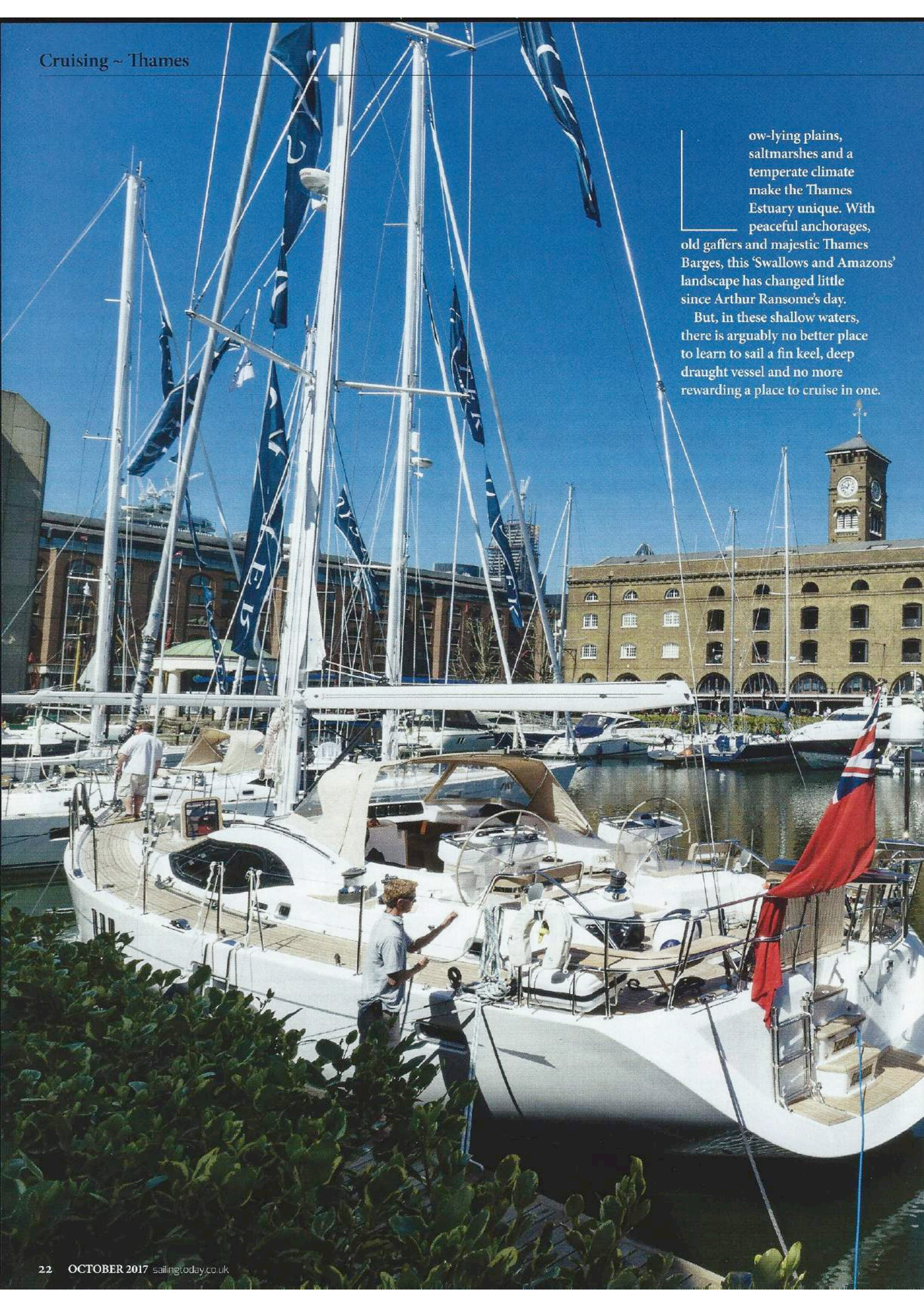


ow-lying plains, saltmarshes and a temperate climate make the Thames Estuary unique. With peaceful anchorages, old gaffers and majestic Thames Barges, this 'Swallows and Amazons' landscape has changed little since Arthur Ransome's day.

But, in these shallow waters, there is arguably no better place to learn to sail a fin keel, deep draught vessel and no more rewarding a place to cruise in one.



