

ON HER MAJESTY'S SERVICE

WASC 1491

CRAFT & CARGOES

on the LEE & STORT

*David & Elizabeth Wood and Martin Hazell take a look
at commercial traffic, past and present*

In the hey-day of the Port of London, shipping was attracted to its teeming docks and wharves not only from foreign ports but also from deep in the heart of England. Around London a network of broad waterways led to the evolution of craft adapted to working these inland waters whilst capable of facing the tidal waters of the Thames. Much has been written and recorded in recent years of the history of the Thames sailing barge and of the narrowboat, but equally important in the history of commercial carrying in the London area are the wideboats and barges of the Lee, Grand Union and Regent's canals and their cousins the Thames lighters about which little seems to have been recorded. In recent years the skill of the Thames lighter-man has been brought to a wider audience through the annual lighter driving matches, but it is a decade since horse drawn boats of any kind worked through London.

Many craft were built on the river and, during the 19th century, the shipbuilding carried on in Bow Creek – the tidal section of the Lee – reflected its closeness to the Thames shipyards. It was here that the Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Co Ltd built some 287 merchant ships between 1840 and 1911 and many warships for the British Japanese, Russian and other navies including their last, HMS *Thunderer*, of 22,500 tons deadweight. In 1895, the company started to build smaller boats, including 206 for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution who themselves had premises for a number of years alongside Limehouse Cut, including a drydock and rigging loft.

Built on the Lee

However, more typical of the craft built on the Lee were those being built at Hertford (the head of navigation) by Joseph Best in the early 1800s. Mostly for local owners, they averaged some 50 tons and were around 70ft long with a beam of some 13ft, being described in the London Custom House registers as open sailing barges. In Ware, James Horseman of Star Lane was building barges in the 1820s, and a decade or so later a spate of patriotism was to produce the sailing barges *Lord Palmerston*, *Lord Clyde*, *Sir George Murray*, and *Marquis of Anglesea*. The Hitch family of Ware were one of the most respected builders on the river until the Great War. Frederick and William Hitch built and repaired barges and small boats for the Government gunpowder factory at Waltham Abbey, including the first *Lady of the Lea* launched in 1898. Specifications for a number of these craft exist in the Public Record Office at Kew. Hitch also had a yard at South Dock, Bishop's Stortford, and there are a number of references to barge building on the Stort, including a newspaper account for 5th July, 1862, of the launching of the 100-ton sailing barge *Young Frank* built by George Smith.

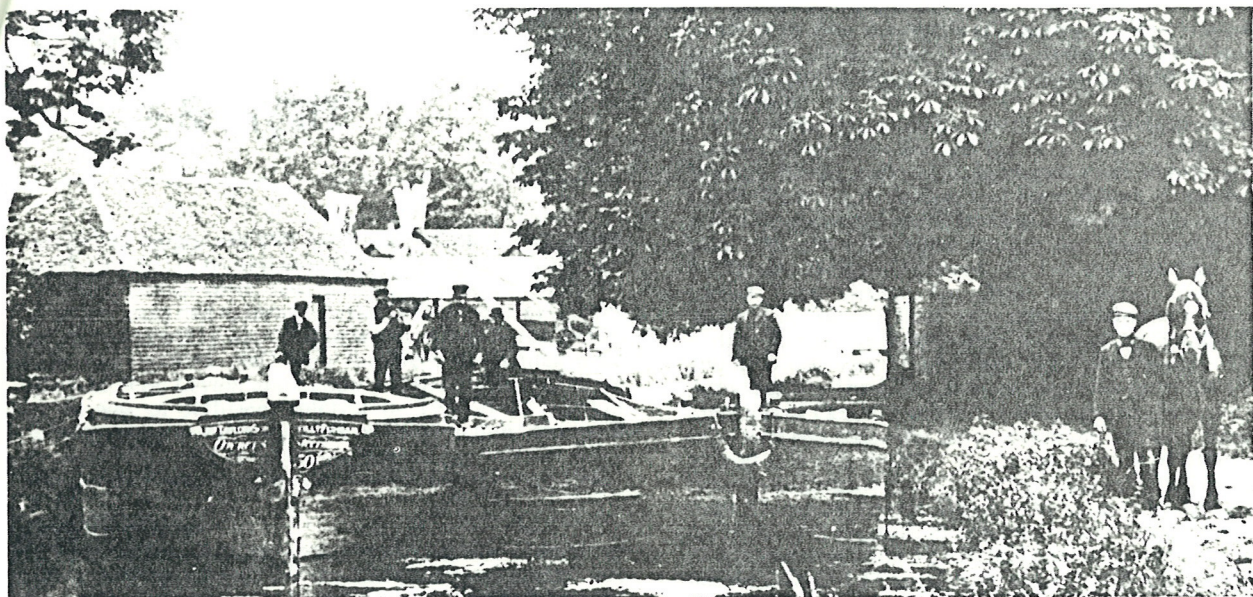
Prints, paintings and old photographs show the typical river Lee craft as a wooden, stem headed, transom sterned craft with the only decoration on her transom which showed her tonnage and the name of the owner and steersman. Although there are photographs showing craft setting a diminutive spritsail as far up river as Ware, they were mainly horse towed or propelled by oars. Most barges were flush decked but some had a steering well and headsheets, and a lower deck up forward with a barrel anchor windlass operated by handspike, the windlass bit-heads also being used for towing.

