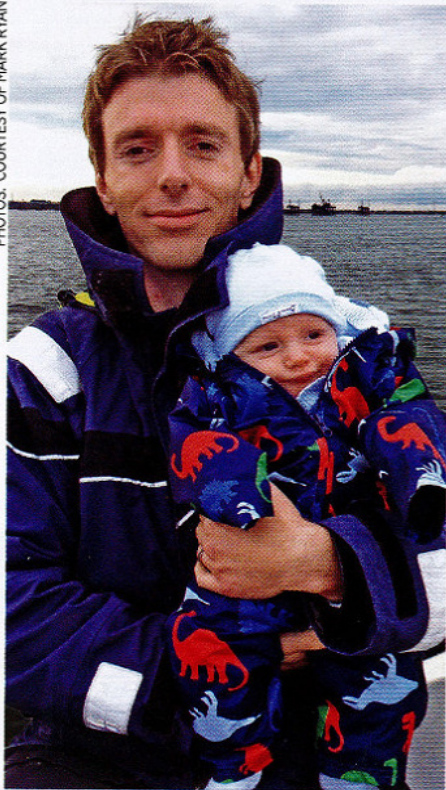


Triola's first port of call: slipping into the Swale to pick up a mooring buoy

Cruising the East Coast with a baby

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MARK RYAN



Keeping it in the family: Proud Mark takes his three-month-old son to sea for the first time

As if being a novice skipper wasn't enough of a challenge, Mark Ryan decided to take his baby along for a week-long cruise

Being crew is easy. Just step aboard with a skipper you trust and abdicate a fair share of the responsibility. As a young boy this had been my experience of sailing with my father, Colin.

Whether crawling the creeks and rivers of the East Coast, the coast of France or meers of Holland, I was as brave, able and (mostly) competent a crew as you could ask for. Then in 2006, my father was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

Besides the horror of the diagnosis, I was struck that the skills to skipper a boat had never been passed down to me, so I might struggle to carry on this family tradition.

In 2008, my father and I completed the Round the Island race to raise money for the Macmillan cancer trust in his 1930s gaff cutter *Wanda*. By then he had sold his shipwrights business, Rowan Yacht

Services, to focus on fighting the illness. In the post-race buzz of Cowes, I fell in love with a 30ft Albin Ballad from the 1970s, advertised in the window of a high street yachtbroker. After viewing *Triola* and a quick survey, I made an offer. Fast forward to today.

My wife Liz and I have just had our first child, Thomas. Determined to continue sailing *Triola*, we planned our first week afloat as parents to be a bold trip from the River Medway, across the Thames Estuary and up to the River Orwell. I was

suddenly struck by the responsibility of taking my new son, aged three months, into the North Sea, across treacherous sandbanks. My imagination conjured up all the things that might possibly go wrong.

Some gentle encouragement from Liz finally saw me pluck up the courage to cram the paraphernalia of a baby into our boat, and we set off in mid-July.

'My imagination conjured up all the things that might possibly go wrong'

CRUISING



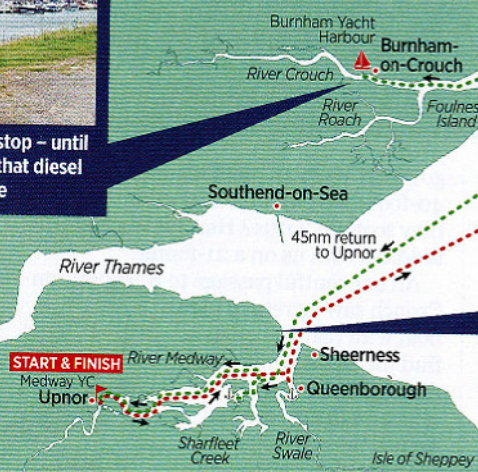
Woolverstone turned out to be a perfect base for enjoying walks through the Suffolk countryside



Refuelling at Suffolk Yacht Harbour before setting off to explore the upper Orwell



Burnham was a relaxing stop – until Ryan and Liz discovered that diesel had flooded into the bilge



START & FINISH

Outward journey

Return home



Leaving the Isle of Grain powerstation behind after an early start to get to the Orwell

CHART: MAXINE HEATH



Thomas was happiest relaxing in his car seat when the boat was under sail or in a swell

Our first sail down the River Swale bought it home that while Liz was keen to help, I needed to learn to sail single-handed. Thomas had to be her priority. Yet with Thomas fed, she leapt onto the foredeck to pull up the main and we had a cracking reach downriver.

