





# TWO DAYS IN JUNE

*Jayne Rawlins* recalls an idyllic summer trip with friends on South Devon's River Dart

Over the winter I often keep myself cosy with thoughts of the sailing season to come. I plan the perfect cruise in perfect conditions with friends relaxing and having fun, taking the occasional swim in the sea or river and enjoying good food al fresco. In the UK such opportunities are fleeting, but for two days in June last year my dream came true.

I am a member of Royal Dart Yacht Club 'Ladies Afloat Group'. We are of mixed abilities and meet every Thursday during the season to enjoy cruising, dingy sailing, kayaking or just being on the water. This time a group of us decided to 'push the boat out' and set aside two days for an adventure. With

the winds and tides forecast as not being suitable for a cruise along the South Devon coast, we planned to explore the River Dart. Our little flotilla comprised four cruising yachts and a small cabin cruiser, each with a crew of four or five.

## *Setting out*

The morning of the first day was glorious, with a blue sky and a light south-southeasterly. Such an invitation was just too good to ignore and we set out early into Start Bay for a quick sail before our cruise upriver. The tide was still on the ebb as we returned, passing Dartmouth Castle to port and Kingswear Castle to starboard, and with 15kt of wind in our sails we made our way slowly back into the river.

We needed to approach the head of navigation of the river at Totnes, 10nm away, on a flood tide and we calculated that with two more hours of ebb and six of flood we would have enough water to navigate the shallow approach to the town and to return to deeper waters shortly after the turn of the tide. Also we would have time to go ashore halfway upstream for a picnic. We settled on gentle motor-sailing to take advantage of any gusts or strengthening wind.

With the castles astern, and ensuring good clearance between ourselves and the two lower car ferries there, we approached the vibrant section of the river between Dartmouth and the village of Kingswear. After a short wait below the magnificent Britannia Royal Naval College to allow the chain- →

ALAMY





guided Higher Ferry to cross, and with the kettle on and homemade biscuits unwrapped, we continued upstream. On an ebb tide this is always a slow journey, but you get the chance to soak up the dramatic change in surroundings and the sudden serenity of the river between densely wooded slopes brushing the high-water mark.

### **Deep water**

As we sailed we saw herons and egrets fishing on the rocky shore, glimpsed an unexpected steam train on the viaduct above the garden at Maypool, and took in the lime kilns

and boathouses. Nearing Dittisham, we kept the Anchor Stone well to port, glancing up at the gardens of Greenway House where Agatha Christie lived and wrote. Here it is important to keep a lookout for the Dittisham to Greenway ferry and the tourist boats that ply the river between Dartmouth and Totnes, because they can catch you unawares as you turn to starboard to leave Dittisham behind and head for Flat Owers buoy.

We were less than one hour off the lowest point of the tide and the only route upriver was the deep-water channel running along a line of moorings close to the south

**ABOVE**  
The little flotilla

**FACING PAGE, TOP**  
There's plenty of wildlife to see in and around the Dart, such as grey seals. There's a colony on the Mewstone

shore. The channel swings across the entrance to Galampton Creek, avoiding the mud flats of Flat Owers before heading upstream past oyster beds, ancient salmon ponds and the pretty Waddeton Boathouse.

You may wonder why a crew of mixed ability would attempt this stretch of the river at low tide. Apart from making the most of the weather, we could practise our navigation and instil confidence in ourselves. With care, forward planning and a suitable draught, the river is navigable at most points of the tide.

As we approached Sandridge Boathouse to starboard, a seal popped up its head to check us out.





## Sandridge to Duncannon

From Sandridge Boathouse we headed towards Dittisham Mill Creek and the red port hand beacon off Blackness Point.

