

# Paul Crisp: The Water's Coming In

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Secret Water sailor Paul Crisp reveals the narrow escape of TARS members aboard the SS Brightlingsea from attack by a pirate fleet.

We all have our own sailing nursery where we first clutched a jib sheet or tried not to grip the tiller too hard. It remains a special place, and from time to time, like salmon, we must revisit it. For me it is the creeks and sandy coves of the Salcombe River; for my wife's family it is the lonely mudflats and saltings of Secret Water. 10 Jane Swainson, the Boyde family ketch, has had a mooring next to the Swallows' camp on Horsey island since just after the War. Clinker built, gaff rigged and with the same engines as those of the Death & Glory, she has in the past sailed to Holland to retrace the route of Goblin. Now, as a very old boat, she dozes on her mudberth, stirring only on high tides and to welcome those who go down to maintain her and use her as a base for family sailing expeditions.

When we heard where the AGM weekend was to be held, Elizabeth and I decided that the only way to attend was by boat. Her father, Carl Boyde, was keen on the idea, having been introduced to sailing as a child by reading AR in wartime Lakeland. Plans were laid and DY72 Devon Yawl (her class and her name) was prepared; a few weeks before she had attended the East Head Corroboree but had remained on her trailer because of the conditions.

High water on the Saturday was just after 2 pm, and we set off from Surrey allowing plenty of time to get round the M25. After the usual delays we reached Kirby Le Soken and made our way carefully over the bumpy surface of Shady Lane to the launching site at the end of the Wade. Carl reversed the trailer down the concrete slip to the water's edge. We unhitched and waded in, finding it almost as warm as the actual Red Sea. DY72 was floated off, and, leaving Carl to recover the trailer, Elizabeth and I moved her over to the ancient wooden jetty.

As we did so the sound of a low flying aircraft made me glance up. To my amazement I saw a Douglas Dauntless torpedo bomber of Pacific War vintage (from Duxford?) coming in at an angle reminiscent of the attack on the Torrin from In Which We Serve. She passed overhead twice before making a torpedo run on Horsey Island. I watched her go, climbed up to make fast and glanced down into the boat. It was then that I quoted Roger's remark. Life was imitating literature too closely for comfort.

For one fantastic moment I wondered whether the Douglas had somehow chalked up another belated victory. I scrambled aboard and started to bail. The water, so warm and pleasant when launching, was cold and menacing

when knee deep in the cockpit. Awfully wet, water, as Noel Coward might have murmured when playing Captain (D). And it was coming in at a great rate. 72 seemed ready to join the Submarine Service.

Elizabeth and her father thought I was joking until they saw me acting as a pump. Quickly they eased her across the Wade while she still had clearance and let her rest on the mud until the tide receded enough to reveal a hole no larger than an old half crown punched across the keel. What had happened was that the rubber of the forward roller on the trailer had disintegrated and during the bumpy half mile journey the metal centre of the roller had broken through. It would not have been noticeable until the boat was off the trailer.

Carl, who is unflappable in the face of maritime disaster, drove off to find a fibre glass repair kit while we unscrewed the bottom boards and dried out the bilge. On his return we made a stout repair including a piece of iroko in the mixture for good measure. Then feeling optimistic for the morrow we rigged the masts and altered our plans. The Wade was now passable and Carl decided to walk over to the island to have an enjoyable evening with old friends so that he would be on hand at first light to see whether 72 was all right. Elizabeth and I had to get to the AGM as we were meeting friends and had their tickets. She had managed to clean up somewhat but I was still pretty disreputable as we set off.

The road from Thorpe to Ipswich via Manningtree is both twisting and undulating. Elizabeth used rally techniques to cover the miles while I changed in the back of the Volvo. Several times I seemed to defy gravity while struggling into presentable kit. The wash room at the Corn Exchange was not up to more than a face wash: only I knew how much mud clung to my legs during that enjoyable evening.

The next morning we were at the landward end of the Wade bright and early. The tide was still out and we were pleased to see that 72 had not leaked a drop. We would be able to sail to greet the Brightlingsea party. A Land Rover from the island came to collect us, and soon we were in the farmhouse kitchen. The talk was naturally of AR, and Nancy Backhouse, owner of the island, recalled meetings with the Ransomes when they came to Horsey. By coincidence another of the guests is a director of a London gunsmiths who still manufacture 500 Express elephant guns, though these days they grace the cabinets of wealthy gun collectors rather than the wheel houses of treasure-seeking schooner skippers; indeed, they cost as much as a schooner! After coffee we returned to the now covered Wade to make ready our reception flotilla: a beautifully restored lug sail fishing boat, a high speed dory which took us to the mainland, and 72, none the worse for her accident. The Brightlingsea was sighted nosing along The Twizzle, so we sailed to meet her.

Alas, perhaps we were too piratical in our appearance; perhaps her skipper had heard dark tales of the backwaters and feared boarding and subsequent

plank walking – who knows? Whatever the cause his craft failed to enter the Red Sea and headed back along the Walton Channel. James, sans elephant gun but with a spaniel sea-puppy as crew, took the dory through the Dardanelles and reported back that the Brightlingsea looked as though she might enter Hamford Water and approach Kirby Creek. The wind was favourable so we set course and made fast passage past Ambrose to Kirby. Our quarry must have guessed our cunning plan and sheered off towards Harwich.

Cheated of our prey, we decided to explore the upper waters. The lugsail skipper was having rudder problems and made for base escorted by the dory. We had with us David, one of Nancy's sons, a Mastodon First Class and excellent Native Guide who has known all the creeks and islands since childhood. He pointed out Speedy's winch and stern post (Ed: but see letters) as we cruised past Skipper Island to Landermere, and as near to Beaumont Quay as masts and low power lines will allow, before heading back to Horsey for tea.

It had been quite a weekend, we agreed, as we were driven ashore across the Wade that evening. DY72 spent the rest of the summer on her mooring near Horsey. On subsequent visits she was used to circumnavigate the island both ways, managing to get round Peewit Land on a spring high and visiting all of the sites mentioned in SW. One house by the top of a creek has a sign in the water warning against trespassers in almost as strong terms as that on the Fram; additionally a fence spans the very head of the creek. Flags flying (Jolly Roger and ICC) we swept up 'under their guns' and let loose an imaginary broadside at the notice before goosewinging back the way we had come! Altogether a very good summer of Secret Water and mud stains.

And Salcombe? With the promise of a good hotel and meals Elizabeth agreed to a visit right at the end of August. The only time we were afloat was on the east Portlemouth Ferry. Ah well, there's always next year.