

The Humble Sailing Barge

A message from Sir Alan Herbert¹



The humble sailing barge is still, with all respect to the great ladies of the Orient and P. & O. Lines, the most beautiful vessel in London River. Carrying perhaps 200 tons of cargo and 6,000 square feet of canvas but handled by two men only, or one man and a boy; she is also one of the most remarkable examples of the sailor's ingenuity and skill.

From their high bridges the men of steam look down at her with affection and delight. She is only a flat and shallow box, but wears the airs and graces of a sailing-ship and is driven by the same old arts. She can face fierce wind and water in the North Sea, or creep by narrow creeks through the fields to mill or farm. She will go, the bargemen say, 'wherever there has been a heavy fall of dew'. Yet one went to Norway; another was caught up the Rhine when the last war broke. Five sailed to South America. There is nothing like them.

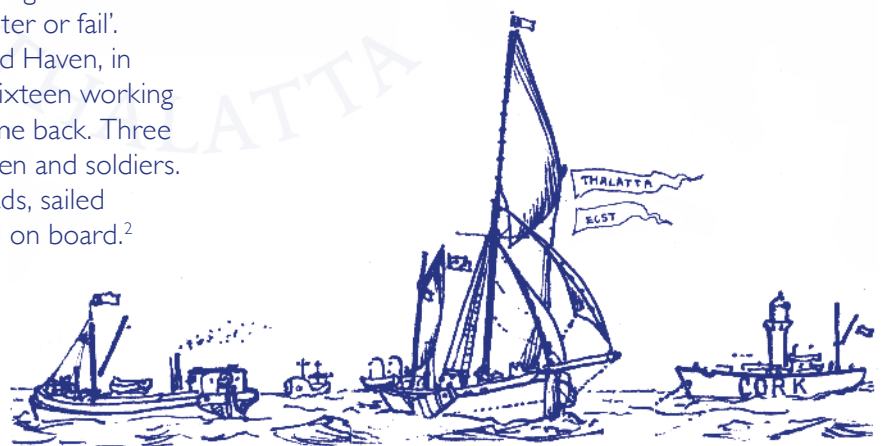
They have done good service in the wars. In the first world war the barges carried precious cargo, especially coal, across the Channel. Often their shallow draught took them safely over mine-fields where the grander vessels dared not go. In the last war the magnetic mine was the end of many, but they did not 'falter or fail'. They were seen at Scapa Flow and Milford Haven, in the Clyde, even in the Outer Hebrides. Sixteen working barges went to Dunkirk; six, I believe, came back. Three came back under sail; manned by fishermen and soldiers. One, the *Ena*, abandoned in Dunkirk Roads, sailed herself home to Sandwich, without a soul on board.²

But the breed is dying. No more are being built and only a handful are left which are pure 'sailormen', that is, without auxiliary engines.

One of these beauties we have captured – and we hope to catch more³ – not to be embedded in cement, but to sail the famous reaches still, carry some useful cargoes, and show her arts and graces to the world.

Sentiment? Maybe – and why not? – but not sentiment only. For though the sailing barge may be out-of-date the arts of sail are studied increasingly and will endure for ever.

A. P. Herbert



1. Sir A. P. Herbert (born 1890, died 1971) was an English novelist, playwright, poet, and politician. He wrote this piece for the 'Thalatta prospectus and joining instructions', produced for the London Borough of Redbridge Education Department during the late 1960's.

2. This makes a great tale but has since been proved to not have been the case! On the Dunkirk beaches, her crew were ordered to abandon her. She was beached but then refloated by Lt Colonel W. G. McKay and men of the 19th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, and taken back to Kent.

3. In 1974 the sailing barge *Lady Jean* joined *Thalatta* as an East Coast Sail Trust schoolship, and was renamed *Sir Alan Herbert*.