Towage by horse was to continue until the early 1960s, being superseded by tractors, but records go back many years. The records of the gunpowder factory contain a number of tenders, including those for 1872 when the cost for the trip from Waltham to Bromley varied between 16 and 25 shillings. The contract went to Webster Brothers who quoted 22 shillings at a speed of 2 mph for the round trip, but by 1900 the contract had passed to William Iszard charging 14 shillings for a one way trip. The powder barges were not permitted to be towed by tug when laden, but for other traffic tug towage was well established by the turn of the century.

River and Canal Craft

At a casual glance, one barge is very much like another, but a waterman can recognise each craft. Apart from the wide boats – the 10–12ft wide versions of narrowboats – the first obvious division is between the stem-headed straight-sided canal barge which was at home being towed by horse or tractor, and the swim-headed sloping-sided budgett-sterned lighter designed for towing behind a tug. The ends of the lighter sloped like a punt and, indeed, the smaller craft under 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ registered tons were referred to as punts by the lightermen who, perhaps with just an apprentice, handled them under oars on the tideway. All barges using the Lee were required to be capable of being steered so, although most lighters have a fixed rudder or budgett, those on the river have part of this blade capable of being turned with a detachable steel bar tiller on deck. The narrower stem-headed craft were able to work up the Regent's Canal and into Brentford, and at one time there were many steel transom barges, direct descendants of the earlier wooden craft, as well as round-sterned barges. Both types of craft were prone to get their rudders bent, and other craft were built with an overhanging canoe-shaped stern which gave the rudder some measure of protection.

The Lee Conservancy needed craft for the maintenance of the navigation, and their inspections were carried out from their steam barge *Salisbury*, mentioned in 1869 and still in commission in 1922. A few of their steel self-



