

Short Cut Across the Sands

When I returned from my main 2014 summer cruise I decided to leave the boat at a half-tide anchorage on the mud for as long as the mild weather held, in the hopes of getting a little more use of her during the remainder of the season.

The first such occasion was a two-day trip to Hilbre and back, on Friday/Saturday 12/13 September. The outward passage had to be motoring all the way, in zero wind, but for the return trip there was a nice SE force 3-4 so I was able to leave my anchorage under full plain sail, and apart from a very brief bit of motor-sailing in part of the Hilbre Swash I was able to sail all the way as far as the entrance to the Rock Channel. Then, with the wind on the nose and wanting to be certain of being in time to carry the flood all the way home I motored up the Rock Channel and most of the Mersey. However once I got into the Garston Channel I was a little ahead of time, so even though the wind was still on the nose and windward performance in the Privateer is not good I could afford the luxury of sailing - and thus beating to windward - all the way up the Garston Channel and back to my anchorage off the club.

The second trip was two and a half weeks later, starting on Monday 29th September, the day after the club's Upriver Cruise. This was to the Dee as the first stop, a very useful staging post, then on to North Wales, with a tentative target of either Conwy or Anglesey. Once again the first leg, in fact out to Hilbre (although that had originally been only one of two options), was in flat calm conditions, and thus entailed motoring all the way, but once again there was enough wind for sailing throughout the rest of the cruise; indeed on the Wednesday afternoon and evening there was an uncomfortable excess of wind, and with rain and cold and heavy swell to boot!

I had initially considered not actually entering the Dee estuary at all on the Monday evening, but anchoring instead somewhere in the vicinity of HE1, which is effectively a landfall buoy for the entrance to the Hilbre Swash, but the 1200 forecast warned of the S or SW wind increasing to force 6 "later", i.e. anytime after midnight, so rightly or wrongly I opted for being in a position where I could put banks to weather of me, rather than being in open water. In the event it was, if not a false alarm, at least an arguably mis-timed alarm; the hooligan didn't hit until around midday on the Wednesday, 36 hours after the initial warning had indicated.

Given that decision to go in to Hilbre, the obvious onward route on Tuesday morning was to go back out via the Hilbre Swash, which if one is going west is not really much of a dogleg; the first mile and three-quarters is north-northeast, but after that one heads northwest - which is not far from the direction one wants to go anyway - for about a further three and a half miles. After that it is all open water.

However when the morning came, near Low Water, with glorious sunshine but initially zero wind, I took the opportunity instead to explore whether there might be a Low Water passage through to the Welsh side of the estuary. Alright, the only charted passages are Welshman's Gut, which is nowadays a drying High Water passage across the West Hoyle Bank, and the long way round, passing to the south of that bank approximately on a line between West Kirby and Mostyn. But, as we all know, banks in estuaries periodically change, and channels appear or disappear; that is what estuaries do. Indeed I have seen an out of date Imray chart (perhaps twenty or thirty years old) in Tom Workman's possession which shows Welshman's Gut as a deep water passage, so very clearly the depths change with time. And I was there at just the right time and in ideal weather to explore the up to date situation, and my

time was my own, so I took the opportunity to explore. In the event, I found two substantial inlets into the bank, but neither of them went right through to the far side.

In the course of this exploration I saw very substantial numbers of small fishing boats dried out on the bank, with a sizeable group of men working the sands and the shallows on foot, and I also saw a moderately large colony of seals dried out on the bank near the HE4 buoy.

