

THAMES SAILING BARGES



The Thames Sailing Barge is a commercial sailing boat once common on the Thames in London

The flat-bottomed barges, with shallow draught and leeboards, were perfectly adapted to the Thames Estuary, with its shallow waters and narrow tributary rivers.

The sails were usually a rusty-red colour due to the dressing used to treat them. This dressing was traditionally made from red ochre, cod oil, urine, and seawater.

The working routes of the Sailing Barge.

Their origins lie in the 17th and 18th centuries when flat-bottomed wooden craft evolved for use in the Thames and its Kent neighbour the River Medway. They were used to transport cargo from ships to the wharves along the banks of the rivers in the developing ports of London and Rochester.

They would carry grain, hay, timber, bricks, stone, sand, and gravel one way — returning with rubbish (for the brickworks), cement, animal feeds, fertiliser, and manure (for the farms), paraffin, coal, and acid (for heating and processing).

The “Stackies”



Essex and Maldon in particular evolved a special variety of barge called the “stackie” designed to be shallow and wide for sailing with a haystack on deck. London depended upon thousands of horses for its transport, and it was the Thames sailing barge that delivered the huge requirements of hay and straw from the farms of Suffolk, Essex, and Kent. The barges were employed to get Hay to the metropolis and were loaded ten to twelve feet or more above the deck — sometimes half-way up the mainmast — with an overhang either side beyond the rails.

They resembled floating haystacks and so became known as “stackies.” The last thing a skipper wanted was the stack to slip or collapse out at sea. The bales or trusses were, built into a typical stack that was pitched inwards for stability and secured with stack irons and ties known as “breechings.” Hatch covers were placed on top, stack cloths covered the structure, and a ladder allowed the barge’s mate to climb up to give occasional directions to the skipper whose view was greatly restricted and to allow access to the foredeck.

The stackies always hoped for a return cargo. Sometimes this might be timber but, more often than not it was the by-product of those horses-muck (stable manure) to bring back to spread on the farmlands of Maldon, the Dengie and beyond. As a result, the trade route along the Blackwater and “the London River” became known locally as the ‘Hay Up – Dung Down.’

The Hay Bale.

To ensure stability in loading, the hay cutter would cut the bales 39 inches (one metre) long to fit into the barge’s width.

Here in this picture, Farmer Steve Gurton and his son Henry, of Tillingham, are pressing the cut hay bales in their home-made press to ensure that each one has the correct weight for a given size.



Old Thames Barges.

The first barges were small, with a single mast and known as a ‘Hoy.’

These developed during the eighteenth-century with the addition of more sails and the distinctive leeboards on the side. These adjustable boards prevent the vessel from sideways drift, serving as a keel substitute, but still allowing journeys into shallow waters.

The craft evolved in three ways — as a Narrow Boat on the canals, as a Wherry on the Norfolk Broads and eventually into the Thames Sailing Barge on the East Coast rivers.

Old sailing Barges at Kingston upon Thames.



Sailing barges of the early 1800s were entirely open and with no decks. They were small – about 20 tons. Decks then began to be fitted from about 1810.

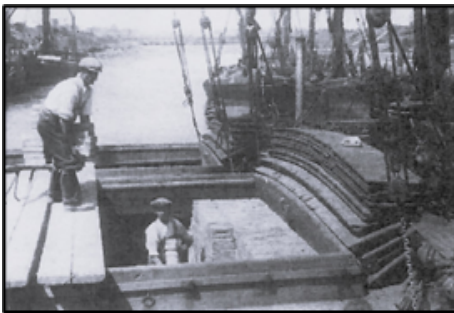
Rounded bows (the front) replaced square ones, and the distinctive squared transom (the back) came in from around 1860. Wheels began to replace tillers from 1880, and the all-important topmast (for the topsail) was added after 1890. Bowsprits were also popular from 1900.

Bulk Carriers.

As mentioned, East Anglian grain and hay was taken to London on the so-called “stackies,” and manure brought back for the fields. This picture is probably the return journey load!

There were “brickies” carrying bricks and tiles, cement barges, “colliers” and coke barges, refuse carriers, “muddies” full of clay for more bricks and tiles, beer barges and the list goes on.

A “Brickie” being unloaded at London Docks.



Quays for large barges were established at Pidgeon Dock, Mayland, the Quay, Bradwell on Sea, the Quay, Burnham on Crouch, and Stokes Hall, Althorne.

Smaller barges tied up at many places on the riverbank to load hay and corn from farms to be taken to the mills and fresh flour, wildfowl and produce to go to London markets.

