# In Shoal Waters

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# Foreword

It was a late summer day and we were gliding up the Wallet from the River Colne on our return to the River Deben. Normally, at this time of the year, there is a great deal of boating activity in the Wallet, mostly a steady line of mass-produced yachts and perhaps the occasional barge. But this day there was nothing else except a solitary Harwich boat trawling near the Gunfleet Sands. Sitting at the tiller, I focused my attention on the end of Walton Pier, and the turning point to be rounded. To my surprise, a small brown gaff sail suddenly appeared from the direction of Harwich. Then I could see the hull was green. I smiled. Only one small boat on the East Coast was likely to be out there and, of course, it was Charlie Stock in *Shoal Waters*.

I first met Charlie Stock through the Old Gaffers Association (OGA). He took part in the first race and was a keen supporter. At one stage he was on the committee and, because he won a race, was elected Commodore one year. But he was never really keen on administration. He was the solitary sailor of the East Coast and conformed only to the rules of wind and tide. Usually, he went where few other boats had been and he did not adhere to a pre-arranged set of racing rules. *Shoal Waters* might not be much larger than a rowing dinghy, but Charlie has visited more places than most yachtsmen have seen in a lifetime.

Even before the OGA started, Charlie had enjoyed a long career of single-handed sailing. He had started in the 16ft *Zephyr* in 1948 and in 1963 shifted her gear to the hull of a Fairey Falcon that was to become the iconic *Shoal Waters*. And if ever a boat was aptly named, it was this one. Charlie hugged along the coast and crept up every creek. The sight of *Shoal Waters* quietly sailing along the side of an estuary and then suddenly vanishing up some secluded creek has been part of the East Coast scene for almost half a century. Charlie has always been very happy to tell you the details of his latest jaunt down the Blackwater or, if it was spring, along the Norfolk Broads to glimpse the birdlife among the reeds. A glance at *Shoal Waters* tells you how these trips have been achieved. The boat was always very tidy and the gear carefully stowed. The voyages were clearly and painstakingly planned and his close knowledge of the way tides behave on the coast was undeniable. He kept out of trouble by

knowing when not to go to sea and knowing where to tuck in when the weather turned foul.

We live in a cottage beside the River Deben and many times I have looked out of the window and seen the tan sails of *Shoal Waters* as she made her way along the tranquil waters of this delightful Suffolk estuary. Sometimes he called in for a cup of tea, at other times we would find a message near our outside tap saying that he had called for fresh water. Mind you, on one occasion Charlie's navigation nearly got me arrested. I gave him a lift back from an OGA committee meeting in Maldon and we were chatting away about boats when he suddenly said: "Stop here this is where I get out." I jammed on the brakes and Charlie apologised and then said: "Ah, no, I think it's further up the road." We repeated this manoeuvre twice. We didn't spot a police car behind us until a blue light shot past with siren wailing. The policemen thought I was a drunken driver, but Charlie assured them that it was his fault and that I was stone-cold sober.

Now Charlie has finally sold *Shoal Waters*, it is time to assess his place in yachting history. Countless single-handed mariners have emerged over the years since small-boat sailing became popular in Victorian times. Their common thread is that they do what they want when they want, and their voyages invariably amaze and astound other less solitary seafarers. However, there can be no area like the East Coast blessed with such a maritime legend who has regularly sailed so many sea miles without getting into major difficulties. Above all, Charlie has covered every mile through the sheer love of it and, at the same time, spread his pleasure to others in talks and writings. Throughout his lifetime, he has set a high standard in seamanship, coastal navigation and passage-making that is unlikely to be surpassed.

*Robert Simper*
*Ramsholt*
*River Deben*
*Suffolk*

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# Introduction

My original aim was to sail round the world, but three things prevented me from doing so: I never had the money; I never had the time; and I had a wife and four children. Sailing the wide oceans, visiting the palm-fringed atolls and sweltering tropic ports where the jungle drops down the mountainside to kiss the warm seas remains a pastime for winter evenings, in the comfort of an armchair and with an endless number of books on the subject.