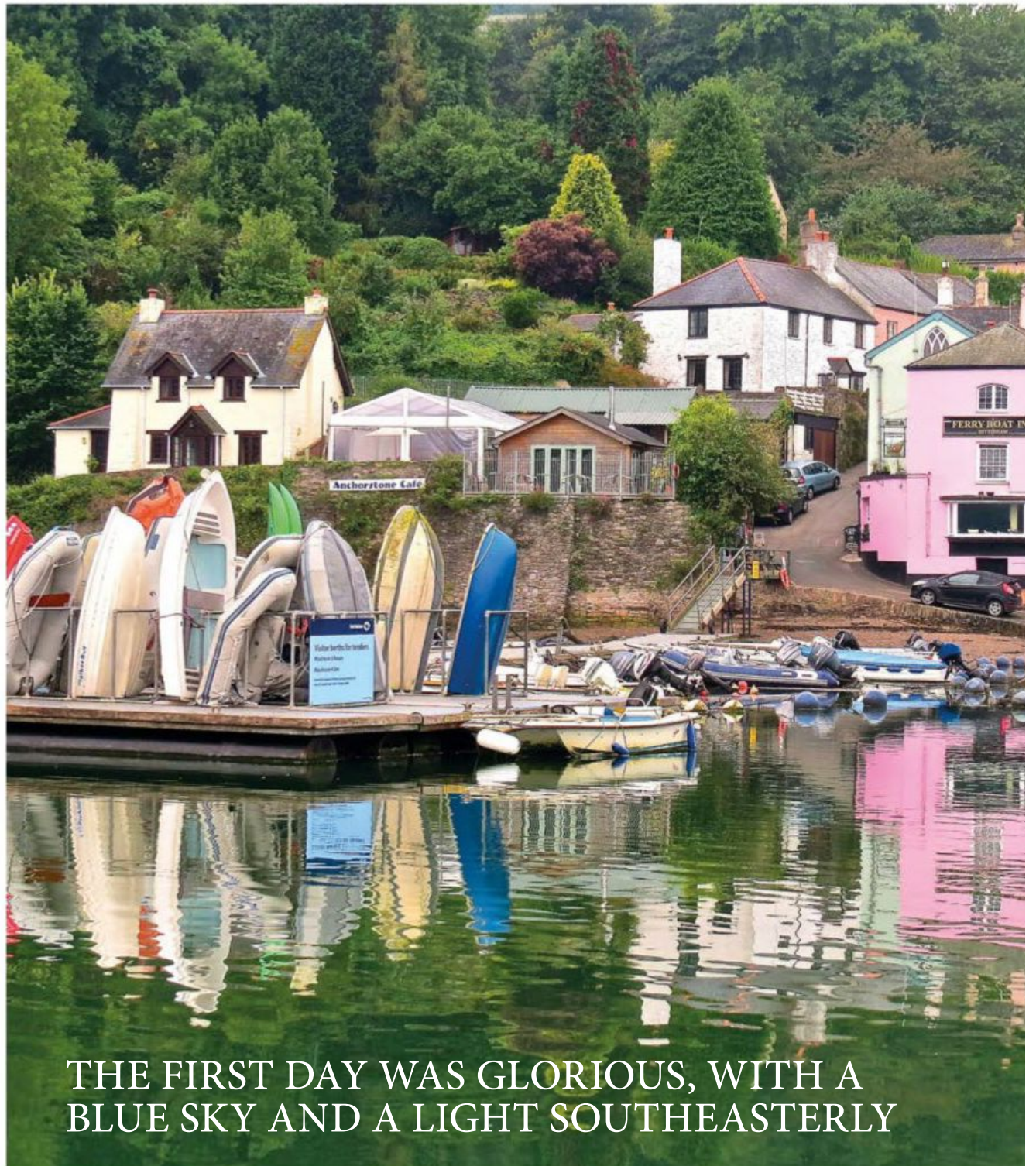
We were now at the lowest point of the tide and all hands were needed on deck to locate the navigation buoys that zig-zag across this section of the river. Known as the 'Lake of the Dart', at low water, this area can be tricky as a drying mud flat known as Middle Back and smaller banks extend up the middle of the river. From Blackness Point we headed over to the eastern shore and Pighole Point, then up the line of moorings to the entrance to Stoke Gabriel. There was no time to go ashore as our plan was to have a picnic at Duncannon a mile further up.

