

# AWAY IN THE *PUDGE*

**Robin Pointer** reports on the MI charter in September.

We arrived at Maldon at 6pm on the 5 September for what was for Sue and I our first Mariners International charter. Gear was stowed and local beer and fish and chips sampled before an early night.

At 4.30am we were on deck to a panorama of stars. Some nifty manoeuvring by skipper Mike and rope-work by mate Phil with help from the MI crew saw **Pudge** extricate herself from inside the barge **Wyvenhoe** and get away down the river Blackwater under iron topsail.

A turn to port by Osea Island brought the wind on the quarter. We set topsail, staysail and main, and the Bedford went silent. With an ever increasing wind to the mouth of the river Colne we made rendezvous with the barge and smack racers. We accompanied them into the Wallet where they rounded the Wallet Spitway buoy, two miles off Clacton. During this time we were making some 7½ knots with the racing barges doing two knots more, according to the skipper, who could identify them all. All were under full sail with lee decks awash in what was reaching the top end of a force six.

Turning back to the river the skipper ordered the main to be brailed up to half its size because the helm was becoming heavy. I took the wheel after this reefing and believe me, it was heavy. Both hands and back muscles were needed to bring her back on course when she came up to windward in the gusts. Apparently, barges have in relation to their size the biggest rudders of any vessels afloat in order to manoeuvre in tight places, docks and rivers etc. Everything about a barge is designed to be handled by a skipper and mate, with a third hand aboard if rough weather was expected. One man can furl the huge mainsail by pulling the five brailing lines one at a time, but with MI crew on board many hands make light work.

With the wind increasing we short tacked back up the river to anchor in the lee of St. Lawrence Bay. Below perfect peace reigned, the hull of wood built so heavily that the wind and rain could not be heard. So to a splendid lunch, one of the many excellent meals provided by our caterers Hilary and Steve.

The afternoon was spent dozing to recover from the 4.30am call; in any case it was raining. A dinner of boiled ham in cider with the trimmings and a bottle of wine forced an early night.

Sunday dawned dry and bright for a leisurely breakfast and 9am start, sailing off the anchor and back down the river to Bradwell to meet with the barges and smacks out for a jolly in the brisk westerly wind. Our short tacks back up the river gave a stint on the wheel to everybody who wanted it. The skipper sailed in to anchor close by Osea Island in time for us to stow sails and disappear below before a rain squall arrived. The last meal in the peace of the hold and it was time to start the engine and take the tide back up to Maldon. So came the sad farewells. It's amazing how quickly friends can be made aboard a vessel at sea, even in two days gathered together in close confines with a common purpose – To Sail. Excellent!



Photos: Steve Bond