

Seven Rivers in Seven Days – a family holiday in *Peter Duck* August 2008

“This is the third most exciting thing that I have ever done” breathed Archie, as he blinked the sleep out of his eyes and settled next to me in the cockpit, snug in his warm, red sleeping-bag.

It was 0230 and we’d left our visitor’s mooring in the quiet anchorage of Queenborough and were heading out of the Medway towards the Thames. The brilliant lights of Sheerness on our starboard side, and the dramatic chimneys of the Isle of Grain power station to port, made the dark water seem positively stygian by contrast. But we were not bound for the River Styx, not today at least. I hoped.

So far this holiday I’d made series of stupid mistakes. Nothing life-threatening but unnecessary, avoidable errors which sap confidence and make one suspect that a quiet week on a caravan site would have been a more appropriate choice for a week away with the children. Preferably immobilised on concrete blocks.

We’d set out from *Peter Duck*’s home mooring at Kyson on the River Deben. My partner Francis was on board with our two children, Bertie and Archie, plus Dot, the ship’s puppy. We planned to meet my brother Ned in his Kestrel, *Gingerbread Man*, at the Desolate Shores. We had a tent and a sailing dinghy and thought we’d mess about in some sub-Ransomey way until Francis had to set off for London and Work, and Ned’s daughter, Ruth, arrived from her GCSE result celebrations.

The Desolate Shores is our family’s name for Stone Point in the Walton Backwaters – Flint Island in Ransome’s *Secret Water*. I wished I could tell Francis its derivation – was it from Mervyn Peake’s *Rhymes Without Reason* or was somewhere in Edward Lear?

I couldn’t remember so we sailed away like the Owl and the Pussycat, completely forgetting that this was August Bank Holiday weekend and half the Jumblies on the East Coast would be pointing their sieves in the same direction.

The queue stretched virtually to the Pye End buoy and parking was a problem. Eventually we found space to anchor in the middle of the channel, welcomed *Gingerbread Man* alongside, and after a socially-awkward, sausage-related incident, kept Dot firmly on her lead as we trudged along the beach trying to find room for the barbeque supper that we’d promised the children.

“Sensitive, seldom and sad are we / As we walk by the shores of the Silent Sea,” I muttered as we went, still struggling for that elusive quotation. “Oh, so seldom and sad / So sensitive, seldom and sad.”

Boat-loads of families like ourselves shivered round our tiny fires then gave up and went gratefully to bed. But not all. When the pup needed a pee in the small hours there were whoopings and lights in the sky from somewhere in the direction of Landermere. A corroborree!

If I’d known what the next day had in store I’d have daubed myself with the last of the tomato ketchup and demanded to be taken on as a human sacrifice. Instead I climbed back into my cosy bunk and slept. Not wisely but too well.

When I woke the next morning the wind had changed. With all the chain I’d put out at the top of the tide the previous day, *PD* had swung round and been blown stern-first onto the sloping lee shore. She was stuck and there was half a tide’s worth of ebb left to run.

Worse. When poor little *Ginge* had struggled to escape she’d got a stern warp round her prop and been blown back to join us.

We weren’t the only casualties. Further up the channel three yachts had subsided onto one another and the shoreline was littered with scenes of distress. Nevertheless it seemed to me that every Sunday sailor who came breezing past over the next six humiliating hours pointed their cameras solely at *Peter Duck*.

Cursing the legacy of A Ransome, I waded into the chilly river trying to pretend that our 45° angle was a deliberate contrivance to enable me to scrub her port side. I grinned and waved but didn’t fool anyone. The ship’s pup wedged herself into the doghouse and curled up miserably, too traumatised even to chew.

The malign wind didn’t let up until we’d towed *Gingerbread Man* to Titchmarsh Marina, met a sleep-deprived Ruthie and waved reluctant goodbyes to Francis and Dot. Then, suddenly, it was one of those mellow, golden, washed-clean evenings that come like a gift at the passing of a weather front and reliably seduce one into forgetting that there’ll be another ridge or trough coming along behind.

The children and I rigged the sailing dinghy and set off across the glittering expanse of the Swallows and Amazons’ ‘Red Sea’. We were utterly alone; not a savage or a native to be seen. That man Ransome – he knew a thing or two.

The next weather front caught us as we rounded the Naze the following day. We’d decided to follow Francis to London but, after several hours of a thudding wind-

against-tide beat which soaked several blankets and a locker full of clothes, we took refuge in the Colne.

But the tide was still with us and we found that we weren't quite ready to stop. After Wivenhoe we took the sails down and drifted. Silently on up the river past Rowhedge, past fields of ruminant cows and banks thick with yarrow. We were overtaken by cyclists and power-walkers and even by our own dinghy when one or other of the children got out to row. The magic ended somewhere just before Hythe when we put the engine on and turned the boat in a lagoon of liquid sewage.

We picked up a grubby fore-and-aft mooring at Wivenhoe and I stayed on board while Ned and the children went ashore to buy fish and chips. A man called across from the pub to know whether *Peter Duck* had been "Saved!"

For a moment I assumed he was concerned for her immortal soul but no. "Saved ... saved from the POINT!" he shouted inanely.

