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A LOW LINE OF sandhills, pink and fawn in the setting sun, at one end of them a little white village huddled round the base of a massive four-square lighthouse – such was Wangerooge, the easternmost of the Frisian Islands, as I saw it on the evening of 15th October. We had decided to make it our first landing place; and since it possesses no harbour, and is hedged by a mile of sand at low water, we had run in on the rising tide till the yacht grounded...”

It is a century since *The Riddle Of The Sands* was published. Erskine Childers’ atmospheric spy novel cum yachting thriller brings the East Frisian islands so successfully to life that it still lures yachtsmen to see these shallow, mysterious waters for themselves. Its masterful descriptions, gripping plot and colourfully sympathetic view of the rigours of small-boat sailing remain an inspiration. Wangerooge, Juist, Norderney, Langeoog – strange, far-off names they sound but thanks to Childers these sandy outposts are as much a part of Britain’s yachting heritage as the piratical coves of Cornwall or the swatchways of the east coast rivers.

The Riddle is set in the Baltic and the North Sea coast, long after balmy sailing weather has given way to scudding skies and blustery rain. It concerns two Oxford friends, Davies and Carruthers, who unmask a British traitor and uncover secret military plans. The writing is of the highest quality, and the characters

are drawn with skill – including that of the heroine, the seven-ton, gaff-rigged centre-board yawl *Dulcibella*.

For Childers, the book had a serious purpose. He foresees an invasion of England by barge-borne troops, launched across the North Sea from the *siels* of the Wattenmeer. Just such a plan was outlined in March 1900 in the *Deutsche Rundschau*, which Maldwin Drummond, in his investigation into the tale, speculates that Childers may have read. Drummond also reminds us of a memorandum by Admiral Tirpitz in 1898 that identified

and they can’t protect their huge commerce without naval strength. The command of the sea is the thing nowadays, isn’t it?... Well, the Germans have got a small fleet at present, but it’s a thundering good one, and they’re building hard.”

Carruthers was persuaded and so, it seems, were Childers’ readers. *The Riddle* was an instant success. Its surprising prescience about German intentions struck a chord with the British public and, as intended, caused a stir in political circles. Although, a century on, the book’s political context is outdated,

the story still sails on as bravely as the *Dulcibella* herself, tacking nimbly among the tortuous channels of the plot. *The Riddle* is without peer in the genre of yachting fiction. It’s literature – a classic.

It is Childers’ powers of description that make the strongest impres-

sion on the yachting reader. It is clear the author knew the mud, shifting sands and wet, salt-laden winter air of the German Frisian Islands first hand. His log of a late-season cruise in these parts aboard *Vixen*, a converted lifeboat, the shallow draught of which made her ideal for shoal waters, had won a Cruising Club prize in 1895.

Born in London in 1870 to an English father and Irish mother, Childers was raised in Ireland and then educated at Haileybury and Cambridge. Work as a Commons clerk left him ample time to pursue his love of small-boat sailing, though he volunteered for the

The islands and their mysterious shoals and shallows change with every tide

England as Germany’s “most dangerous naval enemy”. Because of the disparity in naval strength, he directed that Germany should concentrate on building a fleet that could “unfold its greatest military potential between Helgoland and the Thames”.

This was Childers’ point precisely. “Here’s this huge empire, stretching half over central Europe,” blusters Davies to Carruthers. “An empire growing like wildfire... they’ve licked the French and the Austrians, and are the greatest military power in Europe... They’ve no colonies to speak of, and must have them, like us. They can’t get them and keep them,

The eastern tip of Juist, part of that famous foggy row in *The Riddle*



war in South Africa. He was a complex and principled man. He was a passionate Home Ruler by his late thirties, ran guns into Howth aboard his yacht for the National Volunteers in 1914, yet won a DSO with the Royal Navy during the First World War. He moved his family from London to Dublin in 1920, campaigning against the British military presence, and was elected to the *Dáil*. In the civil war, his Republicanism set him at odds with the new Free State. Childers was arrested in November 1922 for illegal possession of a pistol, and was executed.