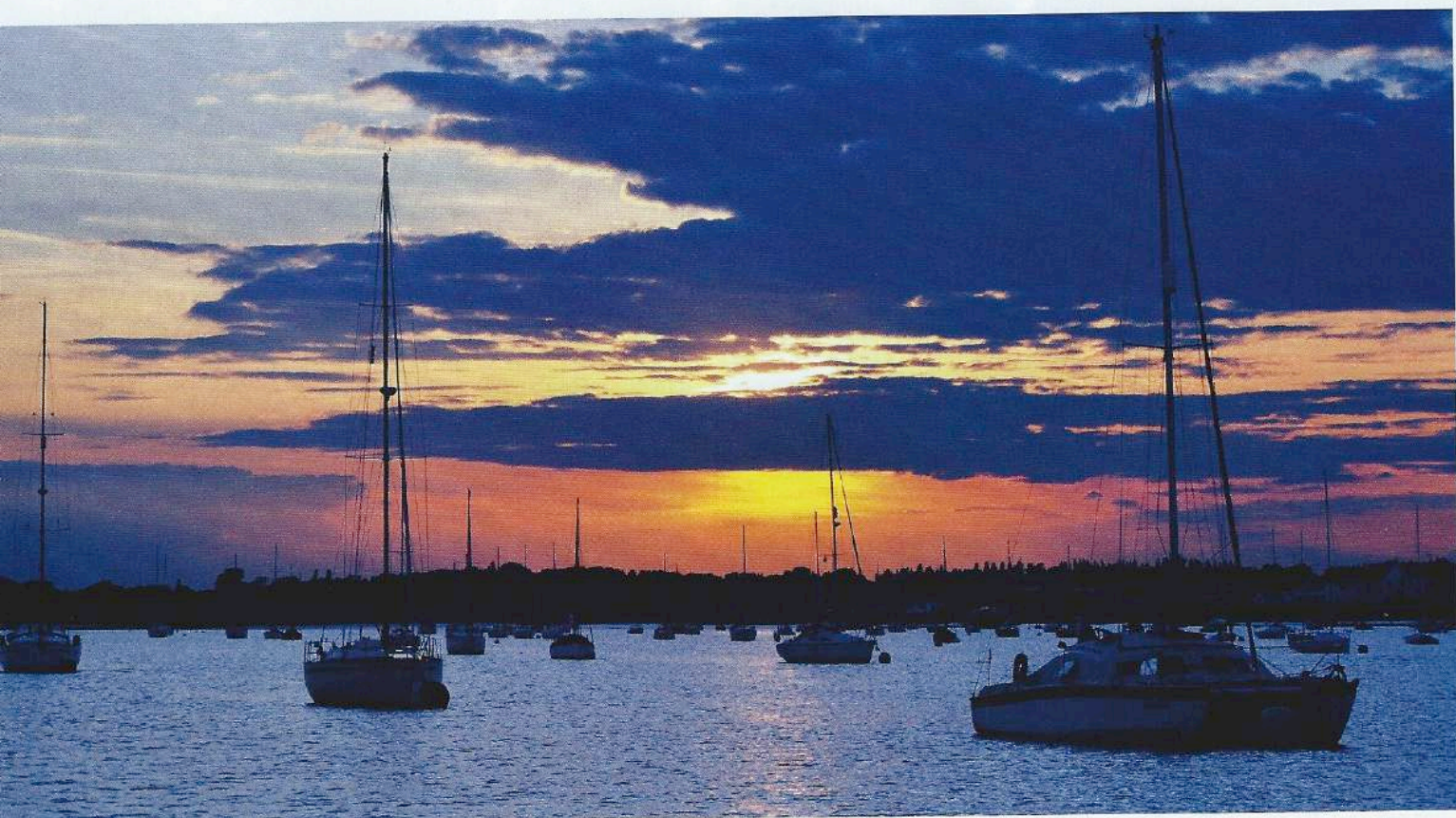
Resolute: deep draught – good choice

Having originally learned to sail in the Thames Estuary, we returned to these waters after buying Resolute, our Maxi 1100. We had decided against a shoal draught vessel, so with a 2m fin and bulb keel we had no plans to let Resolute take the ground.

During our time together, her fin keel, directional stability and angle of tack delivered fast, exhilarating cruising, never once subjecting us to the slamming that is →

THAMES PATH

The many and varied anchorages along the River Thames offer a wealth of options for the cruising sailor. By *Mike Trippitt*



ABOVE
A sunset scene,
approaching
Burnham-on-Crouch

sometimes associated with a bilge keel boat when sailing to windward.

