

# BARGE YACHT BLESSINGS

by PHILIP HAYS

**For a lazy cruise in the Thames Estuary with youngsters on board there is nothing like a barge**

(Illustrated by F. B. Harnack)

A GOOD deal has been written about the virtues and the theoretical vices of the small Essex barge yacht. There are few in existence, and most cruising yachtsmen evidently prefer something more conventional; yet in at least one case last summer a barge yacht proved to be the perfect family cruiser. Or were we particularly lucky?

In any event, we had reason on most days to be glad of our shallow draught and our flat bottom; while the spaciousness of a barge yacht in the horizontal plane is a great blessing when there are children, whose below-deck activities at the best of times seem inevitably explosive. Headroom is limited, but as ninety-nine per cent of anybody's time in the cabin of a boat is spent in sitting or lying down, there seems little to worry about.

Dione is a gaff-rigged Essex barge yacht which has recently spent most of her time away from her native waters, for her home port is now Whitstable. She was built in 1936 by Frank Shuttlewood of Paglesham, in a big black shed on the north bank of the Roach from which trading barges were launched in the past. She is 30 ft. overall, with straight sides and a 9 ft. beam for most of her length. Her normal draught of little more than 21 in. can be increased by two iron lee-boards which go down another 3 ft.

Dione's lines may seem no more delicate than those of the flat-sided Thames lighters from which she is descended, but if the sails are correctly trimmed she handles well. The total sail area is generous—470 sq. ft. There is an 8 h.p. Stuart Turner which could unfold many a tale of hardship and neglect, but it appears to bear us no grudge. On the transom are carved luxuriant flowers and

flourishes, below the words DIONE—MALDON. We had never been to Maldon; we felt we should.

Last summer August had begun as usual with the sort of weather that gives the English climate its doubtful reputation. Luckily, release from the office came on an evening that had promise of a fine day to follow. It was the evening of the local carnival procession, for the two children a time for divided loyalties. Stores and gear for an absence from home of nearly four weeks were got aboard as quickly as the circumstances allowed. They included such apparently vital equipment as crayons, pads of paper, jig-saw puzzles, volumes of Enid Blyton, and a teddy bear and rabbit allegedly brought as mascots. A hurried supper, and we settled down to sleep.

Joan and I were awakened by the alarm clock at half-past four. During the night Dione had taken the ground, which is hard, but she had settled so gently that none of us had woken. It took us some while to sort ourselves out and to get the sails up with the help of a torch. A light breeze from off the land was rippling the water as I backed the headsails and dropped the buoy overboard. I went aft, and we gently threaded our way through the anchorage. By the time Dione had reached the Street buoy the last of the off-shore night breeze had fallen away, and Anthony, aged eight, had come sleepily out of his bunk. (Lesley, twelve, was to be some way behind; afloat as well as ashore, waking is for her a long process.)

It eventually became quite an old-fashioned summer morning, sunny and warm and almost windless. We set the topsail, which previously had only seen service as something of a secret weapon in our little section of the Medway barge race. For a while the breeze was North-West; running before it, a



Whitstable-bound barge was making leisured progress off Warden Point. Red Sand Fort came on our beam while Dione's crew listened to a Test Match on the radio, jabbed at jellyfish with a boathook, or indulged in the almost non-stop eating which a voyage seems to inspire in them. When the official time for lunch arrived, the fort was only about a mile astern.

Dione duly entered the Swin, to contend with the first of the flood; we had failed to work our tides, but at least it was not for lack of getting up early. Luckily the wind had become a moderate easterly and got us along well. It is one of the particular blessings of the barge yacht that a fathom of water is at all times ample, and for some time we cheated the tide along the edge of the Barrow Sands, lowering a leeboard to save ourselves the use of the lead. Scores of seals were sunning themselves on the sands as we went past. The camera was excitedly brought to bear; the resulting photographs were destined to have only historic value, for the nearest seal was about a hundred yards away.

