

How the Thames Barge Evolved

A brief history



The following text is taken from the 'Thalatta prospectus and joining instructions', produced for the London Borough of Redbridge Education Department during the late 1960's. At that time there just was one barge still trading under sail alone – *Cambria*.

The spritsail barge of the Thames Estuary occupies a special place in maritime history as the largest merchant sailing ship in the world to be handled by a crew of two men. She is also unique not only for surviving but in actually continuing to develop and increase her numbers far into the era of mechanical propulsion. At a time when the last of the beautiful square-riggers were being starved out of existence by fast and reliable screw-steamers, the sailing barges that served the world's greatest port were undergoing the most intensive and exciting phase of their evolution.

It took two world wars, a major trade depression and the government subsidised Dutch motor coaster to drive her finally from the tideways of south east England which she had dominated for a century-and-a-half. There was simply nothing afloat that could challenge the spritsail barge in her own waters until the opportunities and discontent that followed the second world war led to a shortage of the specialised skills that were needed to work her under sail alone. Give her a diesel engine and a snug wheelhouse to take the place of her 4,000 square feet of canvas and exposed quarter deck and the mechanically-minded coasterman of the post-war age would consent to take her away with 150 tons of cargo under the hatches. But offer the same man an equally remunerative freight with nothing but the coastal wind and tides to get him to his destination, and he simply did not want to know .

The other factor in the final – and apparently long overdue demise of the sailing barge was one of post-war economics. At some point in the early 1950s the price of individually made sails and spars and rigging began to overtake the cost of installing a mass-produced diesel engine. One by one the barges were motorised, retaining their sailing gear until it wore out and then relying solely on mechanical power. Most of them converted well enough, and many survive today as fast and handy little motor ships, competing satisfactorily with the new 250 ton steel built motor coasters that are gradually taking over the trade.



Sometime around the middle of the 18th century the traditional flat bottom lighters of the London River, fitted with a rudimentary spritsail rig, began to poke their noses tentatively out into the Estuary. These were the clumsy and undeniably hideous forbearers of the handsome modern spritsail barge.

The prospect of despatching their wares down the coast in a lighter at a portion of the expense of employing a properly found ship must have appealed strongly to the adventurous but economically minded merchants of London. The equally adventurous breed of watermen that navigated these fearful travesties of naval architecture evidently lost no time in developing out of their landlocked ways, for within half-a-century or so they were cheerfully blundering down the coast to such strange and distant parts as Maldon and Colchester carrying cargoes ranging from lamp oil and beer to horse manure from the London streets.

Nor were they slow to recognise the advantage of leeboards, which had been used for centuries by the Dutch in their traditional shallow-draught sailing vessels; and this made early sailing barges immeasurably more efficient when beating into the wind. The great weather-going superiority of the coastal brigs, with their deep keels, was diminished, and the ability of the barges to raise their leeboards and slip over the shoals, taking the ground with ease where necessary, led to their rapid decline.

So it came about, as the result of an almost casual extension of the use of the primitive river lighter, that the highly versatile and economical Thames Barge was born. Soon she was to drive every other form of commercial sail from the coast of south east England, her local fleets numbered in hundreds, dominating the port registers from Harwich to Dover.



The continuous improvement in hull and sail design over the next hundred years was given a sudden and spectacular impetus when, in 1863, William Henry Dodd was inspired to organise a sailing match for barges in the London river. Dodd was a refuse disposal contractor of considerable wealth, whose large fleet of sailing barges was used to carry London's refuse down the Thames to the great dumps on the Essex marshes. At that time the barges and their crews were held of little account by the sailors who went to sea in more conventional ships. Dodd wanted to change this to improve the status of the barges by speeding up their transition from crude sailing lighters to ships of their own right. It may be that he was far sighted enough to recognise even at that early stage in the growth of steam power that the sailing barges would soon become the Navy's only reserve of sail-trained seamen in any future conflict.

Whether their originator had any clear-cut motive or not, nothing could have done more than those early barge races to bring about the remarkable transformation of the class that took place in the last twenty years of the 19th century.

The barge races were held annually in the lower reaches of the Thames; and even in that heyday of big-time yacht racing the great brown-sailed fleets provided a spectacle unmatched anywhere on the coast. Competition on those 'sporting' occasions, never less than fierce, was often violent in the extreme, with the low cunning of the rival crews backed up by equally crafty machinations and lavish expenditure on the part of owners and builders. Maximum efficiency both in design and handling methods was the outcome of those spirited contests; and because of it the Thames Barges were fit enough to hold their own when it finally came to a contest between sail and steam.

The refinement of the spritsail rig led naturally to a widening of the barges' horizons; they crew bigger and stronger, and accordingly more adventurous. They undertook longer and altogether more ambitious voyages and developed a regular trade down the Channel and across to the French ports, the time taken on passage between constantly reduced.

In the early days of racing the commonplace little 100 tonners with her tiller steering, handspike windless, and leeboards on rope tackles, was not much of a ship to take to see deep-laden. But little more than 30 years later Goldsmiths of Grays were taking delivery of a fleet of fine new 180 ton steel built coasters, at least two of which were still trading under-sail in the early 1950s. In 1901-2 the same Essex firm ordered nine steel barges from continental yards to be capable of carrying 300 tons of cargo to sea; but the ultimate in carrying capacity was reached in 1925-6 with the building at Yarmouth of 4 giant steel hulled barges for Everards of Greenhithe.

Such vessels as these could face the fickle moods of the North Sea and the Channel with confidence in their ability to compete with the growing menace of the small Dutch motor coaster in all but the calmest days of summer. If the weather were too fierce even for the big Everarders to get under way, then the Dutchmen had to stay in port too.

More commonplace on the coast around the turn of the century, however, were the graceful 130-150 ton wooden hulled barges that were being built in large numbers at Harwich and in the Kentish yards. They were the undisputed thoroughbreds of the species and a final expression of the ancient skill of the small local ship-builders, who somehow contrived to create a model of great beauty from a specification that called for little more than a flat bottomed lighter with sails.



The smaller river barges still had their calling, even as lately as 1955¹, when a hundred and twenty tonner was about the biggest craft that could be got through the bridges to East Mills, Colchester. Lightness of draught was the governing factor, too, when an earthy cargo had to be loaded or discharged at farm or mill at the head of some silt-filled creek. Such work as this was just as important – and probably equally remunerative on balance – as the more venturesome freights to the Tyne or Le Treport.

By 1936 when the last new spritsail barge was built a decline had begun set in and the end of the road was already in sight. Numbers had diminished from 2,000 or more in 1910 to something less than half that figure. The second world war thinned out the fleets still further, leaving no more than 200 sailing in 1945. Today just one remains trading – a lonely survivor to pick up what crumbs she can from the softer-hearted merchants of the East Coast². For the rest the diesel engine's conquest is complete in all but those few cases where yachtsmen have come to the old 'spritty's' rescue, turning spacious cargo holds into living accommodation for summer days, when they set off to re-sail neglected courses down the Essex coast and among the mysterious shoals of the Thames and Medway that once bustled with the coming and going of 2,000 sails.

1. This piece was written in the late 1960's.

2. *Cambria* was the last barge to trade entirely under sail, and took her last cargo in 1970. She is now restored and owned and operated by the *Cambria* Trust.