Sandbanks and swatchways

The sandbanks of the Thames Estuary lie in a generally northeast-southwest direction. Container ships and other large vessels use the deep-water channels, particularly Black Deep and Princes Channel, on their way to Thamesport, London Gateway and other docks on the tideway.

But what are the essential skills leisure sailors need in these waters when sailing outside buoyed channels and crossing sandbanks and shallows where commercial vessels cannot navigate?

Les Rant has operated RYA sailing school East Coast Offshore Yachting since 1992 and has clocked up over 100,000 miles in the Thames Estuary.

He says: "You always have to be aware of where you are, and you always need to know where the nearest hazard is."

Les says that understanding and calculating tidal height for

secondary ports and knowing the height of tide at all times for where you are is "absolutely critical" in sailing this area. But he says that the shallow water "doesn't really impose that much in the way of limitation if you are aware of what the height of tide is and you plan accordingly."

Electronic aids such as Easytide make obtaining tide data easier, but a tidal stream atlas is essential when planning passages in either direction across and along the estuary.

Sandbanks need to be respected, but not necessarily feared. They are friends as much as foes. If known reasonably well, they can be an advantage rather than a hazard.

Les says: "Sailing down The Wallet, for instance [the inshore routes off Clacton], if you've got a southerly wind blowing, and you head out to Gunfleet Sands you are in the lee of the sandbank, so instead of having big, horrible seas, you end up with quite a gentle sea."

Unlike the rocks of the West Country cruising grounds, Thames sandbanks do move. Three years ago whilst sailing on

Maxi 1100 Resolute

Built in: 2002

Designer: Pelle Petterson

LOA: 11.0m

Beam: 3.65m

Draught: 2m

Keel: 2.4 tonne lead fin with bulb

Sail area: 70m²

Original engine: Volvo 2030 with saildrive

Hull: Rare white hull rather than Maxi signature blue hull

a friend's boat we ran aground on Long Sand. I recall admiring the view of the London Array wind farm from below when the boat came to a shuddering stop. "We've run aground," exclaimed the helmsman, overcome by the desire to state the obvious.

We had been sailing along a 5m contour line with a height of tide of 1.8m. However, the sandbank had changed.

The helmsman's lack of attention to the echo sounder for →

a minute or two left us stuck for several hours on a falling tide.

Below the waves, just a mile further along Long Sand the wreck of MV Mi Amigo, the original pirate ship of Radio Caroline, is testament to what can happen here in, and following, bad weather.

Our grounding experience serves as a reminder to keep a watchful eye on the echo sounder. It is arguably one of the most important aids to navigation, especially in the estuary.

Les Rant certainly thinks so: "If we were to have a choice between an echo sounder and a chart plotter, then our choice would have to be the echo sounder."

The Kent Ports

The Kent coastline from Ramsgate to the Medway is dotted with



small, drying harbours and inlets. For yachts unable to dry out there are numerous anchorages, and moorings. Sailors preferring to berth in a marina make for Ramsgate, or Gillingham and Chatham on the Medway.

Ramsgate is the gateway to the Thames Estuary from the south. The Harbour's 700-berth marina accommodates berth holders and 4,000 visitors each season. It is dredged to about 2.5m.

Set within the picturesque and historic harbour, Ramsgate's harbourmaster Rob Brown says the marina outshines

many in the Mediterranean.

"The comfort of our visitors is important to us and we offer free shower and toilet facilities as well as a coin operated launderette housed in a modern purpose built complex. Water and electricity is readily available and our experienced and friendly team will make sure that your welcome to our Marina is a memorable one," he says.

But it is its location that makes it an excellent sailing destination: "Our position, just 35 miles from the French coast and with 16 miles of sheltered, but challenging waters,

RESOURCES

CHARTS: *Imray C1 – Thames Estuary*

Imray Small Format Packs 2000 – Suffolk and Essex Coast. 2100 – Kent and Sussex Coast

Admiralty Leisure Folios

SC5606 – Thames Estuary, Ramsgate to Tower Bridge

SC5607 – Essex and Suffolk Coast

PILOT GUIDES: *East Coast Pilot (Imray)*

– Jarman, Cooper and Holness

Crossing the Thames Estuary (Imray) – Roger Gaspar

East Coast Rivers Cruising (Fernhurst) – Jan Harber

WEBSITES

eastcoastpilot.com

crossingthamesestuary.com



LEFT
Resolute, tied up,
all the work done!