On the far side of the Barrow Sands the steamers were busily passing to and fro, but on this day the Swin was almost deserted. The only company was a powerful-looking craft with a masthead Genoa that had been coming up from the South-West, working along the edge of the Maplins; she went by as we began to bear away near the West Middle. It was now nearly half flood—time, I thought, to begin cutting across Foulness Sands. I set a course almost due West, which was to bring us into the Crouch approach channel not far from the West Buxey buoy, with less than a fathom of water for much of the way. Our performance across the sands must have impressed the occupants of the larger boat ahead of us, for as she approached the Whitaker beacon she too began to bear away in the hopes of cutting off the corner. But she lacked Dione's advantages. After a few minutes she was aground, and through our glasses we could see her crew going through most of the time-honoured formulæ for events of this kind. When we last looked back at her, from west of the Buxey Sands, she was hull down below our horizon.

Our destination that morning had been Anywhere in Essex. We were now bowling along briskly through the Raysand Channel, tea-time was past, and West Mersea seemed a good place to make for. I had originally brought Dione to Whitstable from West Mersea, so we were able to approach the narrow Thornfleet without inhibitions. Near Packingmarsh Island we picked up a buoy; a passer-by in a dinghy told us the owner of the buoy was away for several days. We rowed ashore for a brief celebration of the comfort of our night's anchorage.

The weather reverted next morning to its normal state of unfriendliness, but for Lesley and Anthony there was the opportunity of getting to know a fascinating new place. They were interested in the walled-in ponds in which the local oysters spend a part of their life; the Whitstable oyster appears to dispense with such public coddling.

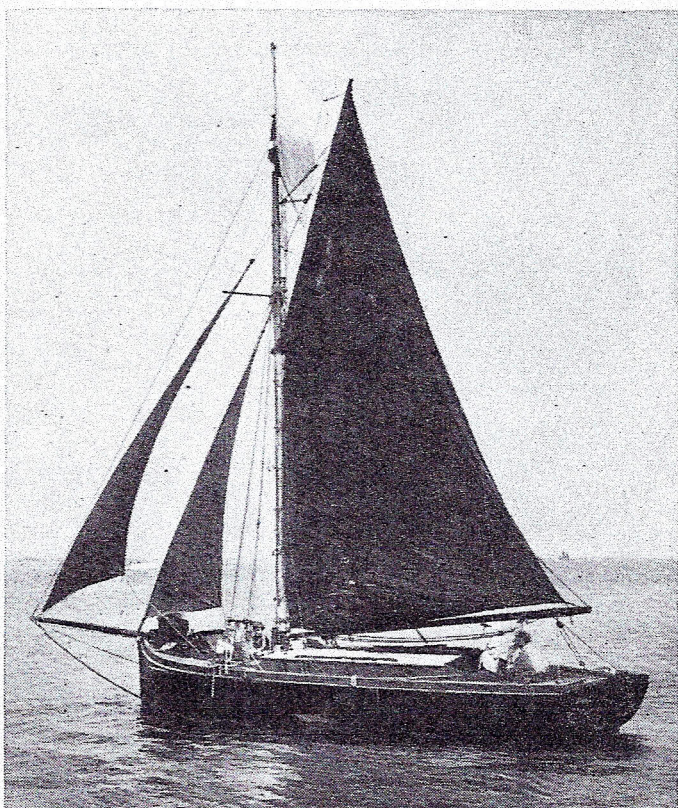
After a night of rain and wind we set off

at high water next day to take the ebb through the Wallet and on to Harwich and the Orwell. It was a cold morning, but Lesley at least had already evolved a method of dressing to suit the English summer when at sea. Shorts and sweater were worn underneath trousers and an ampler sweater borrowed from her mother. When the sun permitted, off came the outer layer.

A moderate North-East wind promised well at first. I could admire the gentle curve of Dione's loose-footed mainsail as we came close-hauled off the Nass. Barge yachts may not be at their best when they are on the wind, but as long as the breeze has the least weight in it there is satisfaction, perhaps because there is skill, in maintaining that smooth curve and getting the best out of the conditions.

The sea was lumpy, although the wind was beginning to drop, as we passed the mouth of the Colne. The weather forecast just before one o'clock spoke of a depression, moving up from the West, which was then centred over Kent and Sussex; a few minutes later the News told us of the storm that had brought disaster to Lynmouh. We began to wonder what might be coming our way; we reflected that continuing further against the light head wind might not be very rewarding—and we turned back to the Colne. Morale improved considerably. The children like to see a coastline slipping by. So, I admit, do I.

