

The Hunter Fleet on the Norfolk Broads

--Kim Apel

I would have bet money that there was no such thing as the Hunter Fleet left on earth. I would have supposed that such things disappeared no later than the 1970s. However, now I've seen with my own eyes the Hunter Fleet alive and well in Ludham, Norfolk in England. I'm talking about a place that builds and maintains a variety of classic wooden sailboats for visitors to rent, for a few hours to a few weeks.



When planning a trip to England, I knew I wanted to visit the Norfolk Broads, which I knew to be an inland waterway system, and a longtime center of recreational boating activity. At first, I expected to rent a small power boat, enough to accommodate four of us on a short picnic cruise: my wife and I, (Californians) and my daughter and son-in-law who reside in nearby Lincolnshire. I prefer sailing, but I thought it would be more considerate of my non-sailing family, and besides, who sails in a river?

Knowing of my affinity for classic wooden boats, my daughter searched the internet for wooden sailboat rentals and came up with Hunter's Yard. <http://www.huntersyard.co.uk/index.html> (a bit more Ludham area information can be found here: <http://www.toumorfolk.co.uk/ludham.html>) It seemed too good to be true, but I reserved via email a day on a 20 foot "half-decker" (a daysailer with a bit of a foredeck, but no cabin) and started looking forward to my vacation even more than usual.

Some further background about the Norfolk Broads may be in order. It is an inland waterway system composed of several connected rivers and lakes on a marshy plain on England's east coast. Centuries ago Dutch immigrants came across the English Channel, drained the marshes and made fertile farmland in a region that the English had until then mostly ignored. The output of those farms was then traded via the inland waterways to the coast and beyond. What had been regarded as a wasteland became a prosperous

region. The Dutch legacy can be seen today in the ruins of windmills scattered around the countryside, as well as a few restored for tourists. “The Broads” are also a U.K. National Park, the kind of place that the British go for family vacations, rather than one that attracts many foreign tourists. For better or worse, all the amenities of what author Edward Abbey called “industrial tourism” (hotel-resorts, B&Bs, boat rentals, shopping centers, etc.) are in abundant supply, and summers are said to be crowded on the water and off. We were fortunate to be there in mid-May which is early season.



The term “broads” refers to several small lake-like bodies of water, broad places in a river, said to have been created by the riverside extraction of peat. Recreational boating has replaced the movement of peat and farm products over these waterways. In addition to sailing on the broads, which one would expect, there is also sailing in the rivers. It’s an odd sight to an American sailor to see substantial keelboats over 30 feet in length sailing in a winding river typically only about 200 feet wide, and often less. Indeed the Hunter Fleet thrives on a riverfront location, not a lake.

The Hunter Fleet has operated as a boat livery service since 1931. There are many such livery services scattered around the broads, offering all kinds of modern power boats up to 60 foot houseboat-like craft. Hunter’s Yard is the only one offering locally designed and built traditional wooden sailboats. When you leave the modern vehicles in the parking lot and step first into the shop building, and then on through to the docks on the other side, it is like stepping into the past. Once on the docks, you would be hard-pressed to find anything not of the 1930s. Only an experienced eye and a close inspection of the boats would reveal synthetic sails and running rigging not of the period. Oh, and the plastic dock fenders I suppose. Everything else is delightfully stuck in an earlier time.

The Hunter Fleet consists of 13 larger boats with cabins and two to four berths. There are also six smaller “half-deckers” intended for daysailing, but these may be optionally set up for camp-cruising. Most are

vintage craft, built in the 1930s. A few are recently built. A visitor like me can't tell the difference. In the shop was a new hull called *Lucent*, apparently complete and ready to be rigged and launched.



I'd reserved a lug-rigged 20 footer. In the course of completing the business arrangements and being shown the boat, I must have said or done something to inspire staff member Graham's confidence. With such precious boats, and what I knew of the safety and security obsession in British society, I expected some kind of intensive procedure for verifying my competence to take the boat out. I even volunteered that I would be the only experienced sailor aboard. Instead of rigorously testing my competency, Graham suggested that on such a light-air day, the lug-rigged boat that I'd reserved might be quite slow, and wouldn't I like to upgrade to a peppier gunter sloop instead (at no additional cost, despite the published rates). I'd chosen the lugger, precisely because I didn't have an experienced crew, and now I found myself in a sloop. She was called *Buff Tip* and very pretty.

The U.K. boating scene, like the U.S. is dominated by synthetic materials. Also like the U.S., it has a resurgent community of wooden boat enthusiasts, but it is still not enough for Hunter's Yard to survive purely as a business venture. It is owned and operated by a charitable trust with an extensive organization of volunteers and supporters.