Before retirement, and thanks to an understanding wife, I did for a dozen or so weekends a year find time enough to sail as far as I liked, provided I was back in good time to go to work on Monday morning. Did this mean just pottering about in the river, with all my year's hopes pinned on fine weather for the precious summer holiday, or could I, year in and year out, still find some real sailing? Did I have to race to get some sort of interest, challenge and excitement? Did my modest means compel me to crew on larger craft to enjoy offshore and night sailing? The answer is set out in this recollection of my sailing years, and I hope illustrates the wonderful adventure playground that lays just a couple of hours from our crowded roads and railway stations.

The maze of beautiful rivers that stretch deep into the heart of the Suffolk, Kent and Essex countryside, and the fascinating triangle of sandbank-infested-waters between Aldeburgh, Ramsgate and Canvey Island, might almost have been deliberately designed for the small shoal-draft sailing cruiser. A voyage round the Whitaker Beacon at the north-eastern edge of Foulness Sand may not compare with the adrenalin boost of a thrash round Cape Horn, but careful research proves that a man drowned off Southend Pier is just as dead as one drowned off the tip of South America. In spite of the rescue services and modern electronic aids and gimmicks, the welfare state ends at the seawall. They may have abolished capital punishment for murdering old ladies but the death penalty is still the ultimate price for bad seamanship. Once you cast off on a Friday evening for 50 hours of freedom and adventure, you are just as much on your own as any skipper in the world, from Tierra del Fuego to Tollesbury.

Make no mistake, the Thames Estuary has always been a busy waterway. The Roman corn galleys used it in the days when we exported grain. Until the advent of the motor lorry, most coastal villages and hamlets survived to the heartbeat of the twice-daily high tides. Every bank and creek had a name and was thus etched into history. Men have traded this area since the beginning of recorded history. The routes they used, their short cuts, the tricks of working the wind and tide, still exist for the modern yachtsman to test his skill and the ability of his craft. On the other hand, the Thames Estuary is essentially a safe area. You can make mistakes and ground on a sandbank for a few hours and, providing the conditions are not too bad, the consequence might be only a delayed return to your mooring. A similar mistake on other rockier parts of the British coast could mean the loss of vessel and crew. Remember the first time that the original pirate broadcaster Radio Caroline broke her mooring and blew ashore near Walton-on-Naze in an easterly gale. She got off later under her own steam and went to Holland for repairs. There are few other parts of the coast where such a craft would have got away that lightly. The weekend sailor may risk drowning but he probably still has less chances of perishing than if he were driving on one of Britain's over-crowded roads. The sheer exhilaration of sailing back to one's mooring after a successful trip, whether it having been an Atlantic crossing or the first rounding of a buoy just a few miles outside the river, is a pleasure that has to be experienced.

Some years ago Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales asked: "Can't we do something to make mankind feel grand?" The common love of boats, the fear of the sea and the camaraderie it engenders among all those who partake in this unique pastime is probably the best answer. Many of our hospital beds are occupied by patients who are mentally sick. How many more of us would join them if it were not for the healing effects of a brief taste of the tranquillity among the creeks and marshes under the wide open skies and on the eternally restless tides of the outer Thames Estuary? In an increasingly cockeyed world, navigating a small boat is one of the few things left that continues to make sense.

*Charles Stock*
*Great Baddow, Essex*

Chapter One

# Learning To Sail

"Of course, there is the *Zephyr*," said a voice in the twilight as I waited for a bus in the little Essex coastal town of Maldon. "Her gear is all right, though her hull is as ripe as a pear!" My heart took a jump at these words and then sank. They were not intended for me but I couldn't resist the temptation to listen when I heard this talk about the dearth of small boats. I had just that very evening bought the 16ft half-decked gunter-rigged sloop *Zephyr*.

It was the Friday evening before Whitsun 1948 and the purchase price of £75, including an outboard motor that I later sold for £10, represented a couple of years' steady saving during my spell in the Royal Marines. My pay had started at 18 shillings a week, rising to 28 shillings in the second year. Saving this modest sum had earned me the title of 'Baron Stock' on the mess deck of HMS *Buchan Ness*, headquarters ship of 416 Flotilla, Royal Marine Landing Craft. While I would never advise anyone to buy a craft without a survey, thank my lucky stars I didn't get further advice on *Zephyr*. She had been on the market for a long time and, being as green as I was, I would almost certainly have been dissuaded from investing in her.