INSET
Bradwell Marina, on
the Blackwater, at
the northern edge of
the Thames Estuary

through the haze or from over the horizon, closer and closer to Resolute. They now stand isolated, decaying and brooding.

Further west, the wreck of SS Richard Montgomery, the US Liberty ship that ran aground and broke her back in 1944 lies close to the mouth of the River Medway.

Her three masts are visible at all states of tide.

The Medway is navigable to Rochester for sailing vessels. Wide, commercial and busy at its mouth, it remains rural and serene in its upper reaches.

Our preferred stopover here is Chatham. The last few miles give plenty of time to drop sails, stow gear and get lines and fenders ready. The relative calm can be welcomed after a long beat from the north.

Chatham Maritime Marina sits in the old No.1 Basin of the Naval Dockyard where submarine periscopes were tested. Depth is no problem at the pontoons! The cill is 1.3 above chart datum with a waiting pontoon outside.

As with Gillingham Marina downriver, deep draught vessels can access the lock for most of the tidal cycle.

Chatham's historic Naval Dockyard lies adjacent to the marina. It should be high on the 'things to do' list if visiting this area.

As well as being home to Naval docks and buildings the attraction is home to a Victorian ropery, several warships and submarines, and a collection of lifeboats. →

between the coast and the Goodwin Sands offers a great experience for boat owners," says Rob.

We have often stayed two nights to enjoy the maritime history, the town's association with the evacuation of Dunkirk, its many restaurants and bars (including the Royal Temple Yacht Club), and the almost Mediterranean feel to its waterfront.

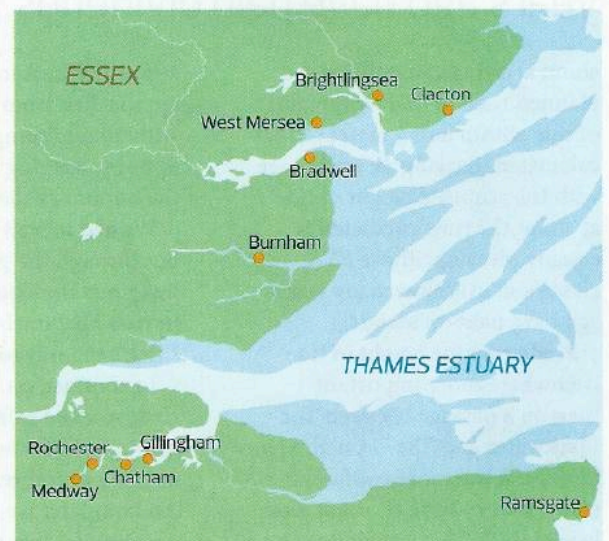
A passage north from Ramsgate affords a stunning view of North Foreland's white cliffs and its lighthouse above.

Kentish Flats and London Array wind farms are also impressive

sights. Their crisp, white sails turning slowly against a blue sky and favourable summer winds appear like waving spectators encouraging sailors on their way.

Our passages between Ramsgate and Chatham, and from the Kent coast to the Essex coast took us close to the World War II Maudsell Forts at Red Sands and Shivering Sands. These abandoned anti-aircraft defences consist of a group of steel platforms each on four legs.

The words of HG Wells and the music of Jeff Wayne filled our minds each time the Martian-like structures marched





ABOVE
Busy marina scene at the southern base of Ramsgate

BELOW
Ramsgate, with the estuary beyond

The Essex Ports

Resolute took us safely and happily to the harbours at Burnham-on-Crouch, Bradwell on The Blackwater and Brightlingsea on The Colne on many occasions. Although we have not stayed overnight, West Mersea accommodates deep draught vessels on buoys.

A passage between Kent and Essex will involve sailing around or through the main sandbanks. There is something satisfying

Channel, but the primary route is through the Swin Spitway.

At only 1.1m at chart datum the one-mile, northwest or southeast between Wallet Spitway and Swin Spitway SWMs has to be timed correctly.

During a passage from Ramsgate to Brightlingsea late one gorgeous June evening, we watched the sun setting whilst waiting at anchor for a metre more water before crossing from the south.

The wind had dropped, the

'Those RYA classroom exercises many years ago have paid dividends...'

about arriving at a point at the planned time to find the height of tide within half a metre of that calculated. Leaving an anchorage with the required height of tide at about the time predicted is equally pleasing. Those RYA classroom exercises many years ago have paid dividends.