The Hunter's Yard docks are on a narrow artificial canal called "Womack Water" dug a quarter mile through the marsh from the main river channel. The staff helped us get away from the dock, and map in hand, we headed down the narrow stream, flanked by tall reeds on both sides, barely wide enough for two boats to pass. I don't know what one would do at this point if the wind were on the nose. Fortunately we were ghosting along on barely the hint of a favorable breeze, as I got used to the boat. I couldn't tell if my passengers' silence was nervousness or a feeling of peace at the idyllic surroundings, and complete ease and confidence in my abilities.



We reached the main channel and turned to starboard – upstream as far as we could tell by the map. There's not enough current to judge otherwise. Suddenly we were in traffic and going to windward, tacking between reed-lined riverbanks. Thankfully, the powerboats seemed to understand, or at least accept, our erratic course. They slowed down and gave us space to tack. Theoretically all the Broads waterways are a 5 mph no-wake zone. It's imperfectly observed, but still far better than the speed-havoc I routinely witness on my home waters.

Though the *The Wind In The Willows* of “messaging about in boats” fame is set on the upper Thames River and not in Norfolk, I would suppose that the Broads offers a similar timeless atmosphere, familiar and otherworldly at the same time. As if sailing a gleaming, varnished mahogany “halfdecker” in a narrow river wasn't exotic enough to my American mindset, then there were the windmills and the ruins of a medieval abbey on the shoreline. *“Toto; I think we're not in Kansas anymore.”*

Buff Tip and all of Hunter's rental fleet have fixed ballast keels, albeit a shallow “shoal keel”. You would expect that sailing in a river in a keelboat would mean the constant risk of going aground, but it was not so. Indeed, when the wind demanded frequent tacking to make progress in a narrow channel, we were able use the full width of the river. We sailed right to the margin of the reed-lined banks, close enough to reach out and touch the reeds if we chose. Our sailors' training tells us to avoid the shoreline, to avoid having the boat strike something hard. But along most of the shoreline there was nothing hard to strike. The water depth was sufficient. If one sailed into the bank (slowly, at least), the reeds would simply absorb the force harmlessly like a giant soft net. Indeed we observed a solo sailor aboard his beautiful 30' traditional cutter drive his bow into the reeds, apparently a standard Broads technique, and let it hang there for a few minutes while he dropped sail and made some kind of adjustment. The he backed out and sailed away.

In addition to the Hunter Fleet we saw a number of other fine wooden power and sail craft cruising on the river or berthed alongside. Overall, however, wood boats and sailboats are a small minority. Fiberglass cruisers dominate. Hundreds are available for hire in the Broads and hundreds more are privately owned and berthed in side channels. On the day we sailed (a weekday in May), we had a fair amount of company on the river, but it was still very enjoyable. By July and August, however, I understand that boat traffic can be intense.



The breeze was light and fluky, but enough to keep us moving, mostly. After a few pleasant hours we decided it might be wise to turn around in case the wind quit completely. None of the Hunter Fleet has auxiliary power, unless you count oars. I'm OK with rowing, up to a point, but if sometimes good judgment can avoid it, I say, why not? And then the wind did quit, for a few minutes at least. Fortunately it was merely the lull while the breeze clocked in a new direction, and returned, this time with gusto. The good news was that we were really moving now. The bad news was that we were in the narrowest part of the river that we had seen all day, and the way back was upwind (again). We were suddenly short-tacking and having to put all our crew weight in the right place at the right time. I hadn't prepared my crew for this challenge, while conditions were sedate. Some of the crew were taken aback at the phenomenon of a boat heeling as it goes to windward in a good breeze. The previous several hours had not required any such thing, and now they doubted whether I had things under control. Apart for my concern for their delicate feelings, I was having a fabulous time.

We turned a bend in the river and took off on abroad reach. The crew was relieved to be sailing flat, but now I was nervous because of our increased velocity. At this rate it might only take a few seconds of inattention to get into some trouble, with other boats and the shoreline so close. Nevertheless we made it back to Hunter's Yard without incident, and despite the breeze I brought Buff Tip into the dock as gently and controlled as can be. Some of the crew debarked immediately for the car. I was a happy guy, and lingered

to stow the sails and lines and re-rig the cockpit cover, even though guests may typically be excused from these chores. It was a very good day.

Of course, it's a long way for an American to go, no matter how rare and special a sailing experience it is. And you will get hammered by the current unfavorable currency exchange rate. But if you do ever happen to visit England, and are wondering how you might try an authentic local sailing experience, I recommend the Norfolk Broads and the Hunter Fleet.

