

# MEDWAY TRIP

## onboard Paddle steamer 'Kingswear Castle'

BY CAPT MIKE WESTON

Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> May dawned bright and fresh with a strong southwesterly wind – just the weather needed for a successful barge race. Twenty-five Dover Society members boarded the coach and within a short time we arrived at Strood Pier just below the bridges at Rochester. There, waiting to take us and another 140 or so passengers down the river to view the annual barge match (this being the 91<sup>st</sup>), was the paddle steamer “Kingswear Castle”. This small coal fired vessel, in immaculate condition, was built in 1924 for service on the river Dart in Devon. For nigh on forty years she sailed the Dart before she was withdrawn from service in 1965. Her fate was undetermined at the time, but she was eventually rescued by The Paddle Steamer Preservation Society which, with the help of a number of sources, was able to restore her, and return her to service with full certification in 1985.

With passengers aboard we set sail down the Medway in search of the participants in the barge sailing match. This is what we had come to see. This annual sailing match brings together barges of various classes that had at one time or another been used for commercial trading up and down the coast. Now of course with the demise of sailing barges for commercial use, all the barges are privately owned. They have been carefully and lovingly restored and are sailed for pleasure. The facts given to us over the public address system illustrated only too vividly the decline over relatively few years of the barge numbers. Out of approximately 3000 barges built there are now under thirty in existence. The heyday of barge operations was in 1907 when 2070 sailing barges were working. By 1918 this had fallen to 1650. 1930 saw 1100 barges still trading. At the outbreak of World War II



*Paddle Steamer Kingswear Castle at Neptune Jetty, Sheerness*

22 there were 600 barges but by the end of the war this figure had been reduced to 300 and further reduced to 80 by 1950. The last commercial barge ("Cambria") ceased trading in 1970.

The sailing barge match has its start and finish off Gillingham Pier. The course takes the barges down the Medway, out into the Thames Estuary around the Medway Buoy and back into the Medway up to Gillingham Pier. On this particular day with an ebbing tide and a wind behind them the barges had made very good passage times down the river. Therefore they were well ahead of us but we were informed that the plan was to go down the river and out into the estuary where we would then find the sailing fleet, so we settled down to an interesting trip down the river.

Within a very short time of leaving Strood we were passing the old Naval Dockyard at Chatham with its fine buildings of an earlier era. The hulk of the 1878 Victorian sloop "Gannet" was moored off the dockyard. The plan is to restore this vessel and she will join other vessels on display to visitors to The Chatham Historic Dockyard (or as it has just been renamed the World Naval Base). Just visible in the dry-docks, of which there are three, could be seen the submarine "Ocelot" which was the last vessel to be built for the Royal Navy at Chatham, and the last of the World War II destroyers "Cavalier". "Cavalier" had arrived earlier in the week under tow from the Tyne from where she had been rescued from falling into dereliction or from going overseas. The plan is to preserve her at Chatham where she will be dedicated to the memory of the many thousands of fighting seamen who perished in numerous destroyers sunk during World War II. She is berthed on the site where Lord Nelson's flagship, HMS "Victory" was built and launched in 1765.

Below Chatham Upnor Castle could clearly be seen. This is a 16<sup>th</sup>. century fortification built to protect the dockyard, although the Dutch were still able to breach



*Paddle Steamer Kingswear Castle*

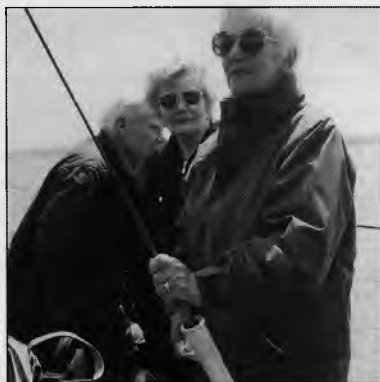
this defence. Below Upnor another fortification was in evidence - the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Hoo Fort. Hoo Fort is one of a series of forts built to protect the approaches to the naval dockyards. Collectively they were known as "Palmerston's follies"

