

# *It's a Swale of a Time as members end Right up the Creek!*

JOHN  
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**S**ATURDAY 20TH SEPTEMBER AROUND NINE IN THE MORNING eleven 'intrepid' mariners waiting by the Harty Ferry hard near Oare. They were Society members assembled for their trip aboard a Thames sailing barge.

The sight of the black-hulled barge with brick red sails brought back childhood memories of yearly trips that I took to the Royal Docks in London. In the late 50s and early 60s a colleague and myself made an annual pilgrimage to see the ships in the London Docks. Claspimg our treasured PLA dock passes we travelled by boat from Charing Cross to Woolwich. In those days both the Pool of London and the River Thames were a hive of activity with all the wharves full of ships. Once we had arrived in Woolwich we crossed the river and a bus ride took us to the Royal Docks, the tops of funnels just visible from the bus as we neared our goal.

Presenting our passes to the policeman at the gate we entered the world of 'commerce', where ships from all countries were busy loading and unloading. The sights, sounds and smells told you where you were in this vast complex. Ships were moored in some places three abreast. Tugs hooted in reply to the Pilot's whistle, pushing or pulling ships into or out of their berths. Tucked in amongst twentieth century bustle were the last survivors of the Victorian era, the Thames barges still plying their trade.

Little did I think that a few years later, I would, as a young apprentice deck officer be leaving my first ship here. Throughout my deep-sea career with Royal Mail, Lines and Shaw Saville I would

join and leave many ships at the 'Royals'. This was before I joined Townsend Car Ferries at Dover in 1980.

All has now gone and in place of the ships' whistles is the roar of aeroplanes at the London City airport and on the vast expanse of water in the Victoria dock recreational facilities replace the sweating dockers. Still, we are about to board a reminder of the past, the *MIROSA*. She will take us back through the years to the days when sail was 'King'.

Built in Maldon, Essex in 1892, she is 82 feet in length and the mast is 85 feet high. Her official number is 96485 with a cargo capacity of about 250 tonnes. Specially designed with a flat bottom and shallow draft these barges were able to go up many of the creeks on the Thames and its environs. At the turn of the century there were 8,000, now 30 remain and the *MIROSA* is the only left that is still a sail only vessel, no auxiliary power, only the wind.

The 'engine' comes in the form of a jib, sprit sail, main sail and a steadying mizzen aft. Sprit sail rig is easier to operate than the more conventional Bermuda or gaff rig. It allowed the barge to carry large deck cargo, the 'sprit' caught the wind that was shielded when in rivers by high warehouses and trees and was easy to operate with the crew of two. The sprit

could be used as a derrick for cargo operations if required.

The day dawned fine, with a keen easterly wind and our instructions to wear warm clothing proved necessary. The barge crew arrived at 9.30: Peter, the Skipper, Geoff alias 'Frog', the Mate and Meg, the ship's dog. We were ferried out in the jolly boat to a small tug, four at a time. The tug then took us all out to the MIROSA.

The tide was out when we arrived and vast areas of mud were exposed. The estuarial birds were having a field day on food sources seldom exposed. This was the lowest tide of the year and adjacent to the Oare Creek Bird Sanctuary observation centre at the top of the hard a mechanical digger and lorries were frantically working to reinforce the sea defences before the highest tide for forty years that evening. By the time we were all transferred to the barge the tide had turned, the first of the flood was making up the Swale. The Swale is the area of water between the Isle of Sheppey and the mainland from Queenborough in the NW to Whitstable in the SE.

We were welcomed by Sally, the Skipper's wife and went below to have hot drinks and warm croissants after a conducted tour and specific instructions on how to use the 'heads' (toilet). The noise of the anchor being hove up brought us out on deck and we got under way around 10.35, heading out towards Whitstable.

The wind was a 'dead muzzler' (right ahead) and the crew were soon working hard tacking back and forth across the Swale beating up against the wind. It was soon apparent that Victorian efficiency made the sail operation easy. The cries of



Geoff and Meg

'lee ho' from Skipper to Mate as we changed tack came thick and fast and with the help of the Mate 'backing' the jib we changed course with the modicum of fuss. We were unable to use the large lee boards to their full capacity because of the low water. These are large boards, one each side, which are lowered in the absence of keel to give the barge more grip when tacking.

Progress was slow: the Horse Sands to port were still an area of mud and the 'Receptive' wreck buoy seemed to take ages to pass. Once past it the channel opened out and we made better progress and the Shellness buoy could be seen in the distance. On the horizon a splash of red was identified as the sails of the Thames sailing barge 'Greta' which had left the Swale earlier for Brightingsea. Several smaller yachts kept us company as we tacked to Whitstable. They had overhauled us in the narrower channel, now with more room MIROSA showed her sail power and the gap between her and her smaller sisters soon closed.

Just after midday Peter said "enough of the hard work" and then turned the wheel to put tide and wind astern, this started our run 'down wind' towards Emley and Ridham Dock. We would anchor for lunch

16 around 12.45, our position dictated by wind and tide. It was during this part of the trip that the more adventurous members were allowed a turn at the wheel.

In what seemed like seconds our starting point was passed, Fowley Island Spit buoy slid by and so did the entrance to Conyer Creek. Conyer was a port frequently used by barges to load bricks, alas no longer. Progress was good and MIROSA turned into the wind around 12.35 and tacked up to the anchorage off Bells Creek on the Sheppey side of the Swale. The mud flats were now being quickly covered by the flood and once we had 'brought up' it was time for lunch. The horizon was being filled by the many structures that form the gaol at Eastchurch.



Mariners' lunch

Sally had prepared an excellent spread for lunch, the hot soup to start being very welcome. What was noticeable as we enjoyed our food was the total absence of sound bar the slap of waves against the hull. The saloon where the meal was laid out was part of the barge's cargo space and the galley would have been the Mate's cabin, the Skipper living aft. It must have been a hard life, especially in winter time. Some barges even made voyages as far as South America, a true testament of their versatility.

Activity above meant the crew were preparing to get under way and at 15.00

the anchor was 'aweigh'. We set off upstream towards Ridham. During lunch the tide had come in fully and the estuary was now full of water. Sailing was now much easier as there was more room to manoeuvre. There was a special event for yachts in the Medway and while we were below having lunch the Swale had filled with a myriad of yachts hurrying along with tide and wind, making a good speed, sails well filled. Off Wellmarsh Creek at 15.25 the wheel was put 'hard over' and it was time to tack back to MIROSA's anchorage. Look behind us a small coastal vessel could be seen making its way out to sea. "A rare sight" commented the Skipper as most commercial shipping uses the Medway route. The radio crackled into life as Peter

spoke to the LEONIS from Kingston, Jamaica, discussing who would keep clear. Before long power overtook sail and the LEONIS was ahead and away to ports unknown. As we approached the anchorage around 16.20 it was apparent that the wind and the high tide had kicked up quite a sea and as we took afternoon cream tea the barge was moving about — we were 'at sea'. Peter and Geoff were busy stowing sails and securing the gear

whilst we lazed below and then it was time to leave. The small tug (built in Holland in the 1930s) we had used in the morning was alongside, however the Hard we had boarded from in the morning was awash and a lumpy sea was crashing ashore. It was obvious that landing here was impossible, the Skipper decided to go round the entrance of Faversham Creek and put us ashore on the bank.

Once everyone was safely on the tug we bade farewell to Sally and the MIROSA, the tug swung slowly head to the sea which was by now quite noticeable and proceeded towards the Creek. Once into the

entrance the sea was less, but despite several attempts to find a suitable landing area the tug kept grounding. There was no alternative but to go right up the creek to the small boat yard near the Shipwrights pub on the junction of Faversham and Oare Creeks. Here landing was safe and we had to resort to modern transport in the form of a Landrover and a taxi to return us to the car park we had started from, thus ending a very enjoyable day somewhat later than anticipated. Thanks to Joan Liggett for once again organising an excellent day out. Members who require further information about sailing barges can apply to Sailing Barge Association, Docklands Business Centre, 10-16 Tiller Road, London E14 8PX.



Leonis passes Mirosa

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## Visit to FORDWICH TOWN HALL

JUNE DYER

ON SATURDAY 11TH OCTOBER a small group from our Society joined up with a party from the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings (SPABS) for a visit to picturesque Fordwich, recorded in the Domesday Book and now described as "the smallest town in the country".

We assembled outside the tiny Guildhall, now the Town Hall, built in 1544 during the reign of Henry VIII. In Roman times an arm of the sea ran in as far as Canterbury and was navigable as far as Fordwich, which thus became the port for Canterbury. The crane house can be seen at the rear of the Town Hall on the bank of the now somewhat smaller

River Stour. Here stone from Caen in France was unloaded for the building of Canterbury Cathedral.

Inside the Town Hall we ascended steep wooden stairs to the panelled Court Room, where we were welcomed by Andrew Claque (former Inspector of Redundant Churches) who introduced our lecturer, Michael Beck, a Town Hall Trustee.