Often loaded and unloaded by hand. Carts and horses were the main form of transport, although in later years, lorries took over this role. Great rivalry and competition developed amongst the barges

and their crews and barge races were the result. These started in the 1860s and winning meant honour, money, and increased freight business. The Thames barge races are the world's second oldest sailing competition, second to the America's Cup.

History of Centaur

The height of the barge trade was around the start of the Great War and there were in excess of 2000 of them working at that time.

A social group and cultural heritage sprang up – involving the masters or skippers, mates, third hands, owners, builders, and their families. Barge related family history is now a specific branch of genealogical research.

The Centaur, built of wood and launched in 1895 at Harwich, was a coasting barge – able to trade all around the British coast and to the near continent. This meant she was larger than the river barges and had a more seaworthy hull form – the generous sheer and shapely transom contributed to her handsome appearance. However, cargoes became more difficult to find and in August 1911 Centaur was sold to work for the oil mills at Colchester. She traded between there and Millwall, taking linseed oil in drums to the London River and returning with raw linseed and cottonseed.



An incident during the First World War involving Centaur. The barge was sailing in the Channel in a light air and thickish fog when the skipper heard the roar of a coastal motorboat's engine nearby. A few moments later the sleek hull of the CMB – an early form of motor torpedo boat – travelling at speed shot out of the mist and, striking the barge amidships, leapt on deck and settled down on top of Centaur's main hatch. The barge made port without problem and unloaded her unusual cargo.

Development of Steel Hull Barges.

Steel barges were lighter, faster, and could carry more cargo than timber barges of the same size. The Horlocks built a fleet of seven steel barges in 1924, with Repertor being the first to launch.

Barge-building centres: The main centres for building barges were in Harwich, Ipswich, Maldon, along the Thames river, the Medway river, and the Kentish creeks.

The last wooden barge to be built was Cabby in 1928. Today, there are around thirty private, company, charter, club, and sail training barges that can be seen under sail around the Thames estuary. The numbers of barges reduced drastically in the 1930s with improvements in the road network. Many of them were out of work, "laid up" or turned into houseboats. Those that survived had engines fitted, were derigged, and turned into motor barges.

Second World War.

The Thames Sailing Barges played a vital role in the Second World War and were converted for military use alongside other merchant ships. They had many advantages, and so were in high demand. Thames Sailing Barges were even used in the Dunkirk evacuation. Their large area of deck space and holds, were ideal to load with soldiers and transport them to waiting warships in deeper water.

Sadly, the barges made easy targets for the Luftwaffe, the Nazi air force, and many were destroyed during the evacuation. A total of 30 sailing/auxiliary barges were involved in Operation Dynamo which was the code name for the evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk in 1940.

Many of the barges were destroyed and a few remained stranded on the beaches unable to refloat before the arrival of the German troops.

Sailing Barges at Dunkirk.

On May 10th, 1940, Germany invaded France and the Low Countries, pushing the BEF, French and Belgian troops back to the port of Dunkirk. A huge rescue plan was put in place by the Royal Navy, to get the troops back to England. Large ships could only get alongside the Dunkirk East Mole [breakwater] and many troops would have to be rescued off the beaches. A call went out for 'little ships' that were able to get into the beach and take troops out to the larger ships. Many local ships answered the call from the Royal Navy - wherever possible they sailed with a Naval crew, but the peacetime skippers went on a number of them. The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from Dunkirk took place between 27th May and 4th June 1940 - 85 years ago. It is often described as a miracle - at the outside they were hopeful of bringing 45,000 troops back.

In the end, more than 338,000 British, French, and Belgian troops had been brought back, though with little of their equipment. The Royal Navy named it 'Operation Dynamo' - because the command of it was from a room deep underground in Dover that once held a dynamo.

Sailing Barge Ethel Everard

Most had no engine, and were towed across the Channel, many with cargoes of supplies for the Army. TOLLESBURY and ETHEL EVERARD were towed across by a tug. TOLLESBURY was run onto the beach, 273 men boarded her, and with many difficulties, made it back to England.

Ena and Operation Dynamo.

But Barges were lost on active service, a heavy price. The names of these humble but heroic coastal craft deserve to be remembered alongside those of mighty battleships. The lost barges included the Aitie, Barbara Jean, Duchess, Doris, Ethel Everard, Lady Roseberry, Lark, Valonia and Royalty.

To end this section, we retell the story of Ena. She set sail for Dunkirk, making the 100-mile journey, in spite of air attacks and the constant threat of mines. After heroic work on the beaches, but with the German army was closing in. Alfred Page, Ena's skipper, was ordered to abandon his barge alongside another sailing barge, the H.A.C. The crews made good their escape back to England on a minesweeper. No sooner had they left, than thirty men of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment arrived on La Panne beach. They had been fighting a desperate rearguard action to keep the Germans at bay for as long as they could. Now, with the evacuation virtually over, they could not believe their luck when they saw two barges sitting there, in seaworthy condition. They took possession of H.A.C., while Colonel McKay with men of the 19th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery boarded the Ena.