Hugging the eastern shore as far as Mill Point, we swung across to White Rock on the western shore and continued north to the mouth of Bow Creek. Just past the port hand buoy and off the eastern shore at the entrance is one of our favourite spots to anchor and swim at high tide. However, we turned east again and headed for Duncannon, where there is a small but delightfully sheltered spot just off the main channel in Duncannon Reach. After a bit of careful depth checking, the two larger, heavier cruisers and the small motor cruiser anchored up with the two smaller cruisers rafted up alongside.

## Picnic time

A flurry of activity followed. Tenders were filled with picnic bags and rugs, precariously balanced homemade quiches and salads, swimming gear and crew. A quick row ashore

PHOTOS: JAYNE RAWLINS



THE FIRST DAY WAS GLORIOUS, WITH A BLUE SKY AND A LIGHT SOUTHEASTERLY

and the picnic site was set up and ready to go. On such a warm day a swim is a must, even though the water is still a little chilly and some mud and rock has to be crossed before reaching deeper water.

By the time the swimmers had dried off and the quiches were demolished, the tide was flooding in nicely with about two hours to go before high water. We rowed languidly back to our little fleet leaving the largest cruiser with the deepest draught behind so that those who preferred a post-prandial snooze in the sun to the promised ice-cream on the quay at Totnes could spend an hour or two in this idyllic spot. →







PHOTOS: JAYNE RAWLINS



### Passing the narrows

The next section of the river can be somewhat nerve-racking for those in larger boats attempting the narrow channel for the first time. During the summer, packed tourist boats ply between Totnes and Dartmouth, while small dayboats and motorboats also frequent this part of the river, as do canoeists and paddleboarders. As a consequence, passing can be tricky, especially on the inside of the bends, but with an observant crew settled comfortably in the bow, the passage was uneventful.

Between the wooded parts of the shore, lush green meadows reach right down to the water. Canada geese, swans, mallard and coot are abundant along this stretch, and if you are really lucky you may catch the iridescent flash of a darting kingfisher or hear the plop of an otter.

Sharpham House rose above us to port with the sun shining on its rows of vines, and the sight of white egrets roosting in a dead tree on the water's edge got the cameras clicking.

As we motored slowly towards Home Reach the wooded slopes gave way to flatter marshy fields and saltings, allowing us to catch sight of the Totnes church tower rising above the town. We sailed past Baltic Wharf to port and headed on to the Steamer Quay. The quay itself is reserved for working pleasure boats but at this time it was conveniently empty, allowing two of our boats to

easily come alongside a little further up. We took a quick trip ashore for ice-cream and within a few minutes were manoeuvring around in the narrow space between the Quay and Vire Island to join the rest of our fleet waiting at the Baltic Wharf.

### A spot of bother

Having had no problems so far, we set off to return to Duncannon Reach in good spirits. But then the unexpected happened – the lead boat was dead in the water. At first we thought she'd gone aground, but it turned out her engine had stalled and she was drifting towards the mud flats along the bank. And, with the tide falling and the possibility of one of the large flat-bottomed pleasure boats turning up at any

minute, action was needed.

My sturdy 4-ton Cornish Crabber 26 with lifting keel was the obvious choice to go to the rescue. Fender and lines were quickly in place and we went alongside, bearing in mind that too much pressure would see us both on the mud. The thought of six or more hours stranded in the narrowest part of the river made for willing and quick work. The two boats were attached to each other and we were soon on our way out of danger.

ABOVE LEFT  
Picnic time, west of Gurrow Point

ABOVE RIGHT  
Greenway House, where Agatha Christie lived and wrote

On arriving at Duncannon, we anchored briefly while the skipper of the stalled boat got the ailing engine going again. With the thought that this may only be a temporary reprieve, the skipper decided to carry on ahead downriver to Dittisham, where we had planned to take up some of the visitors' moorings for an overnight stay. Meanwhile, the remaining boats had got the kettle on and the cake out for a well-deserved rest.

After the restorative cuppas, the three remaining cruisers set off with sails up to make the most of a freshening wind from the northeast. Sailing from the entrance to Bow Creek down to Gurrow Point took advantage of one of the widest parts of the river, and with an eye out for the moorings on either

## BUT THEN THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENED – THE LEAD BOAT WAS DEAD IN THE WATER

side and the sandbanks off Stoke Gabriel we enjoyed a leisurely sail to end our day on the water.

