

Up Faversham Creek

Another tale from the delivery skipper's log

Scotty and I flew down from Inverness on a cold, bright Sunday afternoon, arriving at Gatwick, where it was also cold but with a biting northerly wind, to deliver two boats from Faversham to Tilbury. We were told that we had been booked into a hotel three miles from the airport but, after waiting for the connecting bus for twenty minutes, it took a good fifteen minute ride to get there. Scotty was not happy and decided to go back to a hotel which was directly connected to the airport terminal. We booked into the hotel without too much fuss and went to our separate rooms for a rest before dinner. That night we had dinner at the bar but whilst waiting, were served with the most delicious snack I had tasted for many years, wasabi peanuts. It is like playing Russian Roulette with your taste buds. The peanuts are all the same greenish colour and crunchy but have varying amounts of wasabi on each. You may get four or five mildly hot ones, followed by a real eye waterer. You never know when the next very hot one is coming.

The high water at Faversham Creek was at 12.30 hours the next day, so, as I wanted to leave on the rising tide, we were picked up early from the hotel by Gazzie and Marcus, who were to be our crew, planning to arrive at the boatyard by 10.00. After a slightly roundabout route through the Kent countryside, we arrived at 10.30 to find that the boats were still on the hard, although the crane was on site. Lifting operations began within half an hour and the first boat was put in the water even though, alarmingly, the crane started to tilt off its jack legs at one point. The crane moved to the second boat and did one lift but could not quite reach the water so had to set down and move for a second lift. Eventually both boats were in the water but it had taken far too long. It was high water and I was not happy about leaving the Creek on a falling tide but was assured by one of the locals that there was at least another two hours before it became unavigable. I pressed the starter button on the Yapete and, after much cranking and clouds of black smoke, she fired into life and was moved along the quay until outside of the Louise as the yard had another yacht to lift out whilst they had the crane. Scotty then tried to start the Louise however there were only a couple of small coughs from the engine. After a time the batteries died, so the whole effort for that day was abandoned and the batteries were then put on charge for the night.. While trying to get the engine started, the fuel filters had been inspected and the big Racor primary filters were found to be black, so we rushed off to the the only Scania dealer in that area to get some replacements. The dealer had the small secondary filters but not the primary then luckily Scotty spotted a telephone number on the filter we had removed and ordered, by telephone, eight new ones for overnight delivery. So it was back to the hotel for a chinese meal and a good nights sleep.

The next morning we were picked up at the hotel and travelled by a more direct route to Faversham, arriving at 11.00. The boatyard had arranged for an eningeer to be available for two hours so he was given all the new filters and asked to change them and bleed the fuel lines whilst we went off to a local Tesco's to purchase supplies for the passage. Arriving back at the boatyard, the engineer pointed out that there was a fuel shut off valve, right behind the engine, which appeared to be in the off position. After turning the valve to the on position, replacing the filters and making sure there was fuel right through to the injectors, the engine was cranked. After a nervous thirty seconds, it spluttered into life with a big belch of unburned diesel smoke. The throttle cable was also not working properly but when treated to a good spray of WD40, the problem appeared to be cured.

It was 13.20 and high water with a stiff northerly wind blowing a force 6 or 7. We had earlier driven around to the seaward side of the salt marshes surrounding Faversham, to look at the height of the waves and judged, from what could be seen, not to be large enough to compromise safety. The

boatyard manager said that we should leave immediately and offered the services of his tug to lead us out of the Creek, which we gladly accepted.

