

ARTHUR'S ANGLIA

On the 50th anniversary of the death of *Swallows and Amazons* creator Arthur Ransome, lifelong fan **Christina Hardyment** explores his affiliations to the area and suggests how you can sail in his wake

Illustrations Pietari Posti

“We’re aground,” said the skipper. “Looks like we’re here for the night. I’ll drop the anchor.” I peered over the side of the little wooden yacht that had transported us from Pin Mill in Suffolk to explore the former haunts of *Swallows and Amazons* author Arthur Ransome, and smiled. The ebbing tide meant that we were marooned in the strange marshy wilderness behind Walton-on-the-Naze, just as the *Swallows* and the *Amazons* had been in *Secret Water*, one of the four books Ransome set in East Anglia. Although less well-known than the stories about their escapades in the Lake District, they are every bit as enjoyable, and are still extraordinarily precise evocations of the Broads and the East Coast Rivers.

Ransome, who died 50 years ago in 1967, had an adventurous life reporting on the 1917 Russian Revolution, and sailing the Baltic with his wife Evgenia, before settling down in 1925 near Lake Windermere. It was there that he started writing the 12-book saga that began with *Swallows and Amazons* (1929).

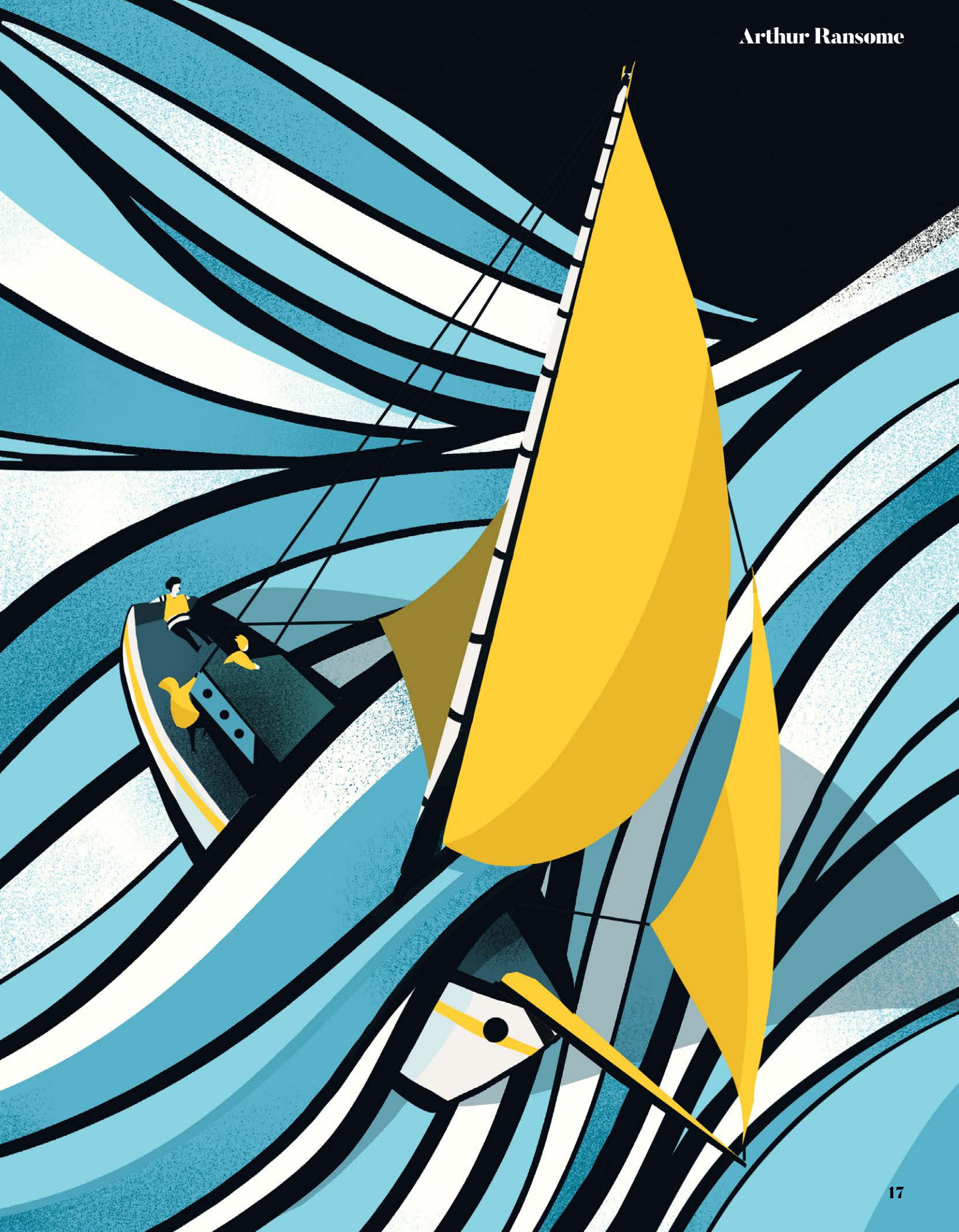
After holidaying in a cabin yacht on the Broads, Ransome wrote *Coot Club* (1934), in which the children