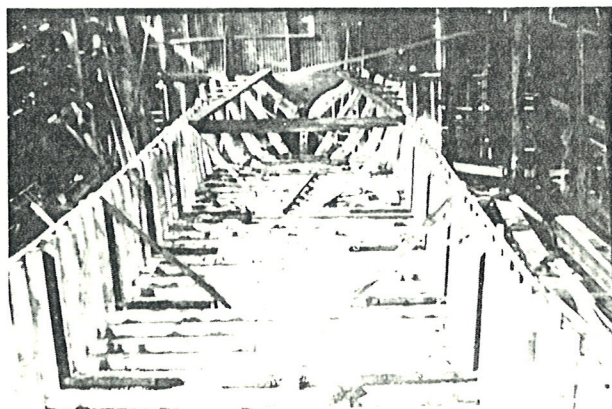
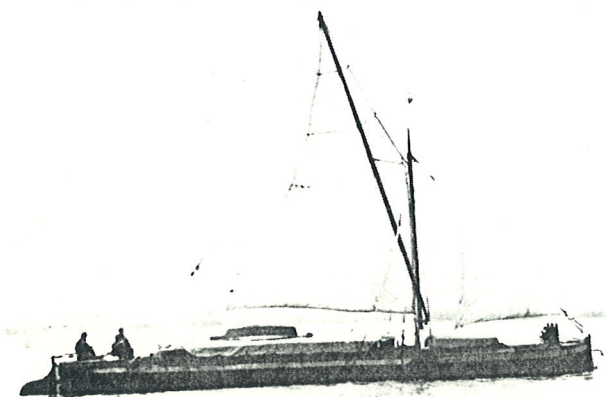
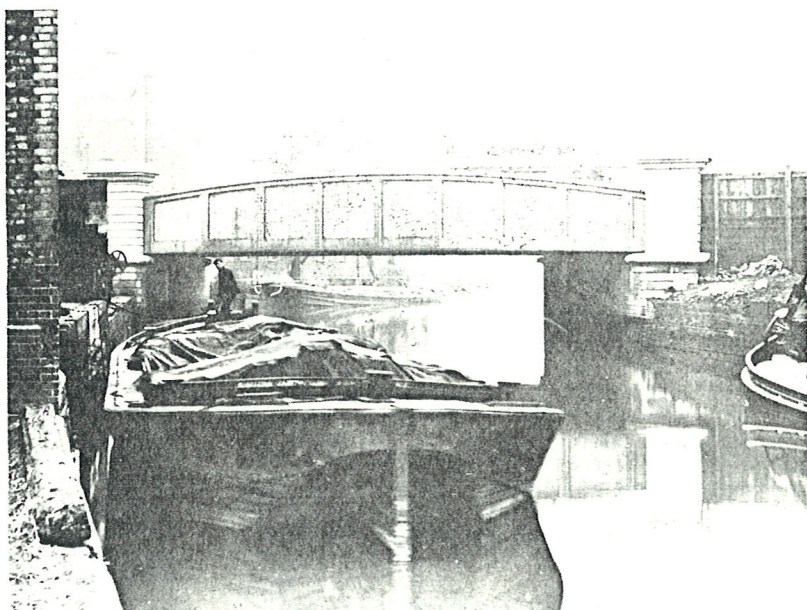
Craft & Cargoes of the Past

Above – Horse-drawn barges at Bishop's Stortford, c.1910. Note the inscription on the transom naming both owner and steersman as well as giving the tonnage. The crane in the background still exists; the land to the left is now a car park. (D. L. McDougall Collection)

Right – One of the snags of early photography was that boats wouldn't keep still for long enough! This photograph of a lighter at Bow Bridge was taken in 1905, and shows the lighter-erman at the windlass, the bows of a river spritsail barge on the right and, under the bridge, a river Lee sailing barge, partly loaded. (The Greater London Council Photograph Library)

Below, Left – The restored wooden sailing barge *Lady of the Lea*, built in 1931. (Peter Reeves)

Below, Right – One of the four barges being built at Arthur White's yard at Conyer in the 1930s. Note the square bilge rounding into the transom stern. (D. Sattin Collection)



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propelled barges can still be found with their distinctive well-rounded bows and long graceful counters. Although William Iszards often saw to the repair of the craft, the Conservators had to turn to Arthur Whites yard at Conyer in Kent when they wanted new wooden craft in the 1930s. The last wooden craft built for them by Whites were *Enfield, Rye, Leyton* and *Latton* and the building of these craft was of sufficient interest in 1934-6 to warrant photographs at various stages of construction. The yard went on to build small swim-headed lighters for work inside the Waltham Abbey explosives factory until 1941.

Few Survivors

Of the craft that once worked the Lee, few remain; of those built at Conyer for the Conservators, *Latton* was recently in use as a mooring pontoon at Hertford, and the flood alleviation works at Feilde's Weir in 1976 revealed a graveyard of sunken boats including the *Homerton* and *Hackney* (now once again covered by water). The remains of *Prudence* are in the cut at Hicks old brickfield a short distance above Ware Lock. Perhaps the most interesting survivor of the wooden craft is the *Lady of the Lea*, the last wooden sailing barge. When built at Rotherhithe in 1931 she closely followed specifications of barges built a century earlier. Used in the explosives trade during the war, she eventually spent a number of years as a housebarge at Kingston until, newly rigged, she revisited the Lea in 1979 and is once more out sailing on London River. Her sister barge, *King Edward*, was not so fortunate, being broken up at Batchworth on the Grand Union the previous year.

