**Do you know the Deben Mouth?**

It’s a rather lovely August Friday. Manningtree beach is awash with children, the estuary is basking in another hot day, yet there’s a comfortable breeze. We row out to Iolanthe, our Cornish Shrimper, hitch the dinghy on the back and set out. What a prospect.

John and I have a guest, who though a yachtsman himself is quite happy to be a passenger on this trip, so John and I get the sails up and we’re under way. The plan is to take Iolanthe round the coast to the river Deben this afternoon, and fetch up at Felixtowe Ferry, where John and our guest will be picked up by his wife, and where I can spend a few days thereafter footling around on the river. I have a friend who sails from Waldringfield that I plan to meet up with, another friend in Woodbridge I can collect if I get the tides right – and the weather forecasts look very promising. I’m not that happy about sea-sailing on my own and I’m wary of the tricky Deben entrance, which is why John is with me for this preliminary leg, and he’ll come to join me again for the return trip in at the end of my jaunt.

The sail down the Stour is idyllic and we all enjoy it – a beam reach, just what Iolanthe likes best. Sandwiches and fizzy water for lunch. Once beyond Harwich we have to make long and short tacks past Felixtowe against the north-east wind and on the last of the falling tide. Iolanthe dips and dances through the gentle swell and we arrive at Woodbridge Haven safe water buoy as planned, as the tide starts to turn at the end of the day.

As you will know, the Deben mouth is awkward. The shingle banks offshore are constantly shifting and the contours of the beach do so too, so a local chart is needed which we had downloaded. Vessels entering the river have to head straight for the beach at first, then guided by strategic buoys turn sharply to starboard heading north-eastwards in the very narrow and shallow ‘deep water channel’ that hugs the shore. In due course they’ reach the river mouth proper, where things open out and there’s more room to manoeuvre.

We duly drop our sails out at the safe water buoy and head in under motor, but having turned the sharp right-hand corner, we find the depths our sounder is registering are diminishing alarmingly – it’s far shallower than we had expected: clearly the shingle has shifted a bit since the buoys were placed and this year’s chartlet drawn up. Indeed, a scraping noise confirms that we are touching bottom, though the incoming tide is now flowing with us. The engine starts to labour as we drag along: throttling down and juggling the revs allows it to recover for a bit, but the situation isn’t a happy one. We still have quite a distance to cover before we’ll be out of this narrow, shallow throat, so John calls to me to go forward to check the anchor is ready just in case our unreliable engine fails – I’m already on my way there.

A few yards further on and we are into slightly deeper water. The engine struggles again, makes a horrible noise and dies altogether. A few brief attempts to restart it fail – and by that time I’ve slipped the anchor down over the bow and made it fast. Hmmm. This isn’t good.

We take stock. We’re safely stationary and afloat in very shallow water, merely yards from the beach, in a narrow channel with a rising tide promising to sweep us inland, with a headwind and no engine. We decide first of all to decant our guest ashore in the dinghy, to be taken home independently. We promptly discover that we probably hadn’t needed the dinghy at all – he could have rolled up his trouser legs and waded ashore, there’s so little water. But back aboard, we face the fact that dusk is imminent, and that our only motive power now is our sails. In waiting for a bit more water to lift us out of difficulty in this tight channel, we will find ourselves either having to beat our way into the Deben mouth – possible but ill advised as we would have to get out again – or turn round and sail out following the kinked track of the buoys against the increasing incoming tide. We realise we are going to have to wait for full ebbing tide or thereabouts to give us enough water for any such strategy – which will be in the small hours, at night. This was not what we’d planned. Clearly, my trip up the Deben must now be aborted, and the task is at some point to turn tail and return to Manningtree directly.

Well, we have plenty of food and water: I’d been planning for several days aboard, and we’ve fortunately brought lots of warm clothing. Only one sleeping bag, though, but an extra blanket will do if we wrap up well. So, while the light permits, we cook supper (oddly, I forget what) and then prepare our beds to get some sleep – after all, we’ll undoubtedly have an early start. This is not a place we’d have chosen to spend a night at anchor. Let’s hope no macho fishing vessel chooses to set out or return before dawn and comes surging round the corner to find us in its path. We switch on the mast-head light, of course, but it’s a pretty feeble precaution.

Suddenly, we hear voices hailing us and see dim figures in the dark on the shore alongside. They’re only yards away. It’s the coastwatch, they say. Are we all right? Well, we reply, we’re OK – our engine has failed, so we’ve got to wait till daylight to sort ourselves out, but we’re not in immediate danger. Have we got a radio? they shout. Yes. Then call up the Coast Guard and let them know what’s happening so that if conditions worsen, they know where you are, they say. Thank you! We’ll do that. And off they go into the dark again. What a kind thing to do – it’s very comforting to know we’re being watched over.