Bensersiel, like many Frisian harbours, has changed since Childers' day. Quaysides have expanded, caravans dot the shore and private yachts fill the moorings in the outer harbour. The Langeoog ferry still leaves from there, however. Captain Jan Janssen looks younger than his 50 years, perhaps because he is also a yachtsman. "No, these waters are not too difficult," he contends, which is easy for him to say. "But you must study the tides." He knows *The Riddle*. "Very good," he smiles. "Accurate? Not always."

The Langeoog tourist office has sent a minder to meet me: Peter, who appears to know everyone on the island. "Moin, moin," he goes as we pedal along, the universal greeting a contraction of the local Platt Deutsch "*moy dag*" ("beautiful day") – although it is used day and night, whatever the weather, which perplexes the citizens of Stuttgart and Frankfurt who come here on holiday. This sort of insular eccentricity has led the

Ostfriesen to become the butt of jokes throughout Germany. "They think we're silly," says Peter good-humouredly. "Drinking tea all the time and eating peat for breakfast. Actually, they're right about the tea."

There are no cars on Langeoog (nor on Juist or Wangerooge). Small electric vans look after the interests of local businesses, and the fire and ambulance services have a vehicle or two, but otherwise it's horses, carts and bicycles. The islands are in the National-park Niedersächsisches Wattenmeer. Their southern shores are largely mud-flats and salt marshes, while to the north lie the dunes and beaches that attract the holidaymakers. Taken together, it's one big, diverse, fragile habitat.

"Come and see our special worm," calls Arvid Männicke, loading a garden fork and child's fishing net on to his black butcher's bicycle and pedalling off barefoot. He is the proprietor of the local sailing school, with a fleet of Optimists for children and some larger dayboats for grown-ups, and also a *wattführer* ("mud-guide"), employed by the park to educate the tourists and ensure they don't stray from the approved areas of the foreshore. Selecting a spot on the beach just above the water's edge, he plunges in the fork, turns the sand and delves with his fingers to produce an alarming black tubular creature about 6in long with spikes along its sides: a *pierwurm*. It sucks sand in at one end, extracts the organic material and extrudes clean sand at the other, like a filter. "He's very important," says Männicke. "He cleans the beach."

Peter arranges for me to catch the world's second-shortest scheduled passenger flight from the local airstrip, a seven-minute hop to Norderney (the shortest is to Baltrum, next door) aboard a four-seat Cessna. I am the only passenger. It is a beautiful day. As we pass over Baltrum, the pilot leans forward and opens the window so I can take photographs.

"Flooded with sun, yet still as the grave, the town was like a dead butterfly for whom the healing rays had come too late. We crossed some deserted public gardens commanded by a gorgeous casino, its porticos heaped with chairs and tables; so past kiosques and *cafés*, great white hotels with boarded windows, bazaars and booths, and all the stale lees of vulgar frivolity, to the post office..." The genteel spa resort of Norderney is a focal point of *The Riddle*. Here, fog-bound, Davies and Carruthers indulge in "the king of breakfasts" at a beach-front hotel, ignore the letter recalling Carruthers to work, confront the spy in his villa and construct the plan on which the plot hinges: their famous "blindfold" expedition to distant Memmert to eavesdrop on their suspects.

Harbour-master Jörg Pauls is amused by English interest in the book but says not all his visitors have been as obsessed with it as they were this summer. Various flotillas have passed through on Childers' track, most notably the Royal Cruising Club (Childers was a member), which brought a dozen boats last June. *Riddle*-spotters have fun guessing which hotel served as the venue for that fictional breakfast. ➤



In The Wake Of *Dulcibella*

It is a century since Erskine Childers wrote his yachting thriller *The Riddle Of The Sands*, a spy epic set in the East Frisian Islands. Text and photographs by Alan Harper

Arvid Männicke with a pierwurm (right); Baltrum with its sea defences from the air (far right); and the dunes on Langeoog beach (below)



Harbours In The Islands

Borkum

Good shelter and full tidal access in Burkana Hafen, tel 00 49 (0) 4922 7877, VHF Ch 17, and Schutzhafen, tel 00 49 (0) 4922 7773, VHF Ch 14. Railway to town centre (three miles). Ferry to Emden.

