

This is the Real Essex

Circumnavigation of Wallasea Island, 20 March 2011

North of the Thames,
East of the Lea,
South of the Stour
And west of the sea

If that old rhyme is accurate then Essex is an island and in theory one could paddle all the way round it. Now that would be a challenge. But we thought we'd start off with something not too strenuous and gradually build up the stamina.

Stereotypes are a terrible thing. There must be people out there who really believe that Essex is a flat wasteland inhabited by bimbos and thugs with pit bulls. Oh all right then, here's my favourite Essex Girl joke:

She cuts her hand on a kitchen knife, panics and phones NHS Direct:
"You've got to help me it's terrible, there's blood all over the place!"
"Please try to stay calm, madam. Now tell me, where are you bleeding from?"
"I'm from bloody Romford, now are you going to help me or not!"

So there we were, walking from Paglesham Harbour up to the Plough and Sail (yes, Kathryn, there would be a pub involved) past a cottage called Rat Hall. In the garden were a small shelter made from half an old wooden rowing boat with a plank fixed across it as a seat, an anchor which locals claim came from Charles Darwin's ship the Beagle, and a greenhouse containing a cat asleep on a shelf under a sign reading "chat bizarre". English eccentricity at its best, or what? One of the photographers was telling us that he had been working recently in scary places like Colchester, but he liked this area best. "This is the real Essex". The pub was worth the walk: an old, low white weatherboard building with a red tile roof. "Have a look at the names over the door" they said. Not difficult: they were at about eye level. Two people called Oliver- the parents of Jamie the chef. So the meals should have been spot-on. We only had a cheese sandwich and that was a bit of all right. And the Maldon Gold was brilliant: cool, clear and hoppy. Inside the place was heaving: low ceilings, crowded tables, log fires, people eating, drinking and chilling out. On the walls were the customary black-and-white photos of the place in the old days. The most intriguing picture just showed three

large trees. Any trees are rare enough in this part of the world but these were special: they were hollow and smugglers hid stuff in them. The customs men must have been a bit simple. I mean, hollow trees, near the coast, a bit of a giveaway isn't it?

So what were we doing in a pub with a group of Chelmsford canoe club paddlers, RSPB people and the local paparazzi? It's a long story. The Romans settled Wallasea Island and it has been inhabited and farmed ever since. At its peak in the late nineteenth century it had a population of about 130, in ten houses. Bet that was cosy. Then it reverted to pasture and wetland, except in the two world wars when it was cultivated for cereals. Thank you, Wikipedia. Now the RSPB own a fair bit of it and are planning to knock down part of the sea wall, bring in shiploads of soil from a railway tunnel being built in London, create salt marsh, mud flats and lagoons, and turn the place into a habitat for all kinds of birds. And here's the good bit: they want to encourage people to visit the island on foot and in canoes. Wow! Somehow Anne and I found ourselves in the right place at the right time, taking part in a trial run for a well-publicised paddle later in the year. Eventually there will be a canoe trail right round the island.

Rich, the trip leader, met us on the car park of the Royal Burnham Yacht Club and took us upstairs into the bar which had panoramic views over the River Crouch and Wallasea Island. There was an antique oak round table, large enough to spread out charts, OS maps, tide tables and cups of tea before the trip, and for a dozen people to sit round and enjoy a beer and a chat afterwards. It looked straightforward on the map: up the Crouch with the last of the flood tide, into the Paglesham Creek in time to portage across the road which serves the island just at high tide, down the creek to the pub, down the River Roach with the ebb tide, back on to the Crouch to Burnham. Three rivers for the price of one, with just a little snag.

“How fast does the tide run on the Crouch?”

“Oh, about four knots.”

“*Four knots?!*”

We can paddle that fast on the canal, but to get a mile and a half back up against that sort of flow? We were a bit nervous about that.

“No problem! Worst case scenario: we ring up Fred here at the club and he brings the launch out to get us.”

Out on the car park, a few more people had arrived. We'd been told the trip was strictly for sea kayaks and river tourers only. Ours was the only K2; there were K1s not greatly different from our boat. Chris, you can

call it the Titanic if you want, but some of those east coast sea dogs recognised a well-designed boat when they saw one. And it handled well on those rivers.

We launched off a floating pontoon by the club. We had paddled on tidal rivers in Sussex, mostly with our friends from Tonbridge, but those were simple there-and-back jobs on relatively narrow rivers and always with the tidal flow. Time it right and you get a free ride in both directions; make a mistake and it's hard labour. Ask Ray and Guy if you don't believe me. The Crouch at Burnham is double the width of the Thames at Westminster and there is no shelter. It was choppy, not like the start of Thameside 2 or the bottom of a big weir, not threatening, just wild and irregular. And the scenery kept slipping sideways. We were aiming at two tall cranes, on the other side of the river a bit over a mile away, which marked the entrance to the creek.