But it was slow work again as we beat slowly up the Colne over the last of the ebb. Off Brightlingsea Creek the local one-designs were having their Saturday afternoon race, and the skipper of one



EVEN IN A PHOTOGRAPH THE OLD GIRL HAD A CAPABLE LOOK ABOUT HER





ON THE EARLY MORNING EBB WE LEFT MALDON

volunteered the information that we should not be able to cross the bar at the point we were making for. But on we went, while Joan turned up in one of our authorities the rule for entering Brightlingsea Creek. "Go in boldly" she read out, and I did so with such effect that we had sailed right through the crowded anchorage in two or three equally crowded minutes and had ended up on the mud at the far end. It was then discovered that I had not heard the second half of the instruction, which was "and bring up as soon as you can."

We tied up that night alongside a converted Fairmille. The next day we were able to make friends with her professional skipper, and the freedom of her decks gave full scope to the expansionist tendencies of the children. In the evening we took them for a scamper along the shore near St. Osyth Point.

The next morning brought news of the approach of southerly gales. The crew of the local lifeboat were lined along her decks, and we apprehensively wondered what were their thoughts about us as Dione headed past them towards the Colne. We hoped they felt better when they saw us turn up-river.

An ugly sky made it easy to believe there was bad weather to come. At the moment the wind was north-easterly, light and unsteady, and we made several boards across the well-marked channel. Near Aldboro Point an auxiliary barge was anchored in mid-stream opposite a quarry; as Dione approached she motored towards a jetty, grounding firmly when still fifty yards away. "Perhaps the skipper did it to get out of our way," suggested Joan. I said that if so it was no compliment.

At Wivenhoe, as the mudbanks on the East side of the river were not yet covered, we had to wait awhile before we could get near to the quay. We

were finally able to lie in the local manner, with our stern to the quay and our bows secured to buoys. With the dinghy as a bridge we could step ashore when we liked, and it did not take the children long to discover the advantages of this. With an excellent public-house only a few yards astern we were well provided for.

That afternoon it began to rain, and the rain fell steadily until the next morning. For Anthony at least there was plenty of diversion at the local railway station, which seemed to be the Clapham Junction of the East Coast. Not far away from our berth was the forlorn Cap Pilar, with the water gushing through gaps in her sides as the tide went down.

The rain was followed by strong North-East winds, but in our comfortable mud berth (we were afloat for only about three hours on each tide), and sheltered as we were by the quayside houses, the weather was almost unnoticed. At tide time each day, small steamers and barges for Colchester swept up-river on the flood; for Anthony, tide time meant a bathe. We found it was a pleasant walk to the mill at Fingrinhoe, we were taken on a conducted tour around Wivenhoe's brisling cannery, and on one afternoon we went to Colchester and visited the famous museum which is housed in a castle.

After two days the wind dropped. Joan and I got up soon after midnight to get Dione away from the quay and anchor her in deeper water; we slept for another four hours and then woke again to sail with the last of the ebb. We were sorry to be leaving Wivenhoe while its citizens were still asleep. We would have liked the excuse for at least a hand wave.

Down river, as we glided by in the early morning quiet, some sleepy-looking cattle raised their heads to gaze at us doubtfully. We had half-lowered a



leeboard to give ourselves warning if there was a chance of going aground, and it touched once or twice as we rounded High Park Corner—which is rendered as Hyde Park Corner by people who know more about Essex than I. I diffidently refer them to the spelling shown by at least one signpost ashore and by the latest Ordnance Survey map.

(The Ordnance Survey is regarded in Dione with deep respect and is frequently consulted in confined waters. Doubters and scoffers are recommended to study its delineation in the 1 in. series of the channel in any small and narrow waterway they know well; such, perhaps as Havengore Creek. All this is said with due awareness of the possibility that pilotage by Ordnance Survey may be an even lower practice than navigation by dog bark.)

There was freshness in the following breeze as Dione bustled past Brightlingsea; the tide was beginning to turn as she came close-hauled opposite Colne Point and headed towards the Blackwater, with the sun shining from a cloudless sky. For a while our lee rail was almost awash, and occasionally a splash reached the cockpit. "Will we capsize?" asked Anthony, who has done his share of dinghy sailing. I was reassuring. This, I said, was real bargeing. Dione surged along with the same feeling of controlled power that I had known when for one voyage I had "gone mate" in a full-sized barge, the Violet; I had been given the wheel because the skipper suspected, and perhaps rightly, that I would do less harm there than in the galley. His rabbit pie was excellent.