Juist

Small yacht harbour for locals only. Visiting yachts can dry out (soft mud) alongside the quay in the ferry port (harbour-master, tel 00 49 (0) 4935 914193), or anchor – handy for town centre. Ferry to Norddeich.

Norderney

Sheltered marina berths with 24-hour access available at yacht club, tel 00 49 (0) 4932 83545, VHF Ch 17. Bar and restaurant at club. Town centre one mile. Ferry to Norderney, Helgoland.

Baltrum

Yacht harbour (partly dries) close to town centre, tel harbour-master 00 49 (0) 4939 448. Good shelter except in south-westerlies. Ferry to Nessmersiel.

Langeoog

Sheltered, dredged marina in drying harbour, tel harbour-master 00 49 (0) 4972 301, VHF Ch 17. Railway to town centre (1.5 miles). Ferry to Bensersiel.

Spiekeroog

Small, partly drying yacht harbour with a few visitors' berths accessible down long, straight dredged channel, tel harbour-master 00 49 (0) 4976 9193 138. Good shelter except in southerlies or south-westerlies. Close to centre. Ferry to Neuhaulingersiel.

Wangeroog

Dredged yacht harbour offering good shelter except in south-westerly gales and southerlies at high water, tel harbour-master 00 49 (0) 4469 630, VHF Ch 17. Yachts under 40ft may request berth on ferry pier. Railway to town centre (two miles). Ferry to Harlesiel.

The mainland harbours are: Greetsiel, Norddeich, Nessmersiel, Dornum-Accumersiel, Bensersiel, Neuhaulingersiel and Harlesiel

Take the ferry from Norderney to Juist and you are following part of the course of that famous foggy row in *Dulcibella's* dinghy. The fairways are still marked by withies picking out an intricate route through the shifting sands. The ferry often pirouettes through 90 degrees or more to stay in the channel, as her captain, Frank Bohlen, tells me how he and his fellow officers come out on to the sands every few weeks at low tide to inspect the channels on foot, moving the withies where necessary. "Heavy work!" he says.

To keep an eye on me, the tourist office in Juist has sent 19-year-old Chantal. We climb into a well-sprung carriage, manned by a garrulous Juister and pulled by a bored mare, and begin a leisurely plod to the airfield, a distance of a couple of miles – for I am to have an aerial tour to inspect Childers' famous sands at low tide. Chantal has just dumped her boyfriend, but it is okay, she says sadly. Discreet inquiry seems to confirm the wisdom of her decision, and steering the conversation on to more cheerful topics I learn that the island is 12 miles or so long (though just 1,500ft wide) and that Chantal rides, skis, snowboards, windsurfs, plays tennis and piano, and flies her parents' aeroplane.

My pilot is Alan Harris, from Wales, and our mount a yellow two-seater touring glider: a sailplane with an engine, to make it independent of the tug. Does it glide well? "About one in 23," answers Harris breezily, meaning that for every foot it falls it travels 23ft forward. "Slightly better than a jumbo jet."

We cannot overfly Memmert as it is a bird sanctuary; the island's sole inhabitant, the park warden, will report us if we do. But we can see the island well enough and from 800ft it seems little more than a topographical

afterthought – a drift of wet sand on the fringes of the land. It is, however, more substantial-looking than the new island, Kachelotplate. We manage to pick out some sparse tufts of marram grass on its sandy, bald pate. "Okay, it's an island," says Harris grudgingly. "But one big winter storm could take it all away."

He is right, of course. The islands and their mysterious shoals and shallows change with every tide. As thorough and painstaking a navigator as Childers would not recognise his old haunts now. A century has wrought myriad changes to the channels, swatchways and sandbanks he grew to know during his great cruise of 1897, which he drew on to such effect in *The Riddle*. On the wall of my hotel a 17th-century Dutch map shows an island south of Memmert that no longer exists, and Memmert itself is two miles farther east now than it was in Childers' day. Juist was broken in two by a big storm in the 18th century. In the church, sketch maps show the locations of earlier churches, all of which have been left to the sea as the island has migrated both east and south.

Two ecologists in the Nationalpark Haus explain that the new island, which has appeared since the Sixties, might one day merge with either Memmert or Juist, or both. No one knows. Or, they concede regretfully, it might disappear overnight – a true riddle of the sands.

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