

Drascombe Adventures

The Riddle of the Sands Cruise

Dave Oakley

Part 1



In 1903 Erskine Childers wrote *The Riddle of the Sands*, a spy novel set in the shallow waters of the German Frisian Islands. Arthur Davies and his friend Carruthers sail the yacht *Dulcibella* into the heart of a German plot to invade England. In 2016 seven Drascombes and their crews set off in their wake to find out what it is really like sailing the Waddenzee and if there is still a riddle of the sands to be unraveled.

I was making my evening toilet in my chambers in the fair Cotswold market town of Chipping Norton when an electronic ping from my laptop alerted me to an incoming email from a certain Jack O’Keeffe, inviting me to join him and other Drascombes on a jaunt to the Frisian Islands. And by the way, the email added, would I mind bringing some rigging screws size 1-3/8, galvanized.

Well, to say I leapt at the chance is an understatement. The summer was fast approaching and quite frankly there is very little to keep one in Chipping Norton at that time of year. My mind was made up. We would go!

Early one fine morning in mid-June we hitched our Coaster *Windsong* to the back of our trusty Ford and my wife Helen and I set out upon the long road to the Netherlands. The car rolled off the ferry in Calais late in the afternoon. We made it to a campsite in Bruges for the evening and caught the last rays of sun in the old town sitting by a canal with a glass of Leffe, watching the swans and enjoying the warm ambience of the ancient streets.

We drove hard all the next day, through Holland until at last we found ourselves driving along the top of a dike into the port of Lauwersoog. To the left of us lay the sea, grey and shallow for as far as the eye could see. In the distance we could just make out the low lying form of the island of Schiermonikoog. To our right was the inland water of Lauwersmeer, a non-tidal freshwater lake. There were many pretty traditional barges in the harbour but nowhere could we see any Drascombes.

The cheerful harbourmaster of the Nordergat marina on the Lauwersmeer side of the dike soon sorted us out. Yes, he’d had an email from Jack. No, he didn’t know where he was. We decided to launch anyway. No doubt things would come together. Soon *Windsong* was in the water, moored up with the tent over the cockpit and the kettle on for tea. Eventually, a text got through from Jack and we learned that he had launched the day before at Zoutkamp way off to the south east and was now with the other Drascombes in the harbour at Oostmahorn, a few miles away. Tired as we were, we drove around to Oostmahorn to meet the rest of the group; John and Darina Tully and their hired Coaster *Elizabeth*, Vernon and Lynn Turnbull with their Drifter *Seiriol* and of course the skipper, Jack and *Tyboat*. There would be three more boats to meet up with later but for now the seven of us tucked

into our first Dutch meal.

The next morning we woke to drizzle. The morning was slow and grey but soon after lunch the sun came out and all the boats gathered at the Nordergat marina before setting off in the early afternoon to lock through into the open sea. There was a light breeze from the north east. Close-hauled, we sailed out from Lauwersoog and since it was high water we paid little heed to the channel buoys marking the route across the silt grey shallows to Schiermonikoog. There were a few lovely Dutch barges sailing with us, all of them drawing more than a Coaster.

Eventually, the indistinct form of Schiermonikoog grew sharper. By now the tide was falling so as we drew close we hugged the buoys through the winding channel into the marina where we tied to a pontoon. Soon after we were settled, another Drascombe came sailing in with Jim Hopwood at the helm of his Gig

Hippo. Now there were five boats.

That evening each crew cooked up on their own boats before heading for the marina bar to discuss tomorrow's activities. Charts were spread out across the table, beer was served and the tide table studied. The next port of call was 18 miles upwind on the mainland. The tide wouldn't let us leave much before 1400 so the following day we had plenty of time to explore the island.

Climbing the dike that protects the island from being engulfed by the sea, we walked across flat land, along a ruler straight road into town. Pretty redbrick buildings lined the streets with hotels and bars. There were very few cars and bicycles thronged the streets. On the western end of the island we came through grass and dunes to the beach. The tide was out and the sand stretched away forever into the haze.

Such a flat featureless landscape has a strange effect on the spirit. When we arrived and had taken our first glimpse

of the Waddensee I had wondered what on earth we were doing here. But now, after only a few hours, the bleakness was beginning to grow on me. I could begin to appreciate its unique beauty.

After lunch all five boats set sail and gingerly made their way through the muddy channel out to the open water. It was a bright sunny afternoon and soon we were tacking upwind. The rising tide was carrying us along well but the afternoon was waning and *Windsong's* progress was slow. The sky became dark and the first few spots of rain blew in our faces. It was time to resort to the engine. Already under power, *Seiriol* was way ahead making her way through the Hornhuizer channel.

There followed three hours of cold wet motoring into wind. Occasionally, we were delighted to see the head of a seal pop up to watch us pass. It was as we steered from buoy to buoy I thought about the tenacity of people like Erskine Childers who sailed



Locking out at Lauwersoog



The team pause in the streets of Schiermonikoog to discuss the best route towards the next beer



The buoyage system in Borkum's high street gave a worrying indication to local tide expectations

these waters at the turn of the 20th century in boats without engines.

At last the withies marking the narrow channel into Noordpolderzijl came into view. With the rudder pulled up and the engine on slow we made our way up the muddy creek. Very soon *Windsong*, *Seiriol* and *Hippo* were tied up alongside the harbour wall but there was no sign of either *Elizabeth* or *Tyboat*. With low tide fast approaching it was clear they were destined to spend the night out on the mud. There was little the rest of us could do other than climb the dike to the one and only café around and have a beer.