The tug set off with the Yapete and Louise following, along a fairly safe straight reach until we arrived at a red, port hand buoy, which was left to starboard (right), as we were going against the general direction of buoyage. The tug then turned to starboard and after 50 metres came to sudden halt. I then had a quick decision to make, whether to pass to the left or right of the tug and, hopefully get back in the channel. I decided to go to the left, based on the fact that the next green buoy, which we would have to leave to port (left), was quite a distance off to our left. This proved to be the wrong decision as, within a very short distance, both the Yapete and Louise ground to a halt and remained stuck on the salt marshes with a fast falling tide. When I later examined the local chart which we had been given, the green buoy was not in the charted position but some one hundred meters further long the channel, directly across the Saltings from the previous buoy. There was now nothing to be done until the next high tide so we waited aboard until the water had receded, leaving a bed of tough springy plants and areas of soft white mud, then proceeded to walk the mile back to a road. A very cold, wet and muddy walk.

After arriving back at the boatyard, it was decided to try and pull the boats off the Saltings, as these marshes are called, on the high tide at 02.00 hours, using one tug, from further down the Creek, in the water and a tractor and digger on the opposite shore. With nothing else to do, we went for a meal in a nice little cafe in Faversham and then back to the boatyard to wait until 20.00 when we would have to walk back through the mud to the two boats. Unfortunately, during the afternoon, the sky had cleared, which meant the temperature was falling, and the wind had dropped and turned to the west, which would leave less water in the Creek at high tide. After night had fallen with clear skies and a big full moon, the temperature continued to drop, and with no heating on the boats, we got colder and colder, eventually having to run on the spot and jump up and down to keep warm. At last there were signs of life on the opposite bank as the tractor and digger were fired up and the tug arrived. The tow lines, which had been laid by the boatyard staff during the afternoon daylight, were tied on and, just before high water, the operation started. Unfortunately, with the change in the wind, the tide was a good metre lower than the previous afternoon and before it started disappearing again, the big tug managed to pull the boatyard tug back into the water but the tractor and digger were only able to move the Yapete a few meters leaving the bow just at the channel. The Louise did not move at all. At least there was some consolation in not having to trudge back through the mud as there was a skiff on hand to take us back to the boatyard. At 03.00 we were taken back to the hotel at Gatwick, and got to our beds around 04.30, after a hot shower.

The next day we set off back to the boatyard, arriving just before 12.00 and learned that everything was in place to try again at 14.00. We were taken back to the boats by the skiff and, before it all started, I asked the two lads to make sure there was nothing blocking the water intake or impeller on both boats. When the tide came in it was slightly higher than the previous night. This time the tractor and boatyard tug were tied to the stern of the Louise and the large tug, to the Yapete. It was The Louise floated first, by being pulled out backwards, down a very slight incline. Whilst this was happening, the large tug was making runs, jerking the Yapete forward metre by metre until she found deeper water. I was aboard the Yapete with Marcus and we quickly untied the bridle and tow ropes, making sure they were well clear before starting the engine. By this time, the Louise, with Scotty and Gazzie, was well away being towed down the channel by one of the tugs. Our engine started easily enough but when I pushed the joystick forward, nothing happened, so we slowly drifted towards the opposite bank, ending up with the bow just aground. Marcus called Scotty on the mobile and after some discussion, I reluctantly agreed to be towed down the channel by the other tug. Without further incident we were towed all the way down Faversham Creek and out into the Swale, the stretch of water that goes around the back of the Isle of Sheppey. The other tug had

towed the Louise out to a two ton bouy and tied her 13 tons on to it by a thin piece of rope, and as we arrived, one of the boatyard staff was hanging over her stern trying to get rid of an entangled bridle. We were towed up to the Louise and tied on so that we then had 26 tons hanging on the the very inadequate rope and bouy in a fast flowing tidal stream. After freeing the bridle, both tugs disappeared in short order, with a parting remark that we would now have to look after ourselves.

So, not in a very happy frame of mind, I asked Marcus and Gazzie to try and remove the weed from Yapete's impellor via an access hatch in the engine compartment, which meant groping about, up to the shoulder in freezing water. They did get a few handfulls of the tough marsh weed out but there was more which could not be reached and when the engine was started, she would spin up to a maximum of 1,000 rpm before starting to vibrate very badly. After discussion we decided to start the Louise's engine to see if she had sustained the same sort damage but this time our luck was in as she fired up without a problem. This meant that we could at least tow the Yapete with the Louise and this we decided to do, as time was getting on.

