

Regardless of lockdown being in full swing, normal life on the Blackwater carries on to some extent- and I am grateful for it. Since the lockdown the yard has managed to stay open. Due to the nature of the work in the yard and the amount of jobs to be done, all of the yardsmen are working on separate tasks/vessels individually. This is the same approach to work that we have adopted on the Blue Mermaid. Because of the size of Blue Mermaid and the fact that the jobs needed were scattered between above and below deck.

This was also refreshing to hear as since my arrival, I have been living on my boat (Cresta). She was at first on the hard so I could get more paint on the hull, this worried me at first as I felt there was a window of opportunity closing. If the yard had closed, it may have left me stuck on the gravel. My anxiety did not last too long. I could tell the Chieftain of the yard was determined to get me in and I was reassured by one of the yard's men to get my lines ready as, "you may come back to your boat to find her in the water soon".



And so I did

On the barge, we had a fairly busy month, our jobs list had only increased to some regard. One of the main pushes was to get the deck painted. The deck had long since lost its high friction appeal. So our objective was to get off as much loose matter as we could and give it the best clean possible. This was made easy with a high power jet washer and some strong detergent (one that wasn't out to kill the fishes). This was definitely easier said than done and took some time to be confident that the deck was actually clean.

Once we had acquired this confidence, our next step was to mix up large amounts of the thick paint we were going to use and roller on an initial coat. Primed, undercoat and topped. As grit, we used tiny glass fragments. This is to prevent people wearing flip flops on deck and the added benefit of grip. The segments spread nicely whilst using a tin with holes poked into the bottom and the red deck ended looking like peppered salami. Two or three coats later, that job was done.



The next big task to be done was to lower the mast. Given that this job consists of lowering two equally large tubes of steel, a long piece of wood maybe 2/3 of the mast in size and plenty of this steel rigging, this is fairly high stakes. This means double checking your triple checks before you take weight onto the forestay.

Once you take the weight off the shrouds, all of the weight of the gear is hanging off of the forestay. The forestay leads down to a six-point tackle. The wire through the tackle is a long piece of wire that usually lives in the foc'sle. This wire has to be wrapped around the windlass four times, and then made off around the bits through a thumb cleat. After this we gradually feed the wire around the windlass by hand until the weight of the mast is great enough to ease the wire through the windlass rather than feeding it through. All of this is done with great concentration and caution. About ten minutes after that, the mast was sitting plum in its cradle with the sprit nestled onto a large wooden block starboard.



We used this time to spot repair the paint on the mast and the sprit and varnish the top mast. Whilst up on the mast, I was asked to create a leather chafe stopper around the eye splice that was eating away at the seizing.



This was a pleasant opportunity to practise some of the tricks learnt at IBTC Lowestoft. I initially cut away the damaged marlin to check for any damage that may have been caused to the stay itself. Once finding that it was all clear, I lathered over the canvas parcelling with tallow and seized over it tight enough for the tallow to splodge out between the strands, followed up by a generous coat of Stockholm tar.

The seizing was to be wrapped in leather. This is the most common material used for chafe prevention. To create a successful moulding, you need to cut the leather a fraction large of what you would expect. This is because the leather will shrink as it dries. It is also wise to prepunch the holes you will be lacing the leather together. I used waxed twine to lace these.



Once we felt satisfied with the work on the mast whilst it was down on deck, it was then our job to wind the thing back up.

Winding up the mast is done almost the same but in reverse. I.e. harder. This time we took around 12 wraps around the windlass to begin with and fixed the wire so that it spools around the barrel. This process took around half an hour of grinding, break, grinding, break. The hardest point is when the sprit is lifted from its crutch. You are at that point working with an extremely heavy load.

It is easy to miss scale of what you are achieving during this process. Personally I find it incredible how through clever gearing, leverage and



The weight of the mast gouging at the windlass barrel

purchase, a pair of people can lift an object that must have an actual load of beyond 15 to 20 ton. In Lowestoft we were taught, “the forgotten art of using a screwdriver”, now that everyone uses a hand drill. Here, it is like learning the forgotten art of lifting things.

