

Day-trip to Gunfleet Lighthouse

Early one morning in May, Justine and I decided on a trip through the Havengore out to the Thames sea-forts, around Foulness and back. We had spent the night in Quay Reach, and set off for Havengore at around HW (08:00). It was not to be - the bridge was 'out of alignment', and could not be opened (it was fixed before the following weekend).

We potted disconsolately back towards the Crouch, and then came up with an alternative. The wind was SE going E, 3-4 - why not try for the Gunfleet Lighthouse?



Well, with the favourable conditions, we had a comfortable trip out, arriving at about 14:00. On this fairly neapish tide there was around 2M of water on the sands around the lighthouse, which must be approached carefully from the South, being sited in a horseshoe shaped bay in the northern part of Gunfleet sands. To the SE is the Gunfleet buoy, a S cardinal with a bell. On the sands to the N is the old ruined seamark

The lighthouse is an iron lattice structure built on screw-piles driven into the sand, and topped by a hexagonal accommodation tower with the light enclosure on the roof. The first of these structures was built on the Maplin in 1836, and several others followed, including Chapman Sands off Canvey, and on the Yantlet. All have long since been demolished, and only the Gunfleet remains. Even this has been out of commission probably since the 1920s.

Odd facts turn up from a search of the internet. A scrap of the 1891 Census showed Gunfleet Lighthouse as the registered address for Richard Turner Ayeis of Gt Yarmouth (assistant keeper), and Keeper, John Francis Ellis of Joleland. In 1974 there was an attempt to set up a pirate 'Radio Atlantis' here, but this was prevented by the Home Office (many of the structures in the estuary were used as radio stations, some successfully for a time).

We anchored a short distance from the tower for a spot of lunch, and took a few photos. The tower is in remarkably good order considering it's age and lack of attention, and in fact is currently in use as a weather station, with anemometers on top (I suspect that this is connected with plans to build a wind power farm on the Gunfleet). The design of the tower reveals its Victorian architects, both in it's strength and the finishing touches.

Unfortunately the wind dropped now, and we had to rely on the tide and some help from the engine for the return trip. However it was pleasant enough and we were home well before high water.
