as they took it in turns to read out some of the more entertaining passages.

We left *Peter Duck* in Goes Stadthaven the next day and made the journey home by train. Only then did I discover that, in my eagerness to cheat the Weather Fairy by pretending we weren't intending to go anywhere, that I'd neglected to check that my passport was in date. It wasn't. ▲

Julia and her crew left *Peter Duck* in Goes Stadthaven, before returning home to England by train



'This almost tideless area would have made a perfect Swallows and Amazons setting'



Ruth and Bertie decide on a casual approach to helming as they catch up on their revision



PHOTO: BOB AYLOTT

Her mother sold *Peter Duck* in the 1980s, but Julia bought the yacht back in 1998

Julia Jones

Julia Jones, 58, was born in Woodbridge and learned to sail on the Deben with her brothers Nick and Ned. Her father, George, ran a yacht brokerage at Waldringfield and was *YM's Around the Coast* correspondent. He and Julia's mother, June, bought *Peter Duck* in 1957. The boat was sold in the 1980s after George's death but Julia and her husband Francis Wheen bought her back in 1998. She is kept on a River Deben mooring.