After that occasion, we finished a few jobs on the Blue Mermaid before heading over to the Tollesbury smack, Sally. This was my first expedition outside of Downs Road Boatyard with the charity. She [Sally] was moored alongside a Dutch pilot launch in an incredibly blissful place called Heybridge Basin. The Basin and Maldon share a similar historic coexistence as Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. Maldon used to be the only Blackwater, Chelmer access. This was what marked Maldon on the map. However, to Maldon’s loss, they were bypassed and this granted vessels direct access to the Chelmer via a lock. Yet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it stands as an excellent sheltered Harbour for yachts and working vessels alike.

Working on the Sally, was my first on-deck introduction to the Essex fishing smack. The key characteristic of these craft seems to be their low freeboard, long counter and a slight sheer. Her rig seems quite large for a vessel that would have been sailing in the North Sea winters. This comes to make sense when you realise that the nature of the fishing industry in Essex was to race back to harbour in time for the train taking fish to London. I’d imagine that their more recent racing history may have something to do with it also.

As we only had a few weeks of rain dodging, I think we did quite well to brighten her up on deck. Painting the Rails, Cabins, Companion Way, hatches and windlass.

We had finally reached a point where the vessels were ready to go out on their moorings. As both vessels are engineless, had to rely on external forces to get them out onto the water. For the Sally, we used the barge boat (tender) powered by her outboard. This was relatively easy for us with light winds and a seemingly following tide.

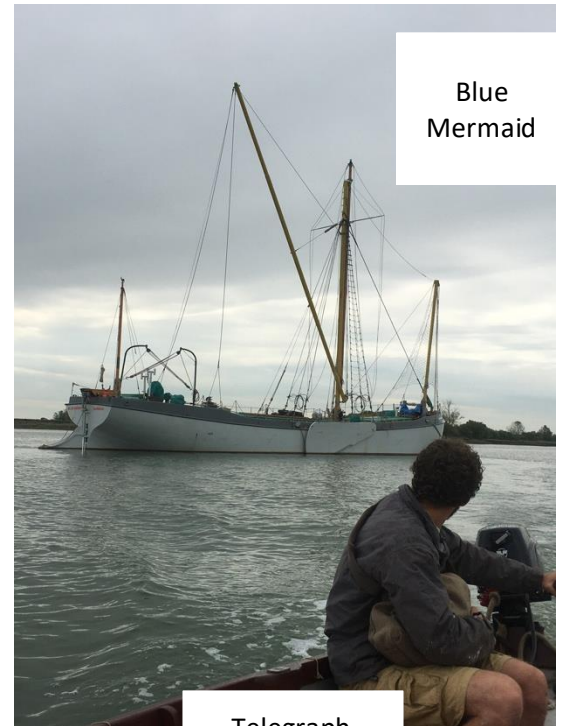
For the Blue Mermaid we had to employ some bigger guns. This involved the yards workhorse. Seemingly an ex-MOD support boat, which pushed us down the Blackwater just fine.

After we tied off the Sally, we cleared the decks and set off. The Blue Mermaid was the same although we tied a spring off onto the mooring so that the buoy didn’t float to the opposing side it was tied to and we sealed off all the bulkhead doors upon leaving.

Sally



Blue Mermaid



Telegraph, Boston Smack

A Maldon Smack





I had not expected to be living in my 27ft boat full time this summer, I think the plan was for her to be a weekend working retreat and somewhere to keep my things. However, regardless of this, I'm lucky to of had so much to do and work to keep me busy.

Later on in May there is a chance that there will be less work to do and as the summer pans by, I shall have to prepare myself for these quiet times. Which for the most part, with help from the course leaders and the trust, I already have.

In October I am set to attempt my Yachtmaster Exam. This is incredibly exciting and has been long in the making. Hopefully as the lockdown eases, I may get some time to sail and get some boat handling practise in. My certain goal is to become a navigation expert. I now have obtained some of the RYA's training charts, which are set in some of the most hazardous fictional waters known! Chart work has always been my biggest struggle, however I do enjoy it at my own pace. With 6 months prep, I hope my own pace should be a lot faster. This is all an encouragement to get my mast up so that I can go sailing myself. Within the next few weeks I shall have dressed and rigged my mast, ready to be erected by the end of the month.

Maldon is a lovely place, so regardless of what is happening around me, I'm just happy to be here and on the water.

