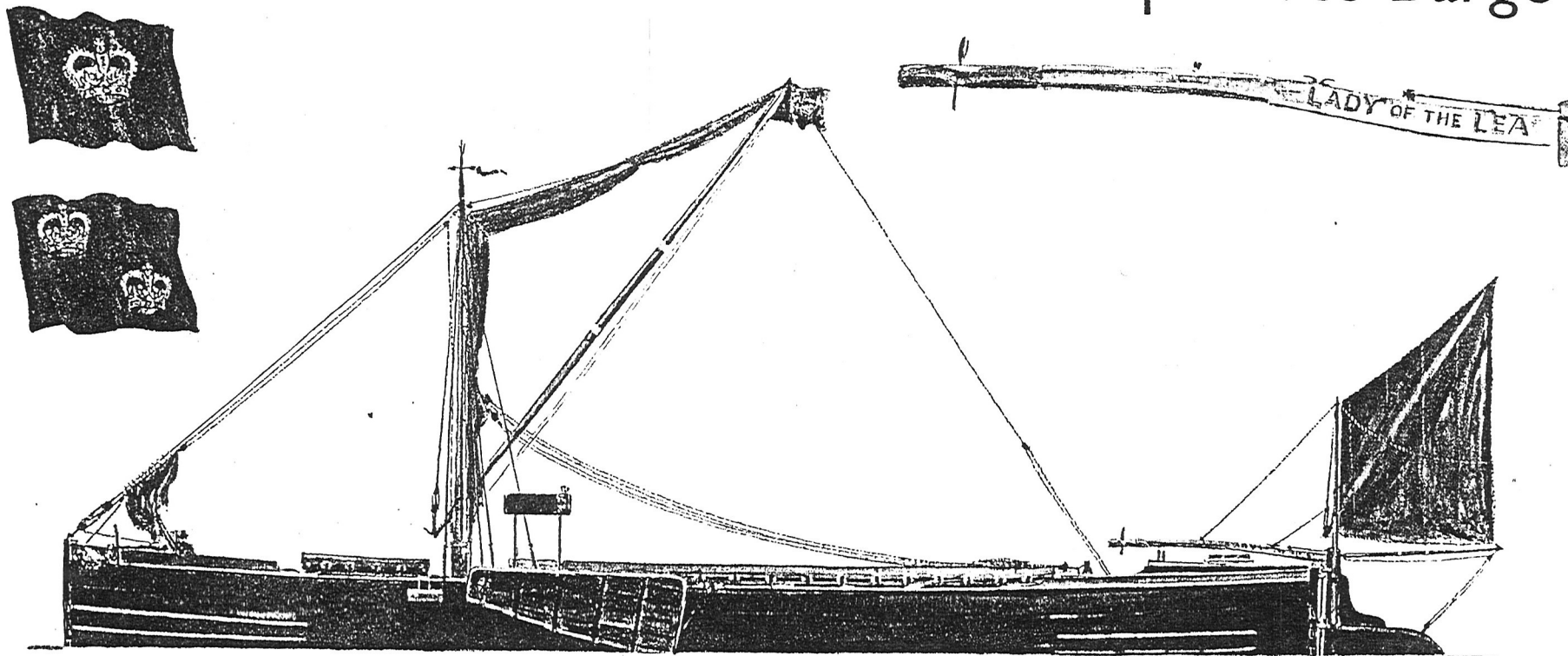


WAsc 1863
WAI 458

Extract from
E. Paget Tomlinson
'Colours of the Cut'
No. 23: Explosives
Barge Lady of
the Lea

Colours of the Cut

No 23: Explosives Barge



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With the IWA National Rally on the Lee at Waltham Abbey, I have temporarily forsaken narrowboats and gone over to one of the spritsail barges built for the Government explosives traffic from what was founded in 1787 as the Royal Gunpowder Factory at Waltham Abbey, on the site of earlier works. The barges brought up raw materials and returned with explosives for the Arsenal at Woolwich, for the magazines at Purfleet and for works below Gravesend. These craft were specially designed with double, lead lined bulkheads between the hold and the cabin, a lightning conductor, and scuttles fore and aft which if an explosion threatened would sink the barge in minutes once opened. Last of the powder barges to be built, and indeed the last wooden spritsail barge of any kind, was this one, the *Lady of the Lea*, in 1931 by Hyam & Oliver of Rotherhithe. She was sold out of Government service in 1947 and is believed to have gone to France. Subsequently she was a houseboat on the Thames but during the 1970s was bought by three students from Kingston Polytechnic, two of them being Brian Pain and Caroline Ware. They restored and rerigged her although the 'stumpy' rig she used to carry was found to be slow. She now has a topmast and takes part in the Swale Smack & Sailing Barge Matches.

Decoration is limited on the 'Lady' but red abounds. The transom (which is drawn to twice the size of the side elevation) may have carried the steerer's name and a number but these have not