"Chris, which side of this next buoy are we going?"

"Left.....no, hell! Right!"

The sea kayaks made it look easy. Our boat slapped up and down a bit, but it never felt really unstable. Just as well: I put my hand in the water. It gripped and cramped like the canal in January. We started to fantasise about best excuses for a swim:

The leader forced us to do a capsizing drill to make sure we knew what we were doing,

A seal tried to surface under our boat,

It's all Colette's fault, even if she is a hundred miles away,

And so on.

One chap had a Valley Nordkapp, an amazing vessel. I could imagine him telling Crocodile Dundee, "that's not a sea kayak; *this* is a sea kayak!" Well, it cut through the waves like a swagman's billy, or whatever.

On the creek the paddling was easier. When we reached the road portage, we were surrounded by photographers. There were more cameras than boats. Our mugs must be all over the Sahfend Observer and the RSPB and BCU websites by now, with paddles akimbo and tasty marshland in the background. We escaped back on to the water and had an easy run down with the start of the outgoing tide to Paglesham Harbour.

As we approached the slipway, Rich said, "Keep well away from the pier." We didn't need telling twice. The tide was running fast by then and we could see waves slapping against the side of the pier on our right and disappearing underneath it. Get pinned against that and you're in trouble.

Lean a little bit away, the water piles up on your deck and suddenly you're upside down underneath the thing. No air, no light and your body heat flowing away into the North Sea. Scary stuff: I shoved the rudder hard left and we paddled like maniacs on to the slipway.

After the pub stop, the water was half a metre lower, moving more slowly and the slipway was coated in grey slime. It was then easy to launch from the pier and away we went, back along the creek to the junction with the Roach. Behind us was Potton Island, a good place to see seals, on our left Wallasea Island, and on our right the delightfully named Foulness Island. This was seriously considered as a site for London's third airport about forty years ago, despite it being covered in thousands of resident and migrating birds. "Most MPs in Favour of Foulness" as one newspaper headline put it at the time. Crispy fried duck may be nice to eat in a Chinese restaurant but it plays merry hell with the innards of a jet engine, and in the end they built the airport further inland at Stansted. Foulness is now occupied by the Ministry of Defence, who use it to practise blowing things up. This didn't seem to bother the seals, which were lying on the mud banks to our right. When we got too close they slid elegantly into the water. You'd expect them to be good at seal launching. After all they invented it. One or two of them followed us at a distance: in the water all we saw was a head like a very big Labrador dog. Above us, redshanks did aerial displays. On the left bank, avocets sifted the soft mud with their bills, searching out creepy-crawlies. And from somewhere on the island, Brent geese kicked up an unearthly racket. Must be spring at last.

"If you step in that mud" they told us, "you can sink in up to your waist." There seemed to be nowhere to land. We came to Wallasea Ness, the northeast corner of the island. RSPB persons waved at us and invited us ashore for refreshments. Behind them we could see sailing boats on the Crouch. They seemed to be gliding across the island. We turned the corner on to the Crouch and found a firm beach to land on. It was easy to imagine the first Roman galleys pulling in here two thousand years ago. They never got the service we did: freshly made tea or coffee with chocolate digestive biscuits. Nobody was in a hurry- we figured the longer we hung around, the slower the tide we'd have to fight against. It turned out to be nearer two knots than four, but it was still hard work. We hugged the left bank, a desolate cliff of wet, black shiny mud, then ferry glided across to the yacht club pier. A cracking good paddle, eleven miles in all.

As we loaded the boat on the car, the press gang caught us, dragged us kicking and screaming into the building and forced us to drink beer. We

sat round that wonderful old table and watched the sun slowly sink behind the island. They were a friendly crowd and included that social treasure, a quiet American. He had Anne and me helpless with laughter as he gave us a new perspective on US gun culture. It seems he used to train cops in the use of firearms. "Some of these deputy sheriffs aren't the sharpest tools in the shed." You may have seen armed police on London streets pointing their weapons at the ground. One police force on the US coast did a similar thing as they stormed a boat full of suspects. They don't do it that way any more. But what an excuse for a swim: "I put fifty round of ammo through the hull of a yacht!" And Brits going to live in the States are advised not to buy a gun. If you carry one it greatly increases your chance of being shot, almost certainly with your own weapon. He also explained the twenty-one foot rule: don't try to draw your gun if the other guy is less than 21ft away (this is the length of a marathon K2). He has time to pull a knife and slash your hand before you can shoot him. We have a lot to be thankful for, living in this country, and not just beautiful rivers.

Next time you drive into Essex and see the county badge: the shield with three daggers (or cutlasses, or maybe they're fish knives) just remember it doesn't mean knife crime area ahead, it means get stuck in and have a nice day.

Chris Jones 23 March 2011