

THAMES BARGES AND COASTAL CRAFT OF GRAYS

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Barges in General

The Thames Barge has been known to exist locally for over 300 years and developed from the Thames Lighter of the early 17th century. These early Barges were first rigged with a single mast and carried a square sail during favourable winds, or were worked by long sweeps, especially up the smaller rivers which find their way to the Thames.

The exact date when the spritsail was introduced is not known, but in Chapman's 'Architectura Navalis Mercatoria' published in 1768, is the plan entitled "An English Chalk Barge" which is the earliest known plan of such a vessel. The barge is 55ft long, 16ft broad, 5ft deep.

To this earlier rig of a spritsail and foresail were added first a jib, next a topsail and later a small mizzen stepped on the rudder post, but until about 1840 the original hull of the early lighter remained unaltered.

About the middle of the 19th century, attention was paid to the form of the barge's hull. First the bow was given a rounded form and a vertical step was introduced; about the same time a square (transom) stern was introduced, and the mizzen was placed farther forward and enlarged. In the latter half of the 19th century the larger barges began to venture further out and sailed up the East coast, and down as far as Dover. Before this time coal and various other merchandise was brought to Grays by schooners and large ketches which belonged to the East Coast Ports – among these vessels was the schooner "Sarah" built at Sunderland in 1837 and later chartered by Capt. W. Green of Grays.

In order to combat the trade being taken by the barges from the schooners, the East Coast builders built what became known as "boomies"; these were a combination of the Thames Barge and the ketch. They had the hull design of a barge, being fitted with leeboards, but retained the standing bowsprit and the ketch's rig. Among these

known locally was the “Dauntless”, built in 1873, and one of the finest of them all, the “Trim”, built in 1881.

Barge Owners and Schooner Owners

‘Seabrooke’. Although not actually barge owners, the Seabrooke family, together later with Peter Balkler, owned several schooners which ran between Grays and the North East Coast Ports. Included among these vessels were the “Lookout” and “Blue Jacket” which were capable of some very fast passages and a great deal of competition developed, although the exact date they commenced is not known – they were certainly operating between 1840 and 1860.

‘Goldsmith’. When the barges and Grays are mentioned, the name of Goldsmiths always comes to the fore; they were the largest barge owners in the country and at one time had 147 vessels. The formation of “Goldsmiths” has been dealt with in Volume 2 of this Journal and so I will deal only with the barges themselves.

The first barge owned by them was the “Richard” of 50 tons, built at Chiswick in 1833; this vessel, which was the pioneer of these barges, worked until she actually fell to pieces from old age. Amongst their other wooden craft were the “Vulture”, “Viper” and “Vampire”, each of 180 tons – built in 1898-9. The “Cetus”, “Perseus” and “Dominion”, each of 150 tons, were built in 1902. There were also a number of swimmies, including amongst them, “Aton”, “Snail”, “Tortoise”, “Romeo”, “Juliet”, “Midget” and “Mite”. The ‘stumpies’, which were barges without a topmast, included the “Adder”, “Cobra”, “Wasp”, “Scorpion”, “Ferret” and “Hornet”.

There was also a class of lug-rigged swimmies, some of which had local names, i.e. “Purfleet”, “Dartford” and “Grays”. Then there were the vessels which were built of iron and known as “Iron Pots”; some of these were the largest vessels in the fleet. The “ic” class of 250 tons register were nearly all built in Holland in 1903-4, and included the “Norvic” and “Cymric” which made the longest voyage ever accomplished by a barge, when they sailed to the River Plate, in South

America. The “Germanic” had her name tactfully altered to “Lais” in 1914.

There were eight 180 tonners which were built in 1898 at Southampton and included the “Briton”, “Saxon”, “Sparton”, “Scott” and some twenty of 160 tons built at Southampton and Deptford. One could go on for a long time writing about Goldsmith’s barges, but space does not permit.

‘Cole and Lequire’ – who took over the Corn Merchants’ business from Lanfields, owned several barges at Grays including the “Henry”, “Major”, “Emma”, Burnham”, “Rose”, “Gladiator”, “Valentine” and “James”; these were all employed in carrying grain.

The Grays Chalk Quarries Company which was formed in 1863, taking over the Chalk Pits etc., of Meesons, had a fleet of stumpies which worked very hard in carrying chalk; amongst their vessels were the “Tees”, “Shannon”, “Tweed”, “Tyne”, “Trent” and “George”. There were many barges owned by individuals and families which included such well known names as Dines, Green, Battershall and others far too numerous to mention.

Barge Building.

Goldsmiths built a considerable number of barges for themselves and other firms at Grays. Of their own barges “Panama” was built in 1897, “Suez” in 1898, “Cetus”, Perseus” and “Dominion” in 1902, “Aton” and “Keil” in 1903. They also built Cole and Lequire’s “Henry” in 1904. The last barge they built was the “Prudent”.

Stansfields who had a Ship Building and Breaking Yard at Grays in the late 19th century , built several small iron barges, among them the “Hornet”, “Wasp”, “Adder” and “Cobra”.

The A.P.C.M. were a combine of firms owning over 300 barges at one time, and although none of their barges actually belongs to Grays, they had a barge repair yard near Brooke’s old cement factory. The yard was

known locally as Strappers Barge Yard: who Strapper was I have yet to find out.

The Barge Matches, which were started by W.H.Dodd in 1863, did a great deal to improve the barges, both in construction and maintenance.

Goldsmiths first raced in 1894 with the barge “Majestic” and won the championship, and from then on they took part in almost every barge race until 1938. The two most famous barges which were built specially for racing were the “Giralda” and the “Haughty Belle”. The Jubilee Races of 1897 were all won by Goldsmith’s barges and they had no less than four craft built specially, the “Giralda” already mentioned, “Her Majesty”, “Castanet” and “Satanita”.

The Coronation Barge Race of 1937 saw the barge “Scott” entered by Goldsmiths; she was painted Red, White and Blue for this occasion.

When writing of the racing barges it is of interest to mention the barges which accompanied each barge competing. This barge would be set aside for the purpose several days before the race, the hatches would be removed and barrels placed in the hold. On these a temporary platform would be built on which spectators, including a number of prominent Grays people, would enjoy a fine view of the race. Baskets of sandwiches and barrels of beer would be placed on board, the latter provided by Mr Seabrooke.

Now, alas, there is not a single barge owned at Grays. All have been sold or broken up, or lie rotting on some Creek. The “Trim” mentioned in the first part of this article was lost off the South Coast in March 1907. The “Haughty Belle” was converted in the 1930s to a yacht and was hit by a Flying Bomb during the last war. The famous “Giralda” became a floating watchmen’s hut at East Tilbury and was finally broken up at Rainham – to mention the end of but a few. Happily the Barge Race of 1961 saw two former Grays Barges entered – the “Dreadnaught” in the Champion bowsprit class, and the “Henry” in the Staysail class.