The early chill was beginning to disappear, and the wind was lessening, as we passed West Mersea. Lesley, who overnight had been strangely enthusiastic about the idea of setting off early, had by now completed the process of waking and coming on deck. Appetites rose with the sun. Dione was returning to a level keel, and cooking breakfast became



WE LAY AWAY FROM THE CHANNEL AT BRADWELL QUAY

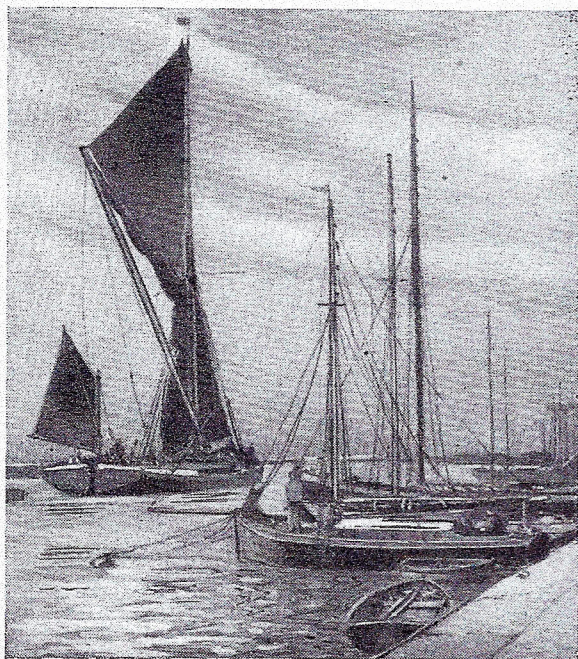
accordingly less hazardous, as we slackened sheets in the Blackwater. Soon it was fair weather sailing again.

Osea Island, on a closer view than we had ever had before, came well up to expectations. From a distance the sun shining on the tan-sailed smacks close by the island had given the scene a festive, regatta-like appearance. As we passed near to them, none of the crews were too busy to look up from their work and give us a cheerful hail. The tide had been flooding a bare two hours as we went by Heybridge Basin, and our leeboard was finding the bottom at frequent intervals. We used the engine for the last quarter of a mile in the winding reaches that remained.

The view of Maldon that unfolds as one rounds the last bend of the Blackwater must surely be one of the handsomest in Essex. Along the waterfront a line of smacks and barges; up the hillside behind them the town rearing itself gracefully, with trees and church towers rising above the coloured roofs. In the sunshine that day it looked, I imagine, its best. Lightheadedly and needlessly I ran Dione aground opposite the first of the smacks. As we waited for the water to rise we celebrated our arrival with big mugs of "elevenses."

Welcoming squeals from Elizabeth and Peter Bennett of the Henry showed that we had been recognized. The junior Bennetts—veterans of four post-war Medway barge races, in three of which the Henry had been a winner—had soon taken our pair on a tour of introduction to the delights of Maldon, in particular the swings.

We spent a long and sunny week-end at our port of registry. We had early reported ourselves to the Water Bailiff, who gave us a berth in which for most of the time we were lying placidly on the mud. Part of our time was passed in examining the barges—the Lord Roberts, having a good do-up on the blocks, was one—and in being invited aboard the yacht-



AT WIVENHOE WE LAY STERN-ON TO THE QUAY



barges, for there were several beside the Henry. The children especially were sorry when it was time to go and to say good-bye to the cheerful little park beside the promenade.

On an early-morning ebb tide we left Maldon with the last of the smacksmen, drifting slowly down to Osea and then to Stone; there, as the tide was beginning to turn against us, we rowed ashore for milk and loaves. A good southerly breeze sprang up while we were ashore; we were soon back on board and pressing on to Bradwell. The instructions for entering Bradwell Creek seemed so complicated that I determined to forget them all and to find my way in by the light of nature, assisted by the leadline. The channel was marked by an unbroken line of moored craft, and if Dione had been of normal draught I would have had to conclude there was no room for us. Instead I anchored away from the channel, in a spot where she would just go aground at low water.