I suppose the story really started at Liverpool Street Station in 1944. At this time, I was employed by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. My job was to plot merchant shipping in the Pacific Ocean and, as American forces stormed from island to island, I quickly developed a keen interest in this fascinating area. One evening I discovered a copy of the National Geographic Magazine that included an article on the voyage of the yacht *Teddy*, which sailed from Norway across to New Zealand. Instantly, the thought of sailing round the world appealed to me. The first thing, of course, was to learn more about small yachts and by chance I spotted on Smith's bookstall a paperback entitled *Yachting on a Small Income* by Maurice Griffiths, price sixpence. I still have that battered volume today. This led me on to the wonderful collection of sailing books in the three branches of the Westminster Library, and I soon became knowledgeable on all the popular sailing writers of the

time, particularly Francis B. Cooke, whom I have always considered has better than anyone managed to capture the very spirit of messing about in boats.

My workplace was on the ground floor of the bank building between the Admiralty proper and the Whitehall Theatre, in a section called Trade Division M4. It was run by naval officers, including a couple of dozen retired master-mariners, who had started in sailing boats. They worked out the probable daily position of each ship and convoy, while a horde of teenagers, of which I was one, handled the stream of signals and moved the pins representing each ship or convoy on large wall charts so that the latest information was available night and day for the War Room. The Atlantic Ocean was the main plot, but the Indian and Pacific Ocean plots were coupled together under the control of one particular lieutenant, who had two major interests in life: pretty girls and greyhounds, in each case the faster the better.

His obsession with dog racing was shared by the chap in charge of the office, and they were very good friends. Us lads on the Pacific and Indian Ocean plots benefited from this liaison because the prettiest girls who came into the office were always allocated to our section. It was no good the young ladies being fast around the desk, they also had to be fast around the chart tables, which required a lot more staying power.

The department operated round the clock seven days a week, so at times we were very busy, though there were slack periods. We would listen to fascinating sea stories from the old-timers, plot voyages from Basil Lubbock's *Last of the Windjammers* on the charts and generally soak up the seafaring traditions of these halcyon days of Britain's maritime past. We followed the island war in the Pacific on large-scale charts, which were freely available, and I took the opportunity to copy carefully hundreds of ports and harbours, atolls and anchorages on filing cards. Alas, they all remain in my desk unused.

There was a branch of the Sea Cadet Corps at the Admiralty and three of us, coached by the old-timers, passed the Petty Officer Examination in record time. Apart from a few evenings rowing a whaler on the tidal Thames and summer camps in Devon, there was little time to get afloat. It was on the River Teign at Shaldon, in Devon, where I had my first experience sailing in a lugsail dinghy. It was great fun, but at four shillings an hour, time was severely limited. With the end of the

war in September 1945, my planned enlistment for training in the Fleet Air Arm was cancelled and I was offered a chance of transferring to the Royal Marines on the 'Y' scheme entry, which I accepted, and I joined up in early January 1946.

Unfortunately, throughout that year our potential officer squad was gradually whittled down and the last week before the passing out parade I was chucked out. I then spent a couple of months or so at Eastney barracks, Portsmouth before being drafted to HMS *Rosneath*, the landing craft base on the Clyde, where I became a deckhand on a Landing Craft Assault. In residence were around 150 bootnecks, 300 matelots and, most important of all, some 180 Wrens, and every morning the population was doubled, or even trebled, by an avalanche of dockyard mateys. They arrived from Glasgow and Gourock in a fleet of ferries and simply just disappeared among the ships and shore facilities. This was in the middle of the terrible winter of 1947, with all the power, fuel and food shortages. Luckily, the Americans, who had been here during the war, had left over two years' supply of paraffin for the space heaters in the huts dotted among the woods onshore. There were two cinemas, a Church of Scotland canteen, a dance hall and several bars, not to mention the lovely Gareloch with its fleet of Dragons and 6 and 8 Metre yachts.