By 1901, records for the Lee Conservators show that there were 75 barge owners with craft working on the navigation, which entitled them to vote for a representative on the Board. Fellows Morton & Clayton had a couple of boats on the river; Smeed Dean, the brick and cement manufacturers of Sittingbourne, Kent, had ten craft; and Vokins & Company of Regent's Canal Dock had seventeen. Many local owners had only one or two craft, and as the upper reaches of the Lee and Stort were essentially rural the millers and maltsters predominated in the earlier lists of bargeowners. A surviving toll book of 1834 for Kings Weir Lock shows that malt occupied 60% of the down-river entries. Another rural product which taxed the minds of the Conservators was manure, and there are many complaints about it being transported in old leaky craft which were prone to sink.


Charles Joseph Albany & Son of Ware, barge owners, corn, coal and coke merchants, were the last firm to work their own craft up to Ware. Albans owned the narrow-beam tugboat *Trial* and road transport in the form of horse and cart and, latterly, motor vehicles. In the 1930s they acquired four Dutch-built barges, *Ware, Warsaw, Warren* and *Wargrave*, specifically designed to go under the toll bridge at Ware when empty without drawing down the water level as had to be done for craft of rival firms. Low bridges were always a problem on the Lee, and Gardner & Tomlin of Mile End Road had a number of barges specially built for the Waltham Abbey trade capable of getting under the even lower refinery bridge in the powder works. The Stort, too, brought problems; its

locks, even after the river's re-opening in 1924, remained too narrow for the river Lee craft, and a number of barges (with the prefix *Stort*) were built specifically to work this navigation.

One of the largest fleet owners on the navigations for a number of decades around the turn of the century was William Iszard, contractor, lighterman and wharfinger of Essex Wharf, Lea Bridge, and Hale Wharf, Tottenham. Apart from general cargo, his fleet carried mainly coal and coke and arranged horse towage for other companies. Today, the largest fleet using the Lee must be that of the Ocean Cory Group. On 28th December, 1979, the Thames & General fleet were merged into the Group in which Mercantile Lighterage continue to handle fine goods while Cory Lighterage take the 'rough' stuff. Although the Thames & General tugs now sport the white diamond of Corys, it will take a long time to eliminate the blue and red from the hatch coamings of their barges; indeed it is still possible to see the colours of other old firms including the green coamings of the craft taken over from Clements Tough. Despite the decline in lighterage since the introduction of containers, the Group still has 128 open barges and 32 hatched barges capable of working the Lee and 23 canal craft of some 100 tons capacity. The fleet also includes 28 launch tugs and a couple of workboats.

Traffic Today

In 1979, some 91,050 tons were carried above Old Ford Locks, of which 60,000 tons were copper for the Enfield Rolling Mills. Although the sheet metal mill may close, the wire mills should continue to manufacture copper wire from the copper cathodes brought in by water, but the trade in copper slab cakes shipped overseas at the Royal Docks, Northfleet, and Dagenham, originating from Australia and Sweden, may decline. The other main traffic is in timber up to Edmonton. Last year Hahn & Co took 9,000 tons and Lathams 4,500 tons. Of the rest, 9,500 tons went to BWB yards and 8,050 to sundry customers. Below Old Ford Lock the BWB cannot claim tolls, but last year the traffic on these semi-tidal and tidal waters amounted to some 235,000 tons. This included bulk sulphur, part of the 18,000 tons delivered to Steetly Chemical, the Berk Spencer works at Stratford on the Channelsea River, and 12,000 tons of scrap metal which came from Cohens in Limehouse Basin. Exports from BWB Duck Lees Lane depot included Gestetner duplicators and resins brought in by road from Cambridge, in addition to which any traders can use the public wharf at Bow.

However, trade continues to decline from the 114,500 tons of toll-paying traffic and 279,000 tons of toll-free traffic in 1976. Recently the BP St Leonards Wharf closed, losing some 187,000 tons annually from the trade of the lower river. Recent investigations seem to indicate that there is not sufficient potential traffic in the Lee Valley to justify the improvement work needed for Sea-Bee or LASH barges but, while the future of commercial carrying is in doubt, the number of pleasure craft increases. 

Spritsail Barge Research

The authors are members of the Society for Spritsail Barge Research, annual membership of which costs £2. Full details from the Hon Secretary, Mr M. A. Farnham, 17 Beaumont Drive, Northfleet, Kent.