

Crossing the Thames Estuary

The Spitway

We may rightly regard the Spitway as an established crossing point for those wishing to cross from the Wallet to Swin or vice versa. However, whilst it has been a regular swatchway for centuries, its position has changed dramatically. One hundred years ago, for example, the swatchway was two and a half nautical miles further east, pretty much due south of Clacton. Depths, at three quarters of a fathom, were less than today and the position of our current swatchway was recorded as drying between 5 and 10 foot!

By 1938, the Spitway was still due south of Clacton but now much wider towards the east. A small gap in the sands was recorded on what is today the current position of the buoyed channel. Obviously in the last 70 years this has opened up. The 1938 chart ominously records the sands at this point as "Shifting". Should this shifting repeat itself and close off the existing swatchway, those of us in the Colne and Blackwater shall be considerably inconvenienced as the former position is now well inside the domain of the Gunfleet Sand Wind Farm. Let us hope for no rapid change!

The following chartlets show the result of several 'passes' over the Spitway on 16th June, 2009. Soundings have been reduced to LAT. My thanks are due once again to Colin Jarman (East Coast Pilot) for his assistance and straight helming.

Please Note: The drawing overleaf was produced from soundings taken on ordinary yacht equipment and reduced to LAT using publicly available tidal data. Whilst every care has been taken in its preparation, it is only a guide to what might be expected. The contours on the drawing are hand drawn in order to help make sense of the soundings and may suffer in places from a lack of data. For this reason, the drawing is also included without the contours.

The conclusion we appear to be able to draw from this is:

1. The profile is pretty regular in the sense that there appear to be no dramatic changes in depth;
2. There is a little more water than charted between the buoys;
3. There is more water than charted to the East;
4. There is little variance in depth (perhaps 0.2m) for at least a mile to the East parallel to a track between the two safe water buoys.



Determining Height of Water at the Spitway

We are fortunate to have an easy way of determining the height of water at the Spitway. Every 30 minutes, the Port of London Authority broadcasts height of tide data at several points in the Estuary on Channel 69. These broadcasts are at 15 minutes to and 15 minutes past the hour.

You will hear Channel 69 is relatively busy with ships reporting their movements inward and outward at several points in the Estuary and occasionally the broadcast is delayed by a few minutes to complete such traffic. We are aided though by the fact that the tide data is always preceded by three pips (broadcast by the PLA; not a DSC warning). They then give four tidal heights starting with the height at Walton on the Naze. Other sites can vary but usually are Margate, Shivering Sands and Sheerness.

Record the tidal height at Walton and add that to the charted depth show overleaf. That will provide a reasonable approximation of the water available at the Spitway. Note that the tide is slightly earlier at Walton (by about 28 minutes) but this is offset by a slightly larger range of tide at the Spitway.

Wallet Spitway Buoy 51°42'.850N, 001°07'380E LFI.10s Bell



Swin Spitway Buoy 51°41'.915N, 001°008'384E Iso.10s Bell

Photographs courtesy of Colin Jarman.

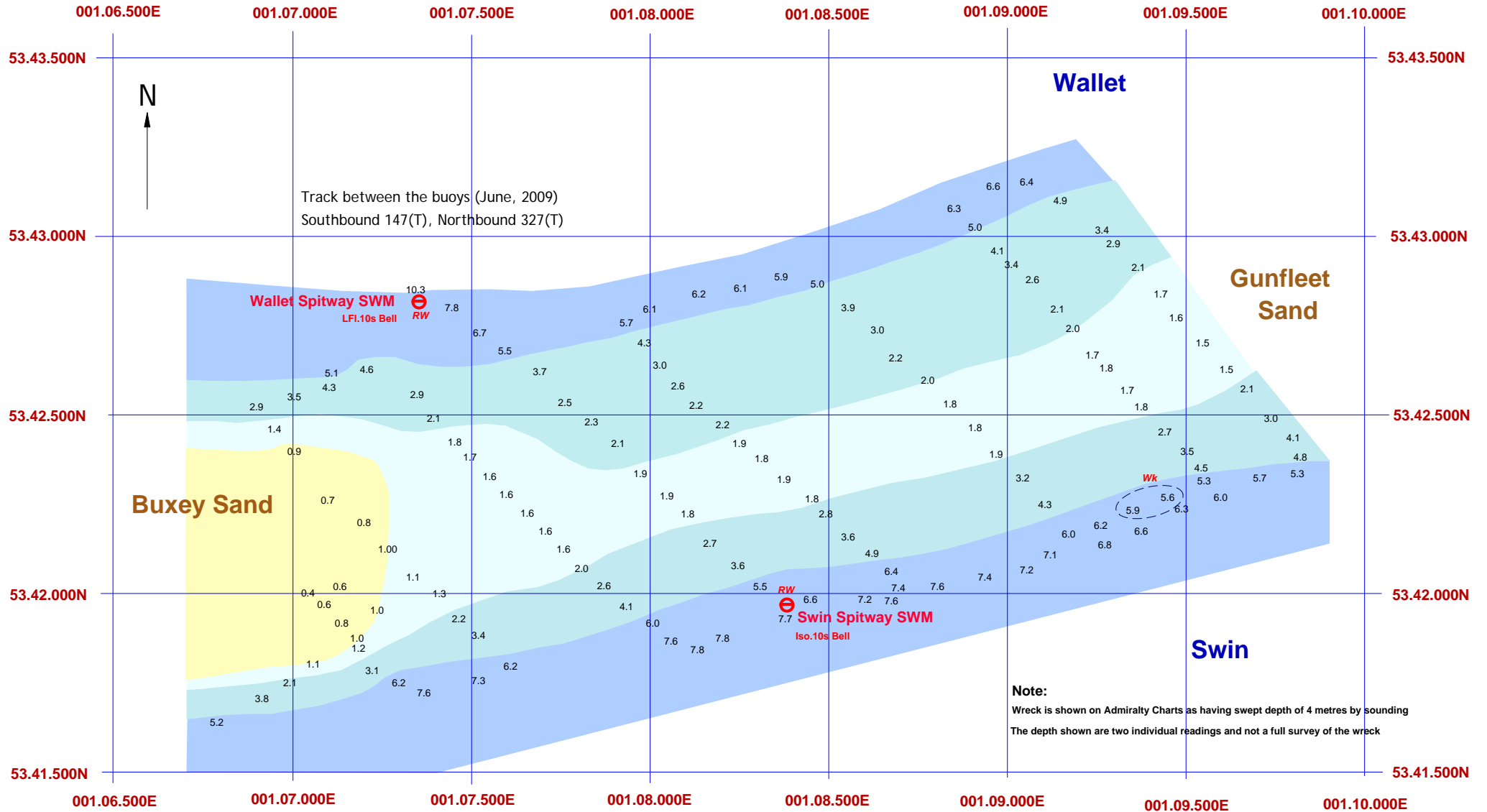
Feedback on this download would be appreciated. Please send any comments to info@crossingthethamesestuary.com

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Soundings taken 16th June, 2009

Contours are only indicative

*1.7" = Depth of water in Metres



The Spitway

Soundings taken 16th June, 2009

Contours removed

*1.7" = Depth of water in Metres