We woke the next morning to rain drumming on the cabin roof. John and Darina on *Elizabeth* had come in during the early hours. There was still no sign of Jack.

Noordpolderzijl is a bleak place but a paradise for bird watchers. The cry of the waders on the mudflats was a lonesome call. Few boats venture into the harbour

and they have long given up dredging the channel. There is a high dike that runs all along the coast. To the south a canal runs straight as an arrow alongside an equally straight road disappearing into the distance; an artist's lesson in perspective. To the north the winding channel marked by withies snakes away into the grey Waddensee.

Late in the afternoon we floated off and carved our way through the mud, following the withies into deeper water. Two spoonbills were hovering for food as we passed. The wind was still in the east and the rain was in our faces as we peered over the spray hood and motored on towards our next destination, the German island of Borkum. The afternoon turned into a bright sunny evening. Peering through the binoculars I thought I could make out a white tipped sail. It could only be Jack and *Tyboat*. Sure enough, as we drew nearer, there he was, determinedly tacking back

and forth. We crossed the busy shipping lane that leads into the Eems River. It was getting late. With a strong tide against us we made our way into the small marina at Borkum. We were now in Germany. Soon we were followed by *Elizabeth* and *Seiriol* and finally *Hippo* towing *Tyboat* behind her, Jack's electric engine was having problems.

The next day was a rest day so we caught a bus into the town, which is a busy holiday resort where the shops are clearly aimed at catching the passing tourist. The museum gave us an interesting insight into the days when whaling was a major industry in the islands. It was here amongst the old photos and models of boats that we came close to seeing something Davies and Carruthers would have recognised.

Back at the harbour two more Drascombes had joined us: David Camlin and his son Euan on their Coaster *Delta* and Maarten Witjens with his Longboat Cruiser *Sybella*. Now there were seven



The harbour at Schiemonikoog



Waiting for the tide at Noordpolderzijl



boats and eleven crew from five different countries – two English, two Welsh, three Irish and three from Northern Ireland. And finally, to bring in a little local colour, we had Maarten, our only Dutchman. That evening we had another meeting in the marina bar. Over beers and charts we planned tomorrow's adventures. We would sail to Greetsiel on the German mainland.

By midday the next day, when we were ready to cast off, the sky had grown dark and there was thunder in the air. Soon *Windsong* was following the other boats down the channel into the wind as it started to rain. Turning south east with the wind on our quarter we began to sail and for a while all went well. Keeping between the busy deep water channel to starboard and the mudflats to port, we followed the Eems. Visibility closed in making it hard to pick out the other boats. If this continued navigation was going to become tricky.

Then, as if someone had flicked a switch, the wind died and the boats were left wallowing on an uneasy swell. Streaks of lightning split the black sky and thunder rumbled and cracked close over head. Rain fell hard, filling the cockpit as quickly as we could pump it out. Then, to cap it all,

it began to hail. Stones the size of marbles pounded and bounced across the decks. Helen and I sat in disbelief, wondering how much worse things could get. For two



Jack and Jim in Hippo's cockpit discussing the next stage in the cruise

hours or more the rain and hail continued. Under engine we ploughed on, occasionally picking out a buoy on the way towards an invisible mainland.

Just as the rain eased and a little sun began to break through, we found the channel across the shallows. There ahead of us were *Seiriol* and *Elizabeth*. It was close to low water when we began making our way to the east following the buoys across the Osterems channel. But the tide was in

our favour and soon the sun was warming our backs. Away to the south west we could make out the silhouettes of rows of gigantic wind turbines along the coast.

Outside Greetsiel there is a long channel of withies to follow up to lock gates. As we approached, I could see the road bridge lifting. *Windsong* powered forward and the gates closed behind us. The water dropped and then we were through into a tranquil sunlit world of reed beds and waders. We took our time motoring the three miles from the lock to the town.

In the early evening we came to the marina at Greetsiel. Beautiful wooden fishing boats lined the quay, their nets hanging, drying in the sun. Soon the other boats followed, plus one more boat; Georg, a German we had met the day before in Borkum had decided to join us with his beautiful varnished lake yacht *Galatea*.

It was Lynn's birthday and Vernon had very generously invited us all out to dinner that night. After a round of drinks in *Hippo's* cockpit, a short walk along the dike brought us into town for a wonderful and well-earned meal.

I woke in the morning to the call of a cuckoo somewhere far off in the marshes.

Greetsiel at night





Euan Camlin

David Camlin gets very wet

The sun warmed the deck as we made breakfast. Today was to be another rest day exploring Greetsiel. There can hardly be a more picture postcard town. The redbrick cafés and houses, two traditional windmills and the fishing boats along the quay came straight out of the film version of the *Riddle*

and Helen to think about heading home. John and Darina also had to haul *Elizabeth* out to return her to Oostmahorn. Over beers on our last evening in the bar we said our farewells. It was sad to be dropping out so soon. Early the next day, while the others passed through the lock to the open

sea, we travelled back to Lauwersoog by bus and train to collect the car and trailer. The following morning we hauled *Windsong* out of the water. The long road home stretched out before us.

I never did find out what the rigging screws size 1-3/8, galvanised, were for. 🚢



A fishing boat at Greetsiel

of the Sands. Helen and I spent the day wandering the streets and trying to avoid consuming too much ice cream.

Although the cruise would continue with Jack and the others following Davies and Carruthers, sailing further east towards Norderney and beyond, it was time for me



Vernon Turnbull

Windsong heads on up the Eems

Euan Camlin