After rigging the necessary birdle and tow rope, the rope to the bouy was cut and both headed down the Swale, with the tide, towards the Thames Estuary on a broad expanse of flat grey water. At this point London VTS was radioed on VHF channel 69, to inform them of our position, our destination and that there were two 60ft boats, one of which was being towed by the other. Following the channel out of the Swale for three miles between, yet to be uncovered, drying sand banks, we passed into the Estuary at Pollard Spit and made for the Whitstable Street Buoy three miles to the north east which marked the end of the very shallow water. From there the course turned further north to the Spaniards Buoy, two miles away, after which we could bear west and follow the Four Fathoms Channel for four miles to the Spile Buoy. The course so far had been out of the main shipping lanes but as we turned north west at the Spile, within two miles we would have to cross the Medway Channel to arrive at Sea Reach Buoy No.1 at the start of the Yantlet Channel leading into the River Thames. Luckily, there was vitually no shipping until past Sea Reach Buoy No.2, only a couple of, relatively, small vessels overtaking. Between Sea Reach Buoy No.2 and Sea Reach Buoy No.3 a large ship approached and as he passed, shone a bright light on Louise then veering back into the middle of the channel. I can only presume that he thought we were too far over on his side but there was no call on the radio either to us or the traffic control authority. After Sea Reach Buoy No.4 instructions were received by radio to change to VHF channel 68 and on passing Southend to our right, on the north shore, London VTS called to say there was an oil tanker coming up astern, making for Shell Haven on Canvey Island and would need to keep 2 to 3 cables north of the middle of the main channel. Looking round, nothing was immediately apparent but a course was steered to gradually move away north, further from the main channel. With no detailed chart of this part of the estuary I had to rely on the GPS and assume a position relative to the Sea Reach Buoys by maintaining an offset of 0.2 miles north from the centre of the rolling road. Just as the lights of Canvey Island were coming abeam, the navigation lights of the tanker appeared on the starboard quarter and, in order to give him more manoeuvring room, we steered back to the centre of the channel, for which the tanker radioed his thanks.

Beyond Canvey Island, the Yantlet Channel and Sea Reach, the river takes a 90 degree turn from west to south with a large sand bar on the port side. The incoming tide was cutting the corner over the bar and pushing the boats south west, towards the West Blyth PHM so strongly that, on passing, the Yapete grazed the buoy. This part of the river is called the Lower Hope Reach and lasts for two miles so with no shipping about, it was time to stop towing line astern and lash the boats together side by side in preparation for entry into Tilbury Docks. This was successfully completed with five minutes to spare before another large ship came up behind and passed nearer to the centre of the Reach. The river then takes another 90 degree turn from south back to west, becoming Gravesend Reach and the final 3 miles to Tilbury. Arrived at the point which the GPS said was the final

destination, it became very confusing as the entrance to the lock to the docks, was not apparent. Motoring slowly further up and then back down the river looking, unsuccessfully, for the opening, we eventually concede defeat and had to call the lock gates on VHF channel 4 to ask for directions. The reply came that they had spotted us on their CCTV and we were only 50 metres from the right spot. Everything became clear after tying up outside a local tug as the lock gates had been closed and, for someone who did know the area, looked exactly the same as the rest of the shoreline.

After waiting for a ship to exit, we took the two boats into the lock, which went through its cycle and decanted us into Tilbury Docks. The Louise and Yapete were due to be loaded on a container ship and transported to Sierra Leone but due to the delays caused by the problems in Faversham Creek, the boat that left the docks just after we had entered, was the one they were supposed to be on. The boats were tied up at 01.00 on Thursday morning, much to the relief of everyone.

It was then back to the hotel at Gatwick to relax for the rest of the day, a good sleep that night, before making for home on Friday.

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