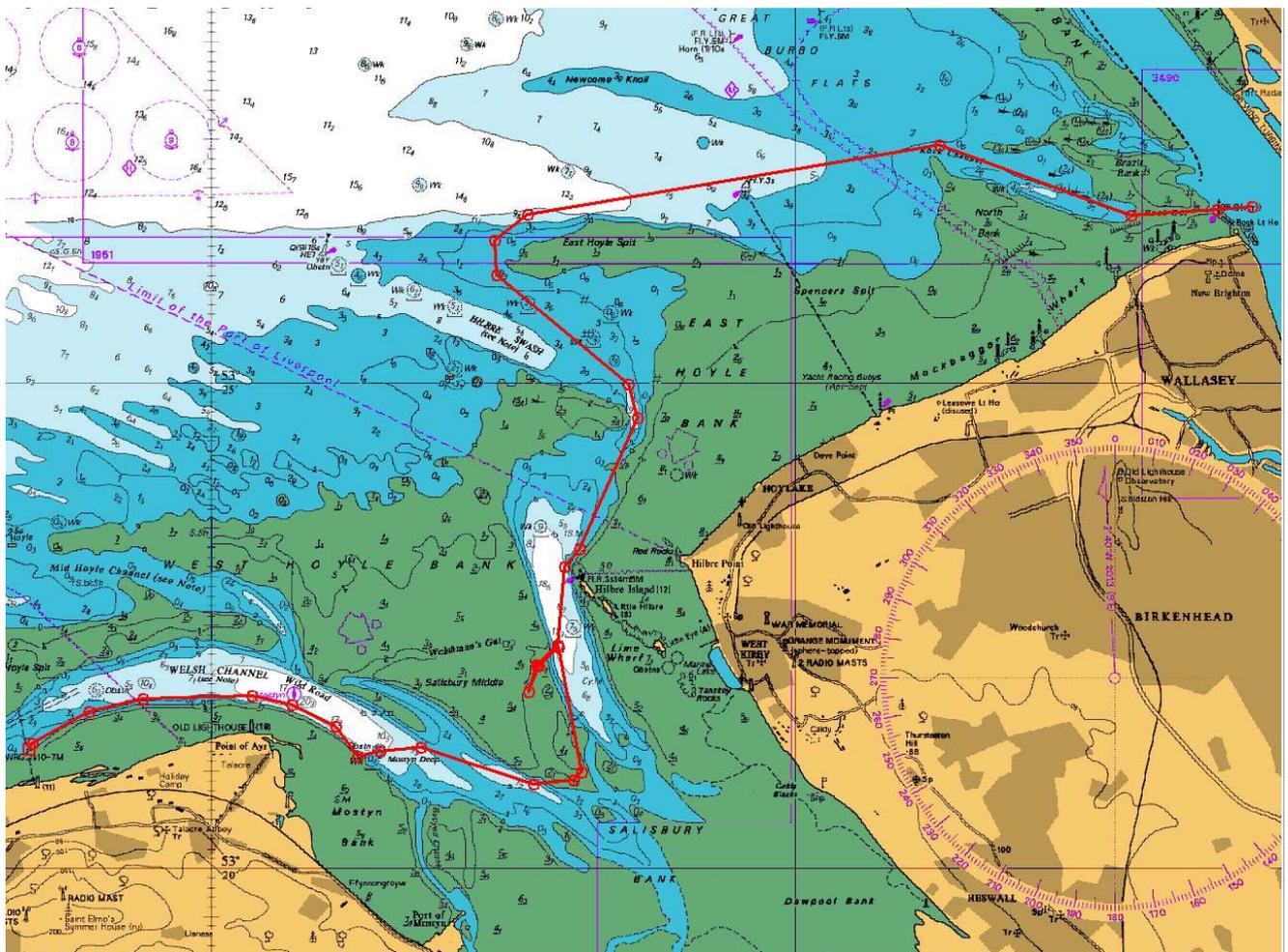


Seals dried out on the sandbank near HE4 buoy

Eventually I made my way round the south end of the bank, and through to the Welsh side, passing south of the West Bar buoy, nicely in time for the wind to come in. I then had a good, and brisk sail, on a moderately close reach, comfortably bucking the incoming flood tide, as far as Point of Air. Once I reached there, in deference both to having been feeling very tired before I set off and to an early start that morning - at least that is my excuse - I dropped the hook for lunch, and then after lunch took a nap before resuming the passage.

When I resumed sailing the wind had fallen light, but there was still enough wind to sail, so I continued until dusk, by which time I was off Prestatyn, between the Earwig Perch and the SH5 buoy. That series of buoys are all labelled SH with a numeral, but for those members who are used to sailing only in the Mersey I should point out that the SH designation does not mean what you may possibly think it does; the water there is clean! As are the banks; they are sand, rather than mud! Rather, SH actually stands for South Hoyle, the name of that channel. Then I handed all sail and motored inshore until I found my chosen depth, just sufficient to remain afloat at LW and with a safe margin beneath the keel, and dropped the hook for the night.

During the course of the late afternoon I had observed a number of wind farm service vessels, largely catamarans, returning to Mostyn harbour from one of the wind farms. One of them approached at a very obviously high rate of knots, with an enormous bow wave, and as I was to observe once he had passed me, a correspondingly enormous wake; I was very pleasantly surprised that he did me the courtesy of slowing down just before he reached me, and until he was well past, in order to minimise his wake. Full marks for courtesy and consideration.