We were glad next day of the shelter given us by Peewit Island, for the wind blew strongly from the West; rowing to the quay on the ebb tide required exceptional effort. We visited the derelict war-time airfield, a reminder of days that seemed only a little less distant than the time when lorries were as unknown as aeroplanes, and the local farm produce was loaded at Bradwell Quay into the barges for London. For most of the day we worked at odd jobs on board the boat.

Early next morning the wind had veered to North-West and it was clear that the worst was over; we were on our way before the B.B.C. could tell us that the weather would moderate. We made a fast passage through the Raysand channel against the tide, keeping for most of the way in a fathom of water; we arrived in the Crouch some time before the tide had finished ebbing. Going against wind

and tide was slow, but the tide had begun to turn by the time we passed the Roach.

Our arrival at Burnham was timed to coincide with the beginning of the Week. We were due to take part in the racing in another craft, and Dione's rôle was to be that of a houseboat only. The problem of where to lie seemed considerable. Moorings were unobtainable. As for anchoring, we should have been remote from the racing if we had sought the better shelter at the up-river end of the vast anchorage. Below Burnham the river seemed too wide for security.

The answer was a mud berth, and for the next ten days Dione serenely observed the racing scene from the stretch of mud a hundred yards below the Pile House Beacons starting line. On one wild day a Dragon was to sink immediately opposite. The children saw it happen as they played with friends among the sea lavender and the water gulleys with which Dione was almost surrounded.

Our holiday was almost ended, and all that remained was the passage back to Whitstable by way of Havengore Creek. This was to be in weather that was truly deplorable—an apparently stationary thunderstorm brought strong winds and hours of torrential rain. With two reefs in the mainsail Dione steadily shouldered her way across the Estuary, towing a National 18-footer as well as her own dinghy. From shore to shore we crossed in just under four hours. We were glad to reach our moorings and gladder still to be on land again. All that evening the lightning flashed in the distance from a gloomy sky, while the wind blew coldly and hard.

On the spring tides a fortnight later we pulled Dione up the beach, in spite of her 9 tons T.M., with a fisherman's hand winch. For her a year was over. It was time to start planning for the next.

## SOLENT BUOYAGE CHANGES

THE following alterations to buoys and lights in the Solent area are reported:

1. North Thorn light buoy altered to fl. w. ev. sec.
2. Prohibited anchorage in Sandown Bay, see N. to M. No. 236 of 31/1/1952.
3. Spithead approach. Lat. 50 deg. 41' 35" N. Long. 0 deg. 53' 25" W. A depth of 7 fathoms marked *Wreck* is to be substituted for a depth of 3½ fathoms marked *Wreck* in the above position. Buoy withdrawn.
4. Southampton Water. Alteration in buoyage. The following are new positions of buoys.

Name	Bearing and distance from Netley Dome
(i) Greenland	... 177 deg. dist. 5,200 ft.
(ii) Hound	... 243 " " 4,200 "
(iii) NW Netley	... 283 " " 8,750 "
(iv) Cadland	... 176 " " 6,380 "
(v) Dean's Elbow	... 266 " " 6,870 "

New buoy est. Lain's Lake F.L.R.5 sec.  
221½ deg. dist. 4,700 ft. from Dome.

5. Hillhead buoy now shows F.L.R.2½ sec.
6. Egypt Point Lt. by now moved to position 000 deg. 1,060 ft. from Egypt Point light.
7. South Bramble Bank buoy altered to can lightbuoy, red and white chequers, F.L.R.5 sec.
8. Buoys withdrawn.
  - (a) Nab West light buoy.
  - (b) Dean buoy.
  - (c) No. 2 Motherbank.
9. No. 1 Motherbank light buoy moved to new position in Lat. 50 deg. 45' 27" N. Long. 1 deg. 11' 07" W.
10. NE Ryde Middle light buoy altered to Gp. Fl. (2) R. 10 sec.
11. Bullock Patch. (i) Buoy established. 041 deg. 2.25 miles from Nab Tower. Conical black. Buoy withdrawn; about 7 cables northward of buoy in (1).
12. Stokes Bay. Prohibited anchorage established. See N. to M. No. 1949 of 26/9/1952.

J. R.