Predicting the height of tide is nowhere more important than on a passage between The Blackwater and The Crouch. Some locals and the more confident take a cheeky little shortcut along longitude 01° E through Ray Sands

scene idyllic. A local coaster approached from the south, and without hesitating crossed the Spitway, banging and clattering the bottom as she went.

We had to wait a while longer, but through the peace we imagined the skipper saying, in true Mr Punch fashion: "That's the way to do it!"

In contrast, on another trip, we close reached safely and comfortably through the Spitway in 25 knots of wind with three metres of tide. An hour later we were screaming along under two reefs in 36 knots.

Brightlingsea is the most northerly of the Essex ports. The small harbour in the creek is home to a commercial quay, pontoon moorings, a wind farm support vessel, a number of historic smacks and the friendly Colne Yacht Club. The town, a short walk away, is a delight.

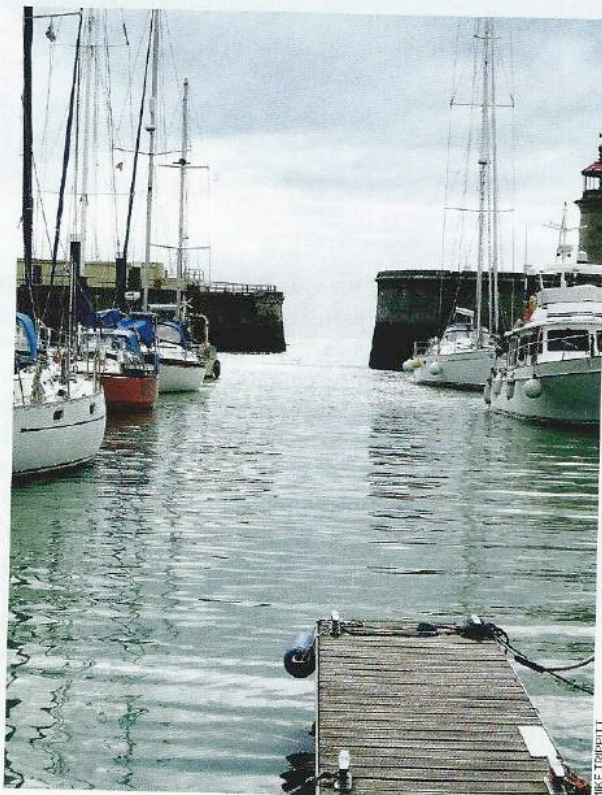
Harbourmaster James Thomas agrees.

"Brightlingsea is a unique town," he says. "It is different to other places you may have visited. Most people are completely enchanted by the place."

The entrance to Brightlingsea is one metre below chart datum. Extensive work is ongoing. "We are dredging and we have dredged. On a big tide you'll probably have six-and-a-half metres," says harbourmaster James. "Even if you had a 2.7m keel you'd still be fine three hours either side of high [water]."

Deeper water exists at the pontoons where the harbour staff will guide yachts to a berth suitable for its draught.

Further north, a whole cruising ground lies beyond Clacton-on-Sea: The Walton Backwaters, the rivers Stour and Orwell, and



MIKE TRIPPETT



'The Lancaster, Spitfire and Hurricane of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight flew overhead'

the Deben. Although Clacton has no facilities for inshore sailors it has had a thriving dinghy racing sailing club since the 1950s.

Annually, in August, the Clacton seafront and offshore airshow attracts thousands.

In fair weather leisure vessels anchor to watch the display while those sailing by get a rare treat.

One of our most memorable sailing moments came when broad reaching past Clacton under full sail in bright sunshine. The Lancaster, Spitfire and Hurricane of the Battle of Britain Memorial flight, a Hawker Harrier and the Red Arrows flew overhead.

ABOVE LEFT
Chatham Maritime Marina exudes an urban look

RIGHT, FROM TOP
Old gaffers at Brightlingsea in the half light, and rafted up



Dispelling the myth

Shallow waters are not just for shoal draught or bilge keel yachts. With an understanding of secondary ports and tidal heights, together with sound seamanship and a reliable echo sounder, sailors navigate deep draught vessels around this area safely all year round.

Sometimes the shifting sands will catch the unwary out. But the challenges of the Thames Estuary also bring their rewards.

These under-used, wide-open waters, where a day can pass without seeing another yacht, provide fulfilment and pleasure to all who sail them.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Trippitt is a freelance writer. He learned to sail on the East Coast before sailing his own yacht in the Thames Estuary. He lives and works in East Anglia.

MIKE TRIPPITT