So we call up the Coast Guard and they’re great. Name of the boat? And position? How many aboard? Any medical needs? Have you got clothing and food and water? Are you in any danger? … then if anything changes and you need more support, get back to us again. Over and Out. That does feel better. We’re not imminently threatened … though neither of us really *like* where we are...

We get our heads down … and then up and then down again and again. The wind is rising and blowing against the tide, and poor old Iolanthe is bobbing and ducking, tugging away at her anchor warp, and it’s not a restful movement. We lie there doggedly inviting rest, but it’s hard to find. Through the open hatch we see no stars, but a red light on a Bawdsey mast appears, traverses the hatchway, is lost and then reappears, swinging back, again and again. As the tide rises, the offshore shingle banks are overwhelmed by the waves and the shelter we now realise they’ve been giving us is lost. The full incoming swell can reach us and Iolanthe starts to roll as well, increasingly strongly. Gradually everything on board that can creak, rattle and frap does so, with maddening persistence. We lie and doze intermittently, and interrogate each noise in imagination. I’m very glad not to be having to do this alone.

It’s pitch dark – but the boat is rolling at least 90 degrees and we’re having to brace ourselves in the bunks to stop being tipped out. And I really don’t like what the boom is doing: it’s being yanked from side to side with every roll, fetching up with a jerk that tugs violently on the mainsheet fitting on the stern traveller, and it’s gradually working itself a longer and longer tether, which strains things even more. I’ve got to quell its clunking noise too – we can’t sleep through that. Going out into the cockpit isn’t fun because it’s rolling so much, so I do so by crawling, to keep my weight low: I do not fancy being tipped overboard in this. It’s pretty easy to tighten up the mainsheet, however, and the tackle behaves much better after that. The anchor seems to be holding nicely too, so it’s back to bed for a bit longer – we can’t think of sailing blind. We’re not safe exactly, but we’re not in danger either. There’s no point in worrying about things until they happen, and we’ll sort them out when they do.

From time to time we get up and assess the conditions: there is more and more water, but with that a deeper and more uncomfortable swell. The wind is quite fresh, and we simply *cannot see* our surroundings – which is crucial if we are not to get beached on some of these unwelcoming shingle banks around us and pounded into matchsticks by the waves. We have to be able to sail and sail skilfully, to get out of here without the engine. It seems a very long night.

Eventually the darkness seems thinner. It’s not light, but it’s not so inky black. We can see as well as hear the waves breaking on the shingle alongside, and the clock tells us it’s at least an hour after full tide, and there is just enough visibility so we decide to set out. We raise the sails at anchor, and then have a muscle-wrenching effort to raise the anchor itself, which of course is well dug in. But up it comes, and then John sheets everything in and turns Iolanthe on a sixpence as the sails fill, and we at once go romping off through the dusk. We’re in the hands of the elements, and must be ready for whatever transpires.

There is very little wind so we are moving more with the tide than the wind, with not much steerages. Something solid passes us in the water. I shine our torch on it, but it’s too far to see clearly and we’re uncertain about it until another looms up in our path … oh heavens, it’s the second buoy! We passed the first one on the right side by a fluke, now we steer around this one and head out to sea. Minutes pass as we concentrate on keeping the boat moving well and on an even keel – the sound of the waves on the shingle diminishes – the boat is handling the swell happily – we’ve made it out of the mouth. Ahead of us are the twinkling lights of the ships at anchor off shore, and further on the greens and reds of the illuminated beacons marking the shipping approaches to Felixtowe and Harwich.

Gradually the sky lightens and a really beautiful dawn breaks over us as we make our way back down the coast. At first we are tense, scarcely believing that our eventful night is safely behind us, but daylight and breakfast on the move help to ease things as we realise that we and Iolanthe have passed a test: we now know that she and we can handle things like this.

It’s another beautiful day. Harwich is looking its best as we sail past it, the Felixtowe cranes are as impressive as ever … and then, as we make our way back up the Stour, we find ourselves suddenly surrounded by sails! Well I never - the Old Gaffers are having their rally here this Saturday and are sailing in convoy up to Mistley, and we (gunter-rigged, actually, but never mind) are in their midst, as if we belong. They call to us and wave: yes, what a lovely day for a sail! At Wrabness and at Mistley they all turn back and we press on. There’s just about enough water for us, and we pick our way gingerly up to Manningtree, very aware of the need to avoid our home mudbanks on the way. Our mooring is at the top end near the Co-op, and we mustn’t miss the buoy: there’s no space in the channel to turn round under sail and have another go. But we concentrate, pick it up at first try, and quickly bring down the sails. We’re *home*.

It takes a long time to make things fast, unpack all the kit and stores, and ferry them ashore again in the dinghy. There’s such a lot to put away, and *always* so much laundry. It seems strange to have an unexpected weekend ashore again when I’d expected to be afloat. And what’s more, there’s another sailing trip to be planned – without the motor again – to take Iolanthe round to Titchmarsh Marina where the engineer will diagnose our problem and suggest the treatments possible. But that … is another story.

Polly Plowman

Iolanthe