We picked up a mooring on the Swale and settled in for the evening. My father had fashioned us a leechcloth, so a bunk could serve as a playpen for Thomas. At anchor, on a mooring or motoring in a slight sea, he could play happily, while in a swell or when sailing he would be snug in his car seat, which we secured into one of the berths. When Liz was on the helm he'd go in a carrier across her chest.



Mark fell for Triola after seeing her advertised in a yachtbroker's window

We'd also bought a pop-up travel cot with a little mosquito net for when he slept. I envied him that, as mosquitoes found their way into the forecabin.

At 0300 we slipped the mooring and chugged off across a still Thames as dawn crept up in the east. I'd hoped for a fair breeze but we motored to Suffolk Yacht Harbour on the Orwell and after dinner in the yacht club gave Thomas his bath in the washing up bowl – a little cramped but still his favourite part of the day.

Our next stop was Woolverstone, half a mile upriver. It was a great base for some lovely walks through the Suffolk countryside – something that was only marred by the pushchair's lack of progress through some muddy tracks. However, we quickly discovered that Thomas was fine being taken around in his baby carrier. It was a lot more convenient for us, too!

We'd been worried about other people's reactions to us taking Thomas on our 'little' 30-footer. But in the marina we

Mid-summer sunset over Woolverstone Marina



The family made the most of the great walks that can be enjoyed in rural Suffolk

got chatting to an older couple on a 40-footer. When I mentioned our concerns they scoffed: 'Little? Hardly! We had two toddlers with us on a 21-footer!'

An uneventful passage to Burnham-on-Crouch saw us return to the boat with fish and chips to find the cabin stinking of diesel. I had overfilled the tank and the excess had seeped into the bilge after the vent pipe popped off.

With the chandlery closed, there was no chance of buying anything to soak it up, but I couldn't let Thomas sleep in those fumes. With the auxiliary bilge pump, I pumped the overspill into buckets, then squeezed half a bottle of washing-up liquid into the bilge, plus Thomas's bath water for good measure. The boat no longer smelled of diesel – but I certainly did!



Mark remembered to lash the tiller when the autopilot failed

Next morning, Liz was busy feeding Thomas when we went to leave, so with some new-found confidence, I decided to singlehand us out. I slipped the boat out of the marina faultlessly and set the autopilot

while I took in the ropes and fenders as we motored along the river.

Then I noticed that our course had drifted to port. Then a bit more, until we were on course for the riverbank (assuming we missed the moorings first). I dashed back to the cockpit: the autopilot had stopped working.

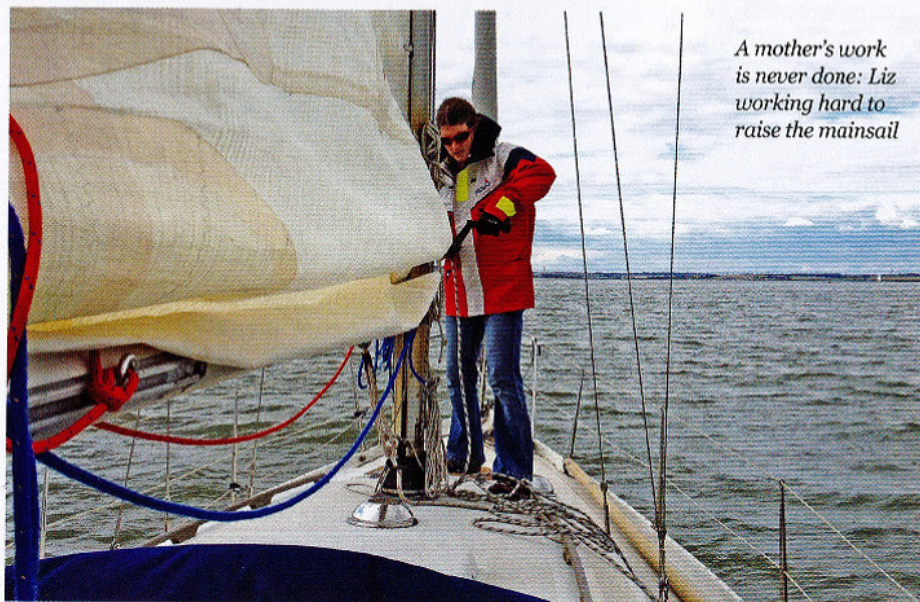
Without an autopilot, I feared my hopes of

singlehanded sailing were completely dashed, until I remembered that lashing a tiller had been a reliable practice for the last few thousand years, and decided to stop worrying. Liz had finished feeding and we hauled up the mainsail and had a cracking sail across the Thames Estuary.

At anchor that night in Sharfleet Creek, having read *The Riddle of the Sands* to Thomas for a bedtime story, I discovered that the pinion on the autopilot's electric motor had broken loose from the motor's spindle. Some out-of-date superglue provided a temporary repair and I snatched a few hours of sleep in between fretting about the light modern boats that swung to wind while *Triola* lay to the tide.

Under a bright blue sky in a stiff 20 knots the next day, I was left alone to navigate the 15 miles home. Navionics states its nautical GPS app is not for navigation, but it made the trip out of the channel stress-free with my iPhone, and with the newly repaired autopilot I set sails and beat upriver.

It was an exhilarating experience – a realisation that I could safely singlehand the boat. Fear melted away and I started to



A mother's work is never done: Liz working hard to raise the mainsail



Getting ready with the bow line to take a visitor's berth at Woolverstone in Suffolk

'I overfilled the tank, and diesel seeped into the bilge after the vent pipe popped off'

revel in the fresh breeze as *Triola* ploughed through the chop. Then Liz shouted up: could I make the boat 'stop', please, so she could put Thomas into his car seat for a nap and join in the fun?

I contemplated the options. Running downwind would take us in the wrong direction. Dropping the sails and motoring into the chop would be uncomfortable.

Then it struck me: heave to! *Triola* settled at 90 degrees to the wind, making about half-a-knot of leeway. Everything went quiet. The chop became muted. Even the sun felt warmer. As Thomas had a nap we romped home up the Medway.

Our trip hadn't been without complications, but we proved to ourselves it could be done safely and be as much fun as without a baby. In fact the hardest part was setting off in the first place – it's very easy to talk yourself out of going.

Being both skipper and father is a daunting prospect, but that makes the role all the more rewarding.

Better still, my father's lymphoma treatment was successful and he is now starting up his business again. ▲

Mark Ryan

Mark Ryan is head of IT for a business mortgage company in Sevenoaks. He has been sailing all his life from the River Medway, most of it with his father, Colin. He married Liz in 2011 and their first child, Thomas, was born in April 2012.



The trip from Mum's perspective

Liz Ryan was confident that the adventure would be great for all the family

I trusted Mark completely as skipper and knew we had everything to keep Thomas safe. We'd spent a night on board earlier to give us an idea of how and where to babyproof *Triola* and ensure Thomas would be happy.

Although I love being part of the action when sailing, I had to learn I could not always be involved. For a lot of the time on passage, I would be breastfeeding Thomas or keeping him entertained, only able to steer or pull ropes if he was napping or held by Mark. It got a bit lonely breastfeeding below, so I often fed him in the cockpit.

At night, I insisted we stayed in marinas. Not because I liked a shower each day, but because we needed to be able to take Thomas off the boat – he became very fidgety and grouchy after more than one night at anchor. Thomas was happiest when seeing new exciting places from the carrier I wore on my chest.

We treated the longer (eight-hour) passages exactly as if Thomas was at home, making sure he had his normal naps and play times. This is why we found it essential to make one side of the saloon into an area for Thomas, using a leecloth where he could lie on his gym mat and play with his toys safely while Mark was sailing.

On our trial night on *Triola*, we messed up Thomas's night-time routine and it took a week afterwards to get him to sleep for more than four hours. So I was braced for a week without sleep on our trip. But we found that by following his night-time feed/bath routine while away, Thomas had no problem sleeping aboard and we had eight hours of solid sleep each night.

Stowage of all the extra baby luggage was more of a problem. We had to be very



Liz and Thomas let Mark get on with helming the boat

tidy – if something wasn't being used it had to be put away, otherwise baby articles would end up strewn everywhere. I highly recommend the Koo-di Pop-Up Travel Cot because it folds into a small bag; wonderful when stowage space is limited. Incidentally, I was glad I brought enough nappies and baby-wipes to last the week because marina chandlers tend not to supply them.

I can't wait for our next sailing adventure together as a family. With good planning there is nothing to stop you sharing your adventures, and by starting Thomas at such a young age we hope sailing will become second nature to him and lay essential foundations for later learning.



Drying out baby bibs on the guardrail

Leaving Medway Yacht Club and heading out into the Swale