We had the use of the 72ft ex-German racing yacht *Orion*, the scratch boat of the Royal Ocean Racing Club in 1947 and in the summer *Myth of Malham*, which went on the win the Fastnet Race, was launched by the engineering officer, Cdr Illingworth. Two other new boats caused excitement at this time. They were the Fairey Firefly and the Swordfish, later fitted with a wooden plate and renamed the Albacore. We had naval whalers and naval 14-footers at the base, but there was little opportunity to get out sailing and it wasn't until Sunday the 3rd of August 1947, my 20th birthday, and after three years' solid bookwork, that I took charge of a boat for the first time. I can't remember who accompanied me but whoever it was I recall that he wasn't that interested. There wasn't much wind, either, but at least it was a start. The following day was a glorious one, so I booked the dinghy again. This time my mate Tilson, a cynical Irishman, came along and we had a fine sail, the voyage made even more pleasurable by the sight of a group of the Wrens sunbathing on their private beach. The 14-footers were reserved for the officers on Tuesdays

for their weekly race, so we took out the 27ft whaler, but there was little wind and we faced a hard row back against the ebb tide, an experience that almost certainly made me begin to reflect on the importance of tides.

I had already become bitten by the sailing bug, but I faced a difficult decision on the Wednesday; to either arrange another trip or attend the weekly Scottish dance. I must confess that the lure of the fair sex won on this occasion, but a resolution to any similar problems appeared with the realisation that Anne, our pay clerk, was keen on sailing, and she became my regular crew for the rest of the season. My regular entries in the dinghy booking list were soon noticed and we had some wonderful afternoon trips down the Clyde on *Orion*.

At the end of September, the daily orders included an appeal for crew to take an 85-ton gaff-ketch from Dumbarton to the Channel Islands. The skipper was an ex-Mosquito pilot, who was trying to make his living sailing professionally. The crew comprised a naval officer, myself and an officer's steward from the landing craft depot ship HMS *Buchan Ness*. He accepted he knew nothing and did just what he was told, but was a most useful member of the crew. It wasn't a record passage but a thoroughly enjoyable one. We arrived in St Helier in warm autumn sunshine at the end of the glorious summer of 1947.

Back at the base once more, the early darkness prevented evening sailing but I continued to get out on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. On 30th November I went out for my last trip on the Clyde before moving to Chatham for demob just before Christmas. The thought of going back to office life was out of the question, so I spent a year training in farming at Chelmsford. Getting afloat was a problem and it never occurred to me to join a sailing club because very few existed at that time, and even those that had survived the war were not very active.

I was, however, determined to get afloat somehow and, though a cabin boat was beyond my means, each week I scrutinised the local papers, eventually managing to find *Zephyr*, a 16ft gunter-sloop open boat. She originated from Poole and was clearly amateur-built, firstly as an open boat and later tastefully adapted as a half-decker. She had a short bowsprit and a dagger plate, which weighed about 80lbs. The planking was mostly sound, but after I had loosened up the pitch in the bottom planks following some hard sailing she leaked by the garboards.

The cutwater had rotted through completely and had been covered with a brass plate, which I had failed to notice. There were also some lead badges on the corners of the transom covering a few flaws. No mention was made of this at this time, but I later discovered a lead keel underneath, which I eventually discovered weighed 250lbs. One slight snag was that the fixed rudder protruded a few inches below the keel, which meant that when the plate was up the rudder was the first thing to touch the bottom.

It was a late afternoon tide on a Saturday when I sailed up and down off Maldon Promenade with two reefs in, delighted to discover that she handled well. The following day, Whit Sunday, my brother Bill joined me for the day. We left Maldon on the early morning tide and sailed downriver before returning at high water in the evening. My log for that day is a stirring tale of the sea:

