



# The tide waits for no man

Ancient waterways, massive skies and  
a new company charting old maps.  
Nick Hammond sails Norfolk's fabled  
coastline using the timeless power  
of wind and tide

Photographs by Ian Finch

**T**HE sky is banded in bold strata of many hues. Beneath a blood-orange sunrise, the otherworldly madness of a curlew cry is all I have for company as my little boat slips silently into the mirrored estuary. The tide—visible via the urgent ripples that swell and spin past—is reaching its spring zenith, a barely credible 13ft, all told. I'm sliding gently across the saltwater, up only one inlet of the myriad forgotten creeks surrounding Norfolk's fabled and crustacean-laden, saltmarsh-ringed coastline.

A boat without an engine, sailing on the timeless power of wind and tide, is an ancient thrill and a silent one. Today's crew—skipper Henry Chamberlain, Royal Marine comrades Ian Finch and Charlie Hodson, science writer Zoe Dunford and surfer and designer Colin Herbert Powell—is chipper, delighted to be out here at 5.30am on a chill and mesmeric morn after promised 40mph winds faded away with the blackness of night. I've left the comfort of 18th-century Barn Drift, with its insulated warmth and sneak peek of white-horse waves through the pines, for a day on the saltmarsh and mudflats with the Coastal Exploration Company (CEC).

## ‘Carrying cargo uses only craftsmanship, wind and waves. It makes you think’

It's a recently founded Norfolk company with vintage values. With three unique and refurbished antique wooden fishing boats—today's is a 1950s crabber—the company leads mystery tours, family excursions, smuggling adventures and more in and around Wells-next-the-Sea.

'I grew up around here,' Henry tells me as we tie up, toss the anchor and watch as the saltmarsh all around us visibly drains. Tussocks appear and great skeins of yelping greylag drop from the brightening morning sky to form an orchestral accompaniment to the sizzle of hot fat and sausages. Chef Charlie is expertly wielding a handful of tools and concocting an early feast aboard, as we wait for enough water to leach seawards so that we can steer our crab boat beneath a wildfowlers' lonely bridge.

'Wells is a lot busier than it used to be, but these places—where no one would dream of going and that bigger boats can't hope to navigate—are the same as they ever were.' Henry's eyes have a faraway look as he quietly observes the miraculous morning unveiling itself before us.

The CEC is Henry's brainchild and his reason for returning to these mudflats and

### All mapped out: the Coastal Exploration Company



- Silk maps have long been used by the military to aid escape and evade detection; Second World War pilots had silk escape

maps sewn into their uniforms, in case they were downed behind enemy lines

- Norfolk has one of the richest and most diverse natural ecosystems in the UK, which includes Cromer's world-renowned crab and lobster hidden in the offshore underwater limestone 'cliff' known as the Marle

- The Coastal Exploration Company (CEC) goes as far as utilising authentic cloth, too: woollen jumpers from North Sea Clothing keep out windchill and heavy-duty British tweed is as warm and weatherproof as any neoprene number

- Dabbing, the art of walking slowly up estuaries and creeks with spears in an attempt to catch young flatfish or dabs (they're called butts in these parts), is all but forgotten—except by the CEC's people, including Colin Herbert Powell (pictured)



the uncompromising, often cold, wet and brutally physical work of manning boats in a British climate. When he's not here, minutely planning each trip to ensure all goes as smoothly as humanly possible—although inevitably, with sailing such as this, nothing ever goes quite to plan—Henry works as an international peace-keeper in far-away lands.

'I want everyone to have the chance to experience what we're experiencing,' he reflects. 'This is still something very special—always was, always will be. It's in such total opposition to the way so many of us now lead our lives that I think it's something worth bringing to more people's attention. Out here, you have to wait for the tide. You can't make it wait for you. There's a lesson in that for a lot of people.'

Working with local homeless charities to get troubled folk out on the water and under the stars is one part of the overall plan. Sustainable produce, locally sourced, also drives the story. We enjoy locally reared pork sausages and bacon, superb Norfolk churned butter and fresh black pudding from the pigs I can make out snootling on a sunny hilltop a couple of miles back on shore.

When you're on a boat, the shore seems a different world entirely, even if it's entirely visible and almost within reach. As we wait, wait and wait some more for the tide to ebb enough to grant us safe passage, the sun climbs warmly and welcomingly in the sky, I scan the wide marshes and watch oyster-catchers slumber, bill under wing; behind them on the bare plough of a distant hill, hares hop and chase.



Previous pages: *My Girls*, a 20ft lug-rigged crabber. Above: All hands: skipper Henry Chamberlain helps ease *My Girls* from a sandbank

The CEC offers families a guided 'surf' down the creeks in search of marine goodies, the tide sweeping you safely along in warm summer waters. As well as foraging for clams, mussels and samphire, more physical and mental exertions are possible: plotting trips and tracks across ocean and mudflat and sinking 'treasure' for teams of smugglers to locate and extricate. In the ultimate environmentally friendly transport service, Henry's boats—the crabber, a whelk boat and a 16ft mussel flatbed—carry cargo up and down the coast, too. Delivering beer to Norwich and gin to Great Yarmouth, the company uses nothing more than local craftsmanship, wind and waves. It makes you think.

At last, we haul anchor and, with an inch or two to spare and the boat laden down with

its breakfast-full crew, we scrape under the wildfowlers' bridge and onwards as the water pours from the marshes like an emptying sink.

'We've got to act fast,' urges Henry, now all business, scanning the surging waters and emerging sandbanks ahead. 'Get wedged here and the boat is stuck until the returning tide frees it.' This means a long, muddy and potentially hazardous yomp across the sodden marshes. Only first-class local knowledge—together with the compelling and remarkable re-created silk maps that Henry has drawn and had crafted for all his skippers—ensures a safe return to civilisation.

At one stage, we fly down the creek faster than a speeding whimbrel, leaving Henry barely enough time to perform handbrake turns on the tiller. Then, the inevitable

occurs and there's the low, slow grind of a mudbank under keel. This is all so thrilling, all handled so competently, that I can't help but feel it's been put on purely for my benefit. I, therefore, graciously let the Marines hop overboard to try to free the little crab boat. Once a landlubber...

Eventually, we get the skiff as close as we can to our original disembarkation point and, drawing her up on a sandbank, hop overboard and back to soggy terra firma. From here, it's a hilarious schlepp across muddy, slippery shoreline and back to the waiting vehicle. I can report that even Marines fall flat on occasion. ✍️  
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