One of those Sunday sailors must have had access to a Yachtwatch blog.

The pounding down the Wallet had loosened a section of seam and *PD*'s automatic pump was in hyper-active mode. She shot an arc of bilgewater in the man's direction. *Yes!*

We slept that night in the Pyefleet and tried again for the Thames the next morning. Conditions were fair, visibility good, the southerly breeze steady as we took the last of the ebb and headed for the Spitway. We put Archie on the helm and instructed him to keep up to windward. Ned became involved in an unexpectedly long mobile phone conversation about the damage to *GBM*. I watched the buoy – or so I thought.

Then the wave shapes changed; something felt wrong. I looked at the depth sounder: less than a metre between us and the Buxey sand. I felt her touch just once as we gybed 180° and scurried out the way we'd come. Two groundings – the thought gave me goosebumps. I'd been watching the Whitaker buoy, not the Wallet

Then we almost made it two ropes round two props as well.

The wind was heading us down the Middle Deep so we'd taken our sails down and resigned ourselves to a couple of hours chugging. We were relaxed and cheerful. Other Thames Estuary sailors will know that special moment when you realise that the colour of the water has changed; instead of the prevalent cold milky coffee tint of the mud and shingle northern section, it becomes intensely blue-green and clear as you are swept though the Deeps. You begin searching your vocabulary for *le mot*

juste: it's not azure or amethyst, but could it be aquamarine or just possibly cerulean? We'd reached that happy stage and Ruthie with A-levels and university and Adulthood all on the horizon was affirming her desire to continue holidays like this for ever and ever ... when I happened to notice a small plastic mooring buoy some distance to port.

It was almost the sole indicator of a long line of partially-submerged corked rope immediately ahead. A record-breaking array of lobster pots? Some sort of net? We didn't stop to enquire: the engine was cut, helm hard over and we glided alongside as if it were thirty metres of fendered wharf – not a mis-placed, prop-snagging, maritime hazard. “One rope round one prop may be regarded as a misfortune: two ropes round two props looks like carelessness.” How could we have explained ourselves to the Lady Bracknells of the Safersail Insurance Co?

I felt tense as we set out on this third attempt. What else might be floating in our path? Was I going to be able to pick out the pinpoint signals of the buoys against the glare of Southend? I could already see the lights of four or five invisible ships steaming purposefully past. Archie's enthusiasm was exactly what I needed.

“If this is the third most exciting thing what were the other two?”

“The day I watched Graham Napier hit sixteen sixes in a Twenty20 match and the first time Dad took me to Lords, of course.”

Clearly this adventure was up there with the greats.

The children fell asleep and woke up again and, much later, in the grey morning light, we commiserated with the bumper to bumper commuters on the QE2 Bridge as the flood hurried us underneath at a cracking 7 ½ knots.

Going through the Thames Barrier for the first time is exciting by anyone's standards – though I was momentarily disconcerted when the duty officer on VHF channel 14 said “Quack quack!” in response to our formal request for passage.

They didn't speak Duck in St Katherine's.

“Lovely boat,” said a charming young man who introduced himself as the dockmaster. “But, er, my management might not be too happy about the ... washing on display.”

I'd draped our damp blankets over the boom and pegged wet clothes along the guardrails to dry in the midday sun. We were spoiling the view from Starbucks.

“We do offer totally free laundry facilities,” he added hastily.

He couldn't have been nicer and this was central London after all. We did our best to adapt to the habits of this strange new land.

The next day we went feral. Almost as soon as we'd left the lock and our bows were pointed homewards, the crew began playing raucous games of Slout! They lounged on the foredeck reading unsuitable books – Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, maybe, but Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* ...? They played poker for matchsticks and then the Gameboys came out ...

Ned managed a brief walk along the seawall of the lonely River Roach where we spent that first post-civilised night and the next day we filled our diesel cans alongside a fuel pontoon on the Crouch. Apart from that it was fifty-two hours before we experimented with life on land again. *Peter Duck* lazed contentedly along under blue skies and through calm seas and we cooked increasingly eccentric meals as we worked our way to the back of the tins locker. All the electrics failed in Hamford Water but we had oil lamps and a knotted lead-line so it didn't seem to matter.

Home in the Deben we jumped over the side to get clean and caught the train back to Essex with moments to spare. We wrote the postcards we'd bought at Tower Bridge and posted them from Chelmsford Station. The pavement heaved and pitched under our feet. Seven rivers in seven days. You'd think we'd been on a Cruise.

Itinerary:

Day 1 Deben to Walton Backwaters

- “ 2 NOWHERE (except the Red Sea)
- “ 3 Walton Backwaters to Colne
- “ 4 Colne to Medway
- “ 5 Medway to Thames
- “ 6 Thames to Roach
- “ 7 Roach & Crouch to Walton Backwaters
- “ 8 Deben

A Note on Slout!

Slout! Is a card game for two players rather like a speeded up, competitive, Patience or a drastically simplified Racing Demon. To the spectator it appears to involve a lot of slapping and shouting and appeals to house rules. My older children played something similar which they called Slam the Lamb. No doubt many families have their own variant styles, just as they probably also have inexplicable names for favourite anchorages.