save hatching birds from vandals and explore as far as Beccles. “Really a lovely setting, with herons and bitterns, and fish, very wild except just in the holiday months”, he wrote to his mother, “with all those rivers, and hiding places in the dykes and the little stretches of open water.”

Coot Club is such an accurate guide to the Broads that you can still use its endpaper maps to guide you around when you hire a vessel from one of its many boatyards. No other novel has so brilliantly captured both their everyday atmosphere and historic traditions. Wherries, Thames barges, racing yachts and punts come into the story; so do eelcatchers and thatchers, fishermen and boatbuilders, and “oldtime marshmen who could keep their balance on a floating plank.”

The fun Ransome had afloat, and his continued literary success, prompted him to buy a boat of his own, which he kept at Pin Mill in Suffolk. In 1935, he found a 28ft cutter built by the Littlehampton boat designer David Hillyard, bought it for £525, and christened it Nancy Blackett (the leader of the *Amazons*), claiming “but for Nancy, I should never have been

Illustration of Arthur Ransome’s *We Didn’t Mean To Go To Sea*, in which the crew of the *Swallow* find themselves on a nail-biting crossing to Holland





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able to buy her”. He sailed her to Pin Mill in a gale, “carrying full sail and smoking along”, and using a red Woolworth bakelite plate to avoid collisions when the navigation lights failed – an experience that he would use in the book that Nancy inspired.

A fortnight later, Evgenia and furniture vans arrived from Kendal, and she, Arthur and their two cats moved into Broke Farm, Levington, just across the Orwell from Pin Mill.

Ransome was delighted with the move, and made many sailing friends, remarking, “Pin Mill is the best anchorage on the whole of the East Coast, and when spring came there were always the little ships of our friends coming in for a day or two before going on elsewhere.” As Evgenia declared Nancy too small for her, Arthur found crews among local and holiday-making sailing families. In January 1936, he told his publisher that he had “seen, grabbed, clutched and pinioned a really gorgeous idea for another book.”

We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea (1937) begins when Jim, a weary young sailor, arrives in Pin Mill in a little sloop called Goblin; she was the Nancy Blackett in all but name. He welcomes the help of John, Susan, Titty and Roger, the crew of the Swallow, who have moved to Suffolk. After a day or two teaching them the ropes (literally),

RETRACE RANSOME'S FOOTSTEPS

How to have your own *Swallows and Amazons* adventure



Pin Mill

Visit the hamlet of Pin Mill on the River Orwell to find the Swallows' Alma Cottage and the Butt & Oyster pub, looking much as Ransome described.



Pin Mill Studio

See a permanent exhibition of Arthur Ransome's stunning photographs of Selina King being built at Kings Boatyard. Tel: 01394 384 705



Pin Mill Sailing Club

The club hosts Ransome-themed events, with a day-long reading of *We Didn't Mean to Go To Sea* planned on 21 October. pmsc.org.uk

Jim goes ashore, but gets knocked over, and doesn't return. The anchor drags, and they find themselves out at sea with fog all around them and the wind rising. How, by good luck and good management, they manage to avoid collisions and cross to Holland in the night, makes for a nail-biting story. The book quickly became a bestseller.

Although Ransome dearly loved Nancy, he decided to ask Kings, the Pin Mill boatyard, to build him a bigger boat, hoping that Evgenia would once more join him afloat. Selina King, designed by Fred Shepherd, was 34ft long with a generous 10ft beam, with a shallow draft well-suited to the east coast rivers, and a pretty canoe stern. Ransome hoped to write a book about his adventures in Selina, but when it was launched in September 1938, the storm clouds of war were gathering over Europe, and gales meant only a few trips could be made before winter.

In January 1939, the Ransomes fulfilled their dream of living on the Pin Mill side of the Orwell by moving into Harkstead Hall, a handsome house two miles from Pin Mill, and close to their sailing friends, the Busks. Sailing in Selina began again in April, often to Hamford Water and the wilderness of islands and rivulets behind Walton-on-the-Naze.

Ransome often moored there overnight while working on *Secret Water*. This time, Nancy and Peggy, the crew of Amazon, joined the Swallows and were marooned on an island to map the mysterious tidal archipelago. The Eels, a savage tribe inspired by the three Busk children, attack,

while mammoth-shaped footprints lead into the belly of a wrecked barge. A totem pole, a near-drowning, hints of human sacrifice, and the nodding heads of seals add to the excitement.

After war was declared on 3 September 1939, Ransome laid Selina up in Oulton Broad. *Secret Water* was published in November, selling a record number of copies, with *The Times Literary Supplement* praising it as "a magnificent exploring adventure." Ransome had already started his next book, *The Big Six* (1940) – a detective story set once again on the Broads. He would have liked to stay on in Suffolk, but life became more and more hazardous as the war wore on. Regretfully, he and Evgenia moved back to Cumbria and the Lakes. He never again sailed in Selina King. No more books were set in East Anglia, but the four that were have since inspired generations of young sailors, and "Arthur Ransome's East Coast" is fast becoming the designated name of the Orwell, Stour and Walton Backwaters area.

There are myriad opportunities to follow in Ransome's footsteps and sail in his wake, including the sailing adventure I took from Pin Mill, which saw us marooned on the mud flats overnight. The following morning I woke to the smell of sizzling bacon and the skipper shouting. Climbing up on deck, I spotted the glossy head of a seal bobbing nearby, and recalled the children's excitement when they saw a seal sunning itself. They tied their dinghies into "something like a floating island" and settled down to eat, just as I did all those years later.

Coot Club, Ransome's first book set on the Broads, explores the idea of protecting wild birds – a relatively new concept for readers at the time

GETTING THERE

The nearest station to Pin Mill is Ipswich, from which you can then take a bus or taxi to Pin Mill.

Looking to share the magic of *Swallows and Amazons* with your children or grandchildren? You can now get any off-peak child return ticket for just £2! For more information, go to bit.ly/2taCIKj



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Hardymont is author of *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk* (new edition 2006) and *The World of Arthur Ransome* (2012).



Classic Sailing Club

Embark on two-day sailing tours from Levington to explore Ransome sites in the Walton Backwaters. classicsailingclub.com



Arthur Ransome Walking Trail

Stroll along the river from the Butt & Oyster and round to the Bristol Arms at Shotley. The trail has geocaches all along it. bit.ly/2sY7D0f



John Weston Nature Reserve

Located near the Naze, you can dare the *Secret Water's* Red Sea (aka the Wade) at low tide, bird watch and truly walk in Ransome's footsteps.



Nancy Blackett Trust

Explore inside and even go for a sail in Ransome's ship, Nancy Blackett. Contact the Nancy Blackett trust to book. nancyblackett.org