Meanwhile, Captain Atley of the East Yorkshire Regiment, was on the mole at Dunkirk and together with one of his men, quickly made a raft. Using shovels, they rowed out to Ena. and helped 36 other men on board including three wounded. By 8am both barges were under way. In spite of enemy bombardment

and machine-gun fire they raced across the Channel under sail, even though there were no naval personnel on board. Eventually, the Ena made it to Margate.

But now, eighty-five years later, Ena lies abandoned and derelict near Hoo on the River Medway, a sad end to an eventful life. Unlike her sister vessels, Greta and Tollesbury, she is not included in the national Historic Ships List. At the very least, she should be fully surveyed and her subsequent fate monitored, out of respect for the lives she saved 85 years ago.

The barges involved in Dunkirk are listed below.

Barges that survived

Ada Mary
Beautrice Maud
Cabby
Ena
Glenway
H A C
Haste Away
Lady Sheila
Monarch
Pudge
Queen Alexandra
Seine
Shannon
Sherfield
Spurgeon
Thyra
Tollesbury.

Barges lost during the Operation

Aidee
Burton
Barbara Jean
Claude
Doris
Duchess
Ethel Everard
Lady Rosebery
Lark
Queen
Royalty
Valonia
Warrior

Two wooden sailing Thames barges were lost to mines off Burnham-on-Crouch on the Essex coast: on 13 January, Ailsa struck a mine on the edge of Foulness Sand off the Essex coast, although fortunately her crew were saved, and on 28 January, Resolute, bound from London to Ipswich with wheat, struck a mine off Holland-on-Sea. When the lifeboat arrived on scene the crew found only wreckage, but the master had been picked up by another barge and was transferred to the lifeboat, although the mate was lost with the vessel. It sounds as if the barge had been blown to smithereens by the explosion.

Some local war time incidents involving barges are detailed below:

AILS A - Lost near the Whitaker Spit when it hit a mine. Her crew were saved.

BANKSIDE - On 19 December 1942 at 7.30am Bankside was laden with flour when it hit a mine at Maplin sands. The forepart sank taking with it the skipper who was trapped in the wreckage. The rear end stayed afloat for a short period that allowed a fishing smack to close in and pick up the first mate who was taken to Burnham on Crouch still plastered with wet flour following the explosion.

ALARIC - At 8.30am on 12 March 1943 Alaric was navigating the Whitaker Channel with skipper Harry Eves and his son Adam aboard. The barge was strafed by canon and machine gun fire from six German Fighters which fatally injured Harry although amazingly Adam survived with scratches. When the fighters left the area Adam turned the barge around to make for the safety of Burnham on Crouch and both he and Alaric survived to tell the tale.

RESOLUTE - On 24 January 1943 Resolute hit a mine in the estuary of the River Crouch. The barge sank taking with it the mate although the skipper was picked up from the sea by rescue units.

DAWN - Dawn was used to land supplies for the BEF in France in 1939 and ordered to help evacuate the troops from Dunkirk. Whilst in Dover harbour awaiting escort for the Channel crossing she was hit by a naval Tugboat and damaged forcing her to limp home rather than make the trip to Dunkirk.

CENTAUR - Like many of the sailing barge fleet Centaur sailed down to the assembly point at Dover, where she collided with a tug and so was unable to make the crossing.

In 2011 part of the hull of a Thames Barge was found in the Dunes at Dunkirk. Although the identity of the barge is not known it is almost certainly one of the barges listed on this page. The hull has been restored and is on display in Dunkirk Museum. This was now established as the Lady Roseberry.

The Pudge at Maldon.

One of the surviving Thames Barges on Operation Dynamo. Now to be seen at Maldon. Built in 1922 by London & Rochester Trading Co., Pudge with a hull constructed of pitch pine on oak with a flush deck, with the steering wheel on a 'short spindle' without the usual raised cabin top.

Pudge is one of the last wooden barges to be built, (although further barges were built of steel). Pudge spent much of her working life carrying goods between London and Ipswich.



Decline of the barges

In 1954 only 160 barges were still in trade. Developments in road transport and container shipping changed the way goods were transported, and motorised vessels made transferring goods quicker and more cost effective.

As barges disappeared so did the communities, the generations of barge builders, sail makers, owners and 'sailor men' that had grown up around them. Many barges were de-rigged and put to use as lighters. Some were turned into yachts, while others became house barges and some simply put into lay-up.



Nowadays trade has
preservation, recreation, and charter.

given way to

November 2024.