"16/5 Sunday. Up early at 0620 hrs; a glorious morning, left at 0655 hrs and cycled to Maldon. Picked up some papers and bottles of Tizer and down to the boat. Heaved ourselves out on the boat's anchor line and made a perfect getaway downstream and round the point. Then there was a snapping and fluttering as the jib halyard carried away. We tried to get alongside another boat to repair it but were waved off so we beached – for eight hours. A long lazy wait. Bill was very bored; wind increasing. I fixed a stake into the mud (we had no anchor) with a line to our stern. It looked like being a sticky journey, so Bill walked to Maldon. The tide rolled in and began to break over her. Would my stake hold? I jumped over and pushed. At last she slid back, round on the line. I heaved her up to it slowly, down rudder, quite a job with the waves breaking on the stern; plate stuck so hoisted the jib, sheet in hand; out with knife and cut the line. She hesitated, picked up and very slowly eased away from the shore. I eased the sheet and got out into the stream and then up to Maldon to pick up Bill. More sailing and then ashore to clean her down. Well, she is far from perfect; the boom is low and the bowsprit awkward, but her hull seems good. Very little turbulence at high speeds. Must get an anchor and sweeps."

All these mishaps occurred just above the lock gates at Heybridge, which meant that the total distance covered for the return trip was less then two miles. Wisely, we decided to spend Whit Monday at home recovering.

Laying a mooring was the next task. A local builder cast me couple of concrete blocks, weighing about 60lbs each, with rings in the top. They cost eight shillings the pair and the following Saturday I took them along the promenade in a wheelbarrow to lay them. The position had been agreed with the water bailiff and the annual charge was ten shillings. Carrying the blocks out through the mud was really hard work and I ended up pulling them along by the chain, and they skimmed along almost effortlessly. I was unable to get down to take her out onto the mooring on the Sunday but the following evening Peter, an old school chum who was working on the same farm, came along because he was keen to learn what sailing was all about. After a few snags, including the lacing on the yard coming adrift and the parrel balls falling onto the foredeck as I hoisted the mainsail, we got away at a fine rate before a westerly wind and decided to go behind Northey Island. Unfortunately, we did not realise that there was a raised road linking the island with the mainland. The chart-makers obviously knew nothing about it and we struck it with a right old bang and I began to appreciate the disadvantage of a dagger plate compared with a pivoting centre-board.

The accident caused the front of the case to be levered forward and water began spurting in. We got the plate up and, despite the mainsail gybing as the boat scraped on the road, I jumped overboard and pushed her over into deep water on the seaward side of the road. For some reason we decided not to sail back over the road but set off right round the island, bailing hard all the way back to the mooring.

By the end of June, rough repairs had been made and an anchor and warp purchased, together with several other fittings and, despite everything, Peter and I were tempted, chiefly because of the fine weather, to branch out and try a weekend camping trip to the mouth of the river. High water on the Saturday was around five in the afternoon. The plan was to go to Brightlingsea for the night and then on to Clacton Pier on the ebb the following morning, returning to Maldon with the flood on Sunday afternoon. This was before the days of transistor radios and we never gave a thought to wind force and direction. We also had no dinghy and had to rely on the kindness of a local boatman to put us on board. He looked aghast as we climbed on board, for the water was almost up to the seat. "You ain't agoing to sleep on her," he exclaimed

in amazement. We assured him we were, though it took half-an-hour of hard slog to bail her dry. Finally, at 1545 hrs we set off, with a fine westerly breeze of about F3 blowing under a blue sky for what was to be one of the most memorable experiences of East Coast sailing: the first voyage down the lovely River Blackwater. Once past the sandy point of Osea Island, a new world opened up to us.

To quote from the log:

"The sun was strong and life seemed good. We lowered the sails and had a swim off Stansgate Abbey. Bradwell and West Mersea passed quickly by and at 2015 hrs we arrived in Brightlingsea."

