

Shooting wildfowl over the high tide from a salt-marsh island is a privilege not granted to every coastal fowler. Many parts of our foreshore are remote enough to satisfy the craving for isolation of the most jaded gunner but there is nothing to equal this particular sensation of remoteness.

Sometimes actually getting out to one's chosen island with decoys, gun and dog is an adventure in itself.

If walking out at low tide is not possible then the ever-adaptable fowler must take to his boat.

One October morning a few seasons ago I arrived early at the slipway, to await the arrival of my ferry out to the furthest island in the harbour. It did not matter that the first car and trailer to arrive at the slip was another gunner and not my two companions with their impressively fast dory. There was plenty of space for all of us on the islands and anyway, this first arrival was none other than dear old Harry.

Harry was getting on a bit and tended to move at a very leisurely pace but his plans did not interfere with ours and I could hardly stand by and watch him struggle to launch his twelve-foot dinghy on his own. So I helped him put it in the water. That done, he should by rights have been loaded up and under way within a few minutes.

Dan and Mike soon arrived with the trailed dory, which was expertly reversed down the slip, launched, loaded up and made ready to go within minutes. This display of efficiency seemed to rattle old Harry who appeared to have forgotten that we had no intention of going to his favourite spot.

With his boat in the water, by now loaded up with decoy sack, gun and springer spaniel, Harry had only to clamp his ancient little Seagull outboard engine to the transom to be ready to shove off.

At this point I should explain two things. The first being that Harry's springer was not very keen on boats, the second being the nature of the Seagull outboard. A working piece of maritime history, the little Seagull is the nautical equivalent of the Land Rover. Slow, crude and thirsty but guaranteed to function despite the most appalling abuse and neglect. Smaller



## Fiasco on the estuary

Wildfowler Nick Horten recounts a calamitous tale from the water's edge.

ILLUSTRATION: PHILLIP MURPHY

models have a number of mechanical foibles. They lack a clutch - pull the starter cord and the propellor immediately rotates, the throttle control is an old fashioned lever rather than a twist grip, and the steering arm, uniquely among outboards, can be pushed downwards as well as raised.

Unusually, Harry prepared the engine before clamping it to the boat. Tank vent open, fuel tap on, throttle fully open, choke closed and "tickle" the carburettor. Then he fixed it to the back of the boat. Laboriously he pushed the bow round to face the open sea, stepped aboard and pushed himself away from the slipway with an oar. Fifteen feet away from dry land was far enough for his spaniel, which promptly threw itself overboard and swam ashore. It repeated this performance twice more before a purple faced Harry finally slipped a leash around the dog's neck, the end of which he tied securely to a ring bolt inside the bow.

Meanwhile, the three of us looked on in amazement as Harry pushed off one last time before inadvertently launching into the main entertainment of the day.

His outboard spluttered into life at the first pull of the starter cord and the little dinghy immediately surged forward towards the open water. But wait, something was wrong! Suddenly he started shouting in an agitated voice, all the while devoting his entire attention to the engine at the back of the boat rather than to where he was going.

"Daft bugger" said Dan, who suddenly realised what was happening. "He's started her up with the tiller in the down position, it's wedged between the motor and the back of the boat. He can't reach the throttle at the end of the tiller and he has nothing to steer with." Full of sympathy for the plight of the ancient mariner in his runaway vessel Dan chuckled "Oh well, this should be interesting."

With the engine jammed at an angle the boat's course looked set to bring it back to the slipway. With no clutch to disengage the propellor and unaware, despite shouted instructions, that he could have stalled the engine simply by putting his hand over the air intake, Harry was by now in a blind panic.

Unfortunately this panic rubbed off on the spaniel who decided, once again, to abandon ship. Over the side it went, forgetting that it was now tied to the boat. Suspended on a short rope the dog appeared to be trying to commit suicide by a combination of slow asphyxiation from the noose around its neck, and drowning by virtue of the fact that its head was submerged in the dinghy's foaming bow wave.

Wading into the shallows the three of us positioned ourselves to 'catch' poor Harry who's semicircular course now brought him at full ramming speed, back to where he had started from. In this we were only partially successful, he still hit the slipway ramp with enough force to topple him backwards, landing in an undignified but undamaged heap on the floor of the boat.

For a few seconds the stern vibrated up and down like a jack-hammer as the concrete surface of the slipway and the metal of the still rotating propellor blades chewed large chunks out of each other. Until finally, the engine clamps gave up the ghost and the tortured motor fell off in a cloud of steam.

After we had dusted him off Harry declined to accept the tow out to the island that we offered him. "No Thanks" he said "I didn't really want to go anyway." As for the spaniel, waterlogged but alive, it refused to set foot in a boat for the rest of its life. It's amazing though, just how long a springer can hold its breath when it really has to! □