The motorcruiser had gone ahead to make sure the boat with the dicky engine had moored up safely, and by the time we anchored up in the deep pool to the west of Gurrow Point, the cruiser was on its way back laded with both crews and barbecue gear. A shuttle of tenders got us ashore and soon barbecues were glowing and glasses were filled. A few hardy swimmers took the plunge while →





PHOTOS: JAYNE RAWLINS



others prepared the food. This beach is only accessible from the water and there are few quieter and better places to watch the sun go down.

Leaving enough time to get to our overnight mooring before darkness fell, we packed up and motored the short distance around Guro Point to Dittisham. Before retiring with nightcap in hand, we all went up on deck. On a clear night the sky in this part of the river is perfect for star-gazing despite some light pollution from Torbay over the hills above Waddeton and Galmpton. And once noise from the Ferry Boat Inn on the shore at Dittisham has died down, the silence is pierced only by owls and nightjars or the occasional insomniac seagull.

**ABOVE LEFT**  
The picturesque steam railway runs between Paignton and Kingswear

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Picnicking on the shore

### *Journey's end*

The next day promised to be as warm and after a relaxed start to the morning, plans were made. The smell of coffee lured over the man from the Dart Harbour Board who came alongside for our overnight mooring fees and a chat. We then set off in our tenders for the Dittisham pontoon and brunch at the Anchorstone Café, well known for its seafood and a great place to relax. If only; the keener among us were soon pointing out that we still had some sailing to do to catch the end of the ebb tide and set off downriver for a sail in Start Bay.

On sailing past Noss Marina we came across the inquisitive seal from Sandridge soaking up the rays

on one of the large green buoys that connect the trot moorings.

Forty five minutes after leaving Dittisham we were out at sea ending that glorious summer adventure sailing out in the bay with an evening stopover in Newfoundland Cove.

The beauty of sailing the Dart is being on the water regardless of weather, tides and winds, and on returning to our moorings that evening we all agreed we'd certainly made the most of our days afloat. ✦

### River Dart factfile

#### GETTING THERE

An hour by car from Exeter, or by train to Paignton or Totnes stations. In the summer, a steam train runs between Paignton and Kingswear. [discoverdartmouth.com](http://discoverdartmouth.com) [visitsouthdevon.co.uk](http://visitsouthdevon.co.uk)

#### DARTMOUTH MARINAS

**Noss-on-Dart** With 180 berths and 44 river moorings, Noss has good services and a view across the estuary. [premiermarinas.com](http://premiermarinas.com)

**Darthaven** Large marina on the Kingswear (eastern) side of the river with 270 berths. [darthaven.co.uk](http://darthaven.co.uk)

**Dart Marina** Easy berthing on the west side, a short walk from Dartmouth town centre. Also includes a luxury hotel and stylish apartments. [dartmarinayachtharbour.com](http://dartmarinayachtharbour.com)

**Baltic Wharf** Lift out at the top of the tide in this well-serviced boat yard in Totnes. [balticwharf.co.uk](http://balticwharf.co.uk)

#### CHARTER

**Dartmouth Yacht Charters** Boats from 31ft to 39ft. RYA-approved sailing school also attached. [dartmouthyachtcharters.co.uk](http://dartmouthyachtcharters.co.uk)

**Island Charters** Yachts from a J/109 to a Bénéteau 40.7. Based in Kingswear. [islandcharters.co.uk](http://islandcharters.co.uk)

**Dittisham Boats** Mostly motorboats, but they have a Drascombe Lugger and a 21ft dayboat. [dittishamboats.co.uk](http://dittishamboats.co.uk)



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jayne Rawlins mostly sailed windsurfers and dinghies or went on family flotilla cruises until she acquired a Shrimper 18 years ago. Now she's hooked on gaff rig. Though she races occasionally, she prefers cruising along the South Devon and Cornwall coast and pottering in rivers and estuaries. Coordinator for Ladies Afloat section of Royal Dart Yacht Club.