We had nothing on board except sandwiches, some bottles of Tizer, a fizzy orange-based drink, which was a staple part of our diet in those early days. On our arrival, we decided to beach the boat and walk ashore for some tea, but after a quick look round, I ran her onto the mud half-way into the harbour on the north shore. Unfortunately, as the tide fell I realised that we were on an island and it was ten o'clock before we could wade ashore, by which time everywhere serving hot drinks had shut. Back on board we were fascinated to watch the owner of a sizable yacht from the South Coast in a distressed state, his boat having gone aground. At first, he rigged his spinnaker boom and main boom as legs, but then lost his nerve in case they snapped. We settled down to sleep on the bare boards, having neither blankets nor sleeping bags, and got only a little fitful sleep before the tide returned at around 0130 hrs. The chuckling against the planking was music to our ears and has remained a constant joy to me over the years. Our friend from the South Coast was in a hurry to get away, for he kept his engine going for at least 30 minutes before he floated off and by daylight he was moored somewhere on the horizon. We bailed each hour after she floated and at 0500 hrs, under a cold grey sky and a rising wind from the south-west, set off. Outside the white-capped waves soon killed off any idea of sailing round to Clacton, so we turned for home, beating slowly past the four miles of Mersea Island over the ebb tide. We ought to have reefed, but this was well beyond our capabilities whilst underway.

Peter began to feel sick, a situation not helped, I suspect, because he had breakfasted on Tizer and Mars bars. It was a long trip, but towards low water the sun came out, turning the waves off Thirslet Spit a vivid green. Life seemed good again.

The water was still dripping from Peter's coat when we travelled home on the bus; that, among other discomforts, convincing him that there were better things than sailing. I, however, continued day sailing for the rest of the season and in September enjoyed a holiday on the Broads in one of the Leading Lady class hire yachts, an experience which gave me a taste for Broads sailing that has never waned. On Sunday 3rd October I took *Zephyr* round to the Ballast Hole near the Blackwater Sailing Club and moored her high on the saltings for the winter. So ended my first season afloat. That winter I sent my copy of Hervey Benham's *Last Stronghold of Sail* to a sailing friend of mine from the marines with a caption on the chart inside the cover at the base of an arrow pointing to "Brightlingsea – My furthest voyage."

Chapter 14

# Lighters On The Sand

It was the day of the full moon and the spring ebb pouring out from the River Crouch left the entrance buoys struggling and swirling in the racing tide, which swept north-east towards the tall north sector cardinal Sunken Buxey Buoy two miles away. The only boat in sight, a little green gaff cutter, had enjoyed a swift trip downstream from Burnham, and now swung to port round the spherical yellow buoy marking the entrance to the notoriously shallow Ray Sand Channel (the Rays'n), between the mile-wide mudflats fringing the shore and the extensive Buxey Sand. I checked my watch, reached for the sounding cane and began to swing it like a walking stick, more as a ritual than in fear of grounding, for I have been making this trip regularly for over 50 years and knew that there would be water enough for another hour yet. One hundred years ago Frank Cowper, well-known for his yachting guides of Great Britain, discovered 12ft here at low water springs for his book *Sailing Tours*. We draw a mere 12 inches with the plate up and back in 1963 when *Shoal Waters* was first launched we could get through at any stage of the tide. Now the southern end dries 4-5ft and is getting shallower each year as the tail of the Buxey Sand extends out south-west towards the coast at Shore Ends, leaving the famous great iron seamark, the Buxey Beacon, isolated in a lonely bay. For several minutes, less and less of the cane disappeared beneath the water, but then it began to get deeper again until, thankfully, the bottom was comfortably out of reach. The elaborate fleur-de-lis on the points card of the ridiculously large brass binnacle compass settled opposite the lubber's line. This was a chance to reach into the cabin and set the kettle going for a brew before it was time to look out for the next mark, a tall iron post topped with two large black cones base to base to indicate that it is on the eastern side of one of the four wrecks placed on the sands as targets when it was a wartime bombing range.

If the 80lb iron plate, three-quarters of the way down, whispered it would be a case of just lifting it a little and easing over to starboard into slightly deeper water. By the time the eastern sector beacon drew

abeam, a second mark on the north-eastern part of the wreck would be visible against the Mersea shore. All I needed to do was to log the time spent sailing between the two beacons. A similar time on the same bearing would bring me to the northern fringe of St Peter's flats and the deep water of the outer River Blackwater, well inside the Bench Head Buoy. Once there, I would alter course north-west to find a snug berth for the night among the creeks at either West Mersea or Bradwell, thus catching up on the sleep lost when I left my drying mooring at Heybridge some 14 hours earlier.

This left me plenty of time to watch the late September sun set over the low seawall as flocks of seabirds forsook the wheat stubbles ashore to feed on the teeming invertebrates and crustacea that lived in the mud and sand exposed by the rapidly retreating tide. No villages grace the ten miles of wild coastline along the eastern edge of the Dengie Hundred. Even the local farms cower a mile or so inland, safe from the winter fury of the southern North Sea. I swung the powerful glasses north-east and confirmed that the black triangle two miles away was the Buxey Beacon, now a cardinal mark instead of the bare pole with a T-shaped topmark made famous by those doyens of East Coast yachting writers, Francis B. Cooke and Maurice Griffiths. The Buxey once marked the western edge of the sand and was used by sailing barges cutting over the Ridge and up the Rays'n instead of taking the longer route through the Spitway between the Buxey Sands. Now it stands neglected, except for an occasional adventurous yachtsman on a courtesy call. In the far distance could be seen the white sails of yachts taking the deeper route between these two popular rivers. Gazing shorewards again, I sat up with quite a start. A series of dark oblong shapes broke the gentle line of the seawall as it shimmered in the golden autumn haze. As they drew abeam, careful examination showed them to be lighters, the sort once seen in their hundreds on the London river. There were ten of them, parallel to the shore and several hundred yards out from the seawall. The jib of a crane loomed above the hull at the northern end. This was ridiculous… nothing ever happened on this bit of the coast! The Roman legions left their fort at Othona early in the 5th century and Bishop Cedd built the little chapel that still carries his name in the gateway 200 years later. Sailing barges loaded stacks of hay 10ft high on deck for London's hungry draft horses, and just before the Second World War the RAF established a

firing and bombing range here, of which four wrecks are the only remnants. Lighters! A crane! This riddle of the sand called for further investigation as soon as time and tide served.

On Friday morning a fortnight later, *Shoal Waters* was ready to leave her mooring at Heybridge as the incoming tide lifted her at half flood. The lighters were 12 miles away and dried an hour or two after high water. With a good breeze it would have been possible to reach them before they dried, but the wind stayed light and fickle. And when the lighters came into view as I rounded Sales Point, I could see they were already dry. My little boat worked her way south between the northern wrecks until she came to rest sitting comfortably on the mud, like a large duck to wait for the night tide. At least it was an ideal opportunity for an afternoon nap.

When I woke it was already dark. A brilliant moon shone out of the clear sky, giving the mud and sand a magic lustre. The bones of the north-east wreck, standing out black against the loom of Clacton's lights, invited me out for an evening stroll. I remembered to put up the anchor light before deserting the cosy warmth of the cabin for the eerie silence beyond. The steady thud of my boots on the firm sand was at times interrupted with cheerful splashes as my feet hit the shallow pools. Now and then a startled seabird fluttered up into the darkness and the inevitable cormorant sentries guarding the top of the beacon flapped away resentfully as I reached the wreck. This had once been a wooden minesweeper, the hull recognisable well into the Sixties but, under the twice-daily assault of the hungry seas it was now rapidly disintegrating. Shorewards, the black hulls of the lighters stood out against the grey of the seawall. A soft *fru-fru* sound made me realise that the tide was already threading its way back in and I hurried back towards the lonely anchor light.

Just after midnight the voyage to the lighters was completed and in the moonlight they looked frightfully big and menacing. Working down from the north, the first seemed empty, the next nearly full of black material, almost certainly honest Essex mud, and the southernmost looked full of a lighter coloured material with a strange sheen. Nothing would have tempted me to board them in the dark; that would have to wait until daylight, so I anchored 100 yards off to sleep away the rest of the night.

Next morning, a fine sunrise straight out of the sea brightened up the mudflats as I tramped across the mud to the lighters. They were obviously here to stay. Small holes, like eyes, had been cut into the bow and stern buoyancy compartments, making the great black hulls look more like stranded whales. The crane was on a dumb lighter, with another alongside it at the northern end of the line. Mud was obviously being brought here to fill the lighters as nothing was being dug locally. Further inspection southwards showed that they were being filled to the level of the decks with mud. This was covered with polythene sheeting and then the lighter was topped up brimful with shingle. A flimsy sheet of plastic netting completed the job, for a time at least. By high water the waves were lapping the side decks and it was obvious to any seaman that the first easterly blow would lift most of the shingle out of the lighters onto the mud to leeward. All this was clearly an expensive game. Why? Who was paying for it?

A wide fringe of saltmarsh protects most of the ten miles of coastal seawall between the Crouch and Blackwater from the direct assault by onshore gales and in places these saltings are over half-a-mile wide. The tide covers them and reaches the seawall for an hour or two on a few days each fortnight just after a full or new moon. Here alone, the smooth mud and sand runs right up to the foot of the seawall. Along the rest of the coast, the waves will already have been partly tamed by the off-lying banks, which dry at low water. Only here is there open water all the way through the Wallet Channel between the holidaymaker's beaches of the Tendring Hundred and the long Gunfleet Sand north-east to Denmark. The worst gales come from the north-east. Just here the waves have 300 miles of drift before hurling themselves at the fragile shield of concrete-faced clay that protects the rich marshes of maritime Essex. Thus the protective role of the beached and ballasted lighter is clear, but why the expensive shingle? In my wandering over the years I had noticed the growing concern of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) with the dearth of nesting sites for little terns. About a third of the north European population breeds in Great Britain, giving us a population of something over 2000 pairs each summer. Well over half of them choose the south-east and nest in small colonies on shingle beaches along the shore, the very beaches so popular with the growing and increasingly leisured, human population. This area is very isolated

and nests would be safe from people but I am afraid the lighters would need to be at least 4ft higher above chart datum to survive an easterly blow that coincided with a spring tide. This was a good idea, but I am afraid it was not going to work.

A second visit early next season was top priority. A good westerly breeze enabled me to make a night passage from the mooring to scrape onto the mud inshore of the lighters just as the tide left. Once again a bright sunrise warmed me as I walked across the mud to see what the winter had done. The plastic nets were in shreds. Most of the shingle was heaped up against the stranded hulls on the landward side as I had anticipated. Even the polythene sheeting over the mud had in places been lifted. A tramp to the sea wall revealed a sign from the Anglian Water Authority proudly proclaiming its part in the scheme together with the RSPB. As I had guessed, the aim was coastal protection and nesting sites for birds.

Already the tides are redesigning the drainage pattern so that water can come and go through the gaps between the lighters. In places, channels had been scoured away in the mud to reveal a few wartime aerial cannon shell cases along the old target railway line that had long since collapsed into the mud. The level of the mud was certainly building up between the lighters and the shore but the hulks themselves seemed to be taking a real battering. When I visited them in 2002 several had already had the coamings wrenched away.

Most years, I visit the little creek running in towards the old chapel at the northern end of the flats and have been dismayed at the consistency of the erosion. I wonder if this is in any way due to a change in the method of gathering cockles. Looking from seaward the edge of the saltings seemed to have been covered in patches of bright gold sand. Closer inspection shows that they are one 100 per cent cockleshells, mostly broken, and washed up by the waves. Over ten years ago, I found some sturdy stakes on the saltings and drove a line of them just on the landward edge of the strips of shingle. Today, they are all on the seaward side. The cockleshells seem to take about a year to 18 months to be washed over a given spot, during which time they smother and kill off all the rough grass that binds the saltings together. Once faced with bare mud, Father Neptune wades in, tearing off great lumps and dashing them to pieces. Areas with no cockle cover stand out like miniature

promontories. Once the cockle gatherers beached their craft and raked the sand to find cockles at low tide. Now big powerful boats from as far as King's Lynn and Boston sail over the sands as soon as there is enough water. Their giant vacuum cleaners suck up the top few inches of sand and mud and then run it through a sieve, which spews out the cockles but lets through broken shells and other waste. Does this method mean more empty shells to be driven ashore by the next gale? Whatever the cause, the assault on dear old Essex is very sad but we are fighting back.

Three brightly polished cannon shell cases stand on my mantelpiece as I write this, souvenirs of my own *Riddle of the Sands*.