As is my usual practice, the track is indicative only; it has been added retrospectively to the computer chart, and not taken off the chartplotter.

Come the Wednesday morning, although I had intended pressing on to Conwy and could indeed have easily reached there, the forecast for the following day (Thursday) was “S 4 or 5, veering SW 5 or 6, occasional 7 later”. So I decided that if I went on to Conwy I was likely to get weather-bound there, and I had a guillotine on time for getting back home as I was on duty on the Sunday. So instead of pressing on I turned back, and had a pleasant downwind sail as far as Point of Air and a little beyond.

Then I observed a large and ominous black cloud massing over the hills just inland of Point of Air; this was clearly going to bring a lot of rain, and very likely also rather more than a capful of wind, so I decided to shorten sail in preparation. Just as well; even as I was doing so the wind hit, and immediately I decided that this was no time for messing around with reefing; rather it was a case of getting almost everything off her, pronto. A secondary consideration was that this was still only the bottom half of the tide, and I wanted to thread my way across the banks (now covered) to the far side, in not much depth, using my outward GPS track, so I would soon require precision rather than speed. So I handed the main and jib, and left up just the staysail, and even that pocket handkerchief on its own still gave her an acceptable turn of speed. Then the staysail was handed off Mostyn, and I motored across to the English side.

Anchored temporarily off HE4 buoy, since there was no point in bucking the flood tide at full strength, especially when there was enough wave action to slow the boat down. Then it was time for a late lunch, and in an uncomfortable and rolling anchorage I decided that bacon and eggs would be an appropriate repast, and that cooking would provide an opportunity to warm up and dry out. Unfortunately, having cooked them and put the plate on what passes for the cabin table I was just putting the pans out in the cockpit when the boat lurched to a particularly heavy wave, and the bacon and eggs landed on the floor. I have to confess that I picked them up off the floor

Once the tide slacked off I motored north, hoping to find some shelter under the partial lee of the spit at the north-eastern end of the West Hoyle Bank, but I wonder whether that shelter was only illusory. The neap tide was not sufficient to uncover the bank, even at Low Water, and although I had hoped that it would nonetheless take some of the energy out of the wave trains I am not convinced that it did. So it was a very uncomfortable and swell-swept anchorage, but at least it was safe; I had deeper water under my lee, good holding, an excellent anchor and plenty of cable, and in the last resort if I did drag I had a powerful engine and a well marked channel to open sea. But it was a very uncomfortable evening, and the night was not much better.

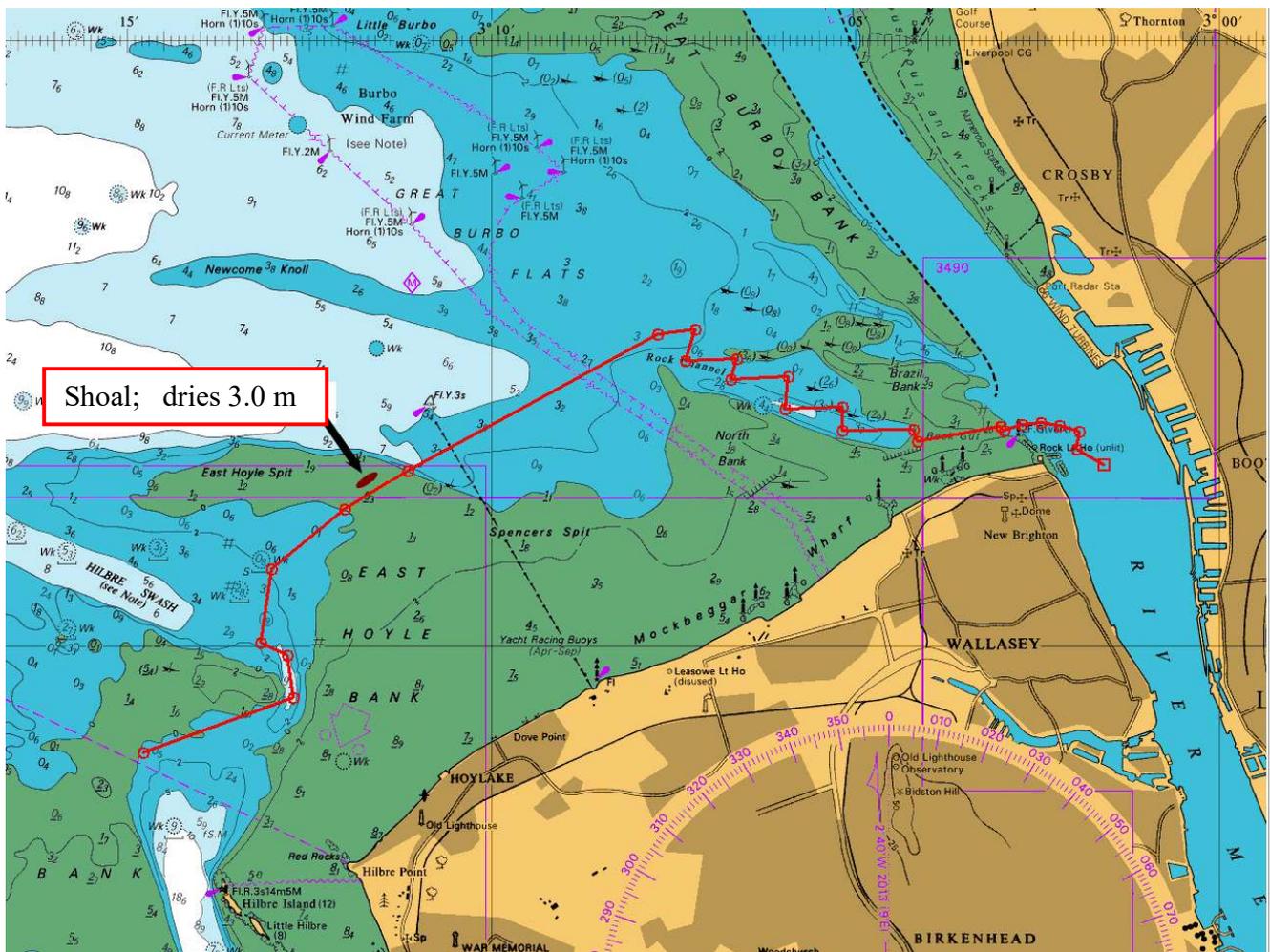
Come the following morning it might have been a different anchorage altogether; a benign mill pond by comparison, although there was still enough wind to be able to sail.

The opportunity to sail rather than motor was too good to miss, but time and tide dictated a limit to how long the passage to the Rock Channel entrance could be allowed to take, and going the long way round via Hilbre Swash and HE1 might result in eventually having to use the iron topsail in order to keep up to schedule. However the sea was smooth, wind was offshore, tides were neaps, and although it was Low Water by the time I took the relevant decision a corollary was that the tide would be rising thereafter. Having looked at the charted depths and the height of tide I decided that a short cut straight across the neck of the East Hoyle Spit would be a safe and sensible option, saving at least a couple of hours, provided I kept a continual watch on the depth sounder and kept a good lookout for obvious shallows. Indeed I passed one such very close; “Birds walking ahead, sir”, to quote the old lookout’s cry as regaled to me fifty years ago by Bill Skutil; this was only a few tens of yards on my port side, but I was still in smooth unbroken water and 10 feet of depth. This shoal was just dry, and the GPS

readout gave the height of tide as 3.0 m, so it is over two metres higher than any of the neighbouring charted drying heights.

That is a splendid example of a route which I would not recommend at Low Water to anyone inexperienced, but which is perfectly safe with a near perfect set of all the relevant conditions; a shoal draft boat with a drop keel, in smooth sea, with winds only modest and with their direction offshore, on a neap and rising tide, with a prior check on charted depths and on current height of tide, and with an alert awareness for any reduction in depth of water. For any other combination, assess with all due caution, and with a seamanlike awareness of all the conditions.

Coming right along the coast close inshore might well have been possible, but note that nearly two hours later in the Rock Channel there was still a dry sand bank to be seen very close adjacent to the channel ...



Exceptionally, I did take waypoints off the track on the chartplotter, which I then transferred to the computer chart to generate this track, so on this occasion it is about as accurate as it is possible to get.

I saw, and indeed had to slightly alter course to avoid, the cable laying barge *Atalanti* doing installation work on the undersea cables for the Western Link Project; NOTM 20 of 2014 refers. Then coming up the Rock Channel I saw a RIB doing what appeared to be survey work, possibly also in connection with either the wind farms or this same project.

We continued under sail until we were well into the Mersey, including a beat to windward up the Rock Channel, but then somewhere between Brazil and Tower buoys I decided that I had done enough beating to windward for one day, and with nearly another 8 miles to windward still to go it was time to hand the sails and start the engine.

And so home, nicely in time before the gales...