

# Misadventure in the Roach

Lulled into a false sense of security by the day's pleasant sailing, **Peter Maggs** and his friend Cliff Weatherup suddenly wound up high and dry

Cliff suggested an outing on *Hamser II*, his Tomahawk 25, during the last weekend in September. The boat is moored at the Marconi Sailing club at Stansgate on the Blackwater, and a trip to the Crouch and Roach was agreed upon. We cast off at 0620 on Saturday and an hour's sailing found us at Bradwell.

We were in the Crouch via the Swin-Wallet spitway by 1100, and shortly afterwards turned south into the delightful Roach. There is very little traffic in the river, and its banks are virtually devoid of civilization. Past the Branklet buoy the river shelves steeply towards the west bank and this forms a good sheltered anchorage. We dropped the mainsail to avoid gibes and continued sailing on the jib.

## Curved creeks

The river now curved towards the west and Yokesfleet Creek bore away to the south. The creek was narrow, there was samphire growing on both banks and all we could hear were the calls of birds. Yokesfleet Creek gave way to the Middleway and we branched off into Narrow Cuts, ghosting along and delighting in our surroundings, although I was a little apprehensive of the depth. Havengore Bridge hove into view. We rounded Rushley Island then headed north-west towards Potton Island. We crossed Middleway again with barely a metre of depth, Cliff commenting frequently on the abundance of samphire.

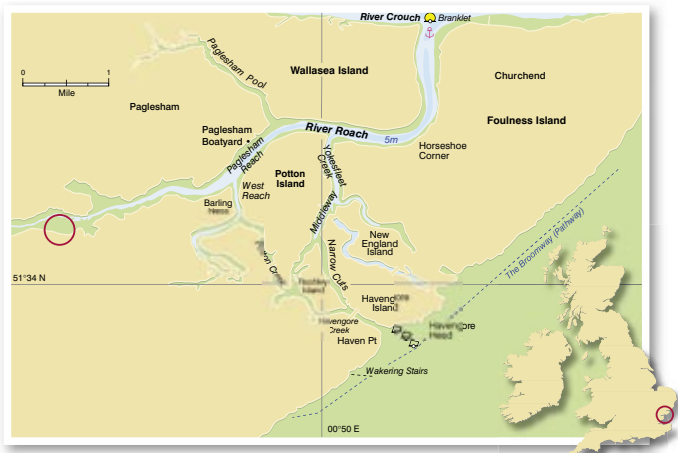
The Potton bridgeman didn't respond to the VHF but following a telephone call the bridge opened for us and the bridgeman came down for a chat as we went past. Potton Creek now took us north, and we came back to the Roach at Paglesham Reach. It felt like we had returned to civilization. We turned left towards Rochford, anchoring about a mile from the town and having lunch. We agreed that the Roach was a thoroughly



Peter Maggs (left) and Cliff Weatherup

charming river, and that the anchorage we had chosen was particularly satisfactory.

The tide turned and *Hamser* swung round pointing upstream. This was an equinoctial spring tide – we joked that we should take care not to go aground. We started downstream with the ebb, with me helming and keeping generally to the middle of the river. There were red channel markers to starboard; to port, there was



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nothing, although I noticed a couple of mooring buoys that had been painted red and green. The depth started to decrease... With a metre of water we cut the engine speed and Cliff took the helm. With low engine noise, it was possible to really appreciate what happened next. There was a sort of 'sheeeough' noise. The nose lifted... forward motion ceased... and *Hamser* was aground. It was 1520, half an hour after the highest tide for six months.

I put the engine into reverse. Some unpleasant black stuff appeared swirling around the stern. Cliff tried polling off using a fender tied to the end of the spinnaker pole. Nothing. I inflated one half of the dinghy – to see it deflate when I removed the pump tube. The self-sealing

valve hadn't lived up to its name. Cliff struggled with the valve, succeeding in pushing it right inside the inflatable. Finally we got the inflatable in the water and Cliff ran out a kedge to the stern. I winched with all my might.

Nothing. Half an hour had elapsed and a strange thing started to happen. Hundreds of little spikes appeared poking up out of the water on our starboard side. It was samphire. We had run aground on a bank covered in the bloody stuff.

I radioed the coastguard. We could be taken off if we were in any distress. The only distress I was in was mental; the knowledge of having done something so stupid. I had sympathy for Captain Smith of the *Titanic*...

The coastguard took my telephone number. Ewan, co-owner of the boat, rang, and was a little put out at my intemperate language. I mentally rehearsed explanations of why I would be unable to get to a business meeting in Paris on Monday...

## Left stranded

As the water receded, the stern dropped until the boat was elevated towards the sky by around 18° – with a starboard list of 8°. *Hamser* slipped backwards, trapping the rudder against the hull. We retrieved the anchor, bringing it round to hold the bow down, and Cliff dug out the rudder to take the pressure off it. We considered our position. The next high tide was 0321 on Sunday morning and it was forecast to be lower. By this time, the water had receded to a thin ribbon no more than a few yards wide and 50 yards away. Cliff pointed out the two 'mooring' buoys painted red and green – now quite clearly channel

The crass stupidity of my actions was now clearly manifest



Local wildlife  
in the Roach



High and dry about four hours after high tide the limp flag was an accurate reflection of our emotional state

markers, the remaining water winding between them. The crass stupidity of my actions was now clearly manifest. Cliff walked the main anchor out astern and *Hamser's* fisherman's anchor towards the middle of the river.

Now below, my appetite deserted me, and the acid test that something was wrong – I didn't finish my wine – confirmed my personal distress. We had several concerns for when the water returned.

### What if, what if...

Would we be able to pull her off? Supposing the anchors dragged? Supposing the 20cm (8in) reduction in water level reduced our flotation too much? It would be late October before there was a higher tide. At 0321's high tide it would be dark. There was a nearly full moon but we would be mostly blind and in an unknown area. We could easily go aground again.

At least the weather was forecast to be good with little wind, but that was a mixed blessing. The prevailing north-east wind would have increased the local tide.

Without the wind, the tide would be lower. Scrutinising the chart carefully (if only I had done so beforehand), we could see the deep channel well to the north. I read off a number of fixes on the channel, and Cliff punched waypoints into the GPS.

And so to bed. I was billeted in the forepeak having to jam my head under a shelf, and half stand against the bulkhead.

Cliff set the alarm for 0230. Lights went off at 2150. At 2200 my telephone rang. It was the coastguard checking we were OK.

At 0215 we were both awake and I made a cup of tea. At 0240 I went into the cockpit and pulled on the winch attached to our kedge. Nothing. I settled my position, leg braced to provide maximum purchase, and pulled again. The rope went slack! We had pulled off and there was still 40 minutes before high water!

Conscious of the dangers of euphoria if things went well, we had written down what had to be done and in what order. Naturally, we now forgot these and made it up as we went along. On went the engine and the GPS. Cliff pulled on the fisherman and this pulled us into deeper water. Originally, the plan had been to recover the main kedge first, pull ourselves into the deeper water, recover the fisherman and scarper. Cliff realised that the tidal current would carry the boat away from the fisherman which, attached to the winch in the cockpit, might allow the boat to yaw from side to side possibly returning us to where we had lately just left. The safe option was to transfer the main anchor to the bow roller, and recover the fisherman first. The boat would then swing round on the bow, and the bow anchor could be recovered. This we did. Cliff retrieved the fisherman with difficulty and I pulled in the main anchor. It broke out with no trouble. Depth was just 1.1m but Cliff steered the boat to the first waypoint, and

into several metres of lovely deep water.

It was surprisingly easy to see where we were going. After a couple of miles, we came to the confluence of the Roach and Potton Creek. We went past Paglesham Boatyard. Shortly afterwards, we came to the fork in the river where we had left it the previous morning, and then to the anchorage at the mouth of the Roach. The anchor caught and we ended up close to the Branklet Buoy.

### Hmm, that tastes good!

To bed at 0430 – this time, the proper way round and level! Bliss! Sleep came easily, but not for long. At 0600 my telephone rang. It was our helpful coastguard. I told him the good news, got up, and made a cup of tea. At 0755 we were off, under power, into a glorious morning.

After the spitway, we turned off the engine and ghosted towards the Blackwater enjoying lunch and demolishing the rest of the wine. Cliff cooked some samphire he had collected. Boiled for a few minutes and served with butter it was quite pleasant, though salty.

It was a beautiful day. The pleasure of the situation, amiable company and not a little satisfaction at having battled the elements and won provided us with a very enjoyable sail back to the Marconi Club. I got home early enough to prepare for my Paris trip but I needn't have worried. The next morning I was stuck in a traffic jam for an hour and missed my flight.