Kingsnorth Power Station and then Thamesport (the container port built on the site of the Isle of Grain oil terminal) were passed in quick succession. Adjacent to Thamesport could be seen the site upon which the Channel Tunnel concrete castings were made. Passing Sheerness the buoys marking the wreck of the World War I battleship HMS "Bulwark" could be seen. This 15,000-ton battleship had returned from a patrol and was moored in the river loading stores and munitions when she blew up on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1914 killing virtually all onboard. Less than a dozen souls survived. It appeared from an Admiralty Court finding that 'accidental ignition of ammunition' was the cause of this disaster.



Garrison Point, on the Isle of Sheppey, the entrance to the Medway, was passed. In the distance ahead of us could be seen what we had come down the river to find – the marvellous sight of sailing badges under full sail in a strong breeze. By this time they were at the seaward end of their course and rounding the Medway buoy in preparation for the return leg of the race back to the finishing line off Gillingham. With much dexterity by our captain, "Kingswear Castle" was manoeuvred into positions amongst the sailing fleet so that photographs of these magnificent vessels could be taken from close quarters. At the same time a watchful eye had to be kept to make certain that we stayed well clear of the buoys surrounding the wreck of the World War II liberty ship "Richard Montgomery". This vessel is a well-known notorious wreck because of the cargo it was carrying when it became wrecked. The "Richard Montgomery"

was one of approximately 2700 Liberty ships built during the war on a conveyor belt system by shipyards in America to overcome the severe losses of merchant ships sunk by enemy action. She had sailed across the Atlantic, around the north of Scotland and down to the Thames where she anchored. Unfortunately she anchored too closed to sandbanks, went aground and became a wreck. She was carrying a large quantity of munitions, hence her notoriety. Her masts are still very much in evidence for all to see.



Joan Liggett and John and Ann Owen watch the finishing stages of the races

The return leg of the sailing match was a real test of skill for the skippers of the barges and their crews. The wind by this time blowing about a force six was mainly from ahead as the craft made their way in from sea and up the river. This meant tacking all the way with the many alterations of course, sail settings and barge boards which tacking entails. A demanding

24 operation, the difficulties of which were compounded by the fact that low water had only just been passed and therefore the necessity to keep within the confines of the buoyed channel was paramount if the fate of running aground was to be averted. One unfortunate competitor well up with the leaders was observed to do just that and sat ignominiously on the mud whilst other competitors passed.

Watching from our vantagepoint on "Kingswear Castle" it was fascinating to observe at close quarters the jostling that went on between the antagonists. One could not help but think of the skills that were required of crews in the past (only two or three men on a barge) who sailed these barges, heavily laden with cargo, up and down the coast, in and out of creeks and rivers in all weathers, in the course of their commercial operations. The barges we were observing were crewed by many more than two or three people and were not laden with cargo.

Our run back up the river again was skilfully managed so that we passed through the fleet of barges with many opportunities for photographs and observing the barges at close quarters. We arrived off the finishing point ahead of the fleet and moored up to a buoy just above



'Repertor' at the finishing post showing '1st across the line' pennant

the finishing line so that we were able to observe the first and subsequent barges cross the finishing line. The honour of being first went to the bowsprit class barge, "Repertor" with another bowsprit class barge, "Xylonite", following close on her heels. Over the next hour we were able to observe the remaining com-

petitors crossing the line. Leaving behind Gillingham and the barges "Kingswear Castle" made her way back up to Strood Pier where we disembarked for our coach journey back to Dover.

I am sure I speak for all when I say the day was enthralling. The barge crews had the bonus of very good sailing winds, but

this proved less of a bonus for the observers. Red faces seemed to be the order of the day as we trooped off "Kingswear Castle". Of course it may not have been the wind and sun which produced this phenomenon it could well have been put down to the beer!

Our thanks must go to Joan Liggett for organising a very successful day.



Course: from abreast Gillingham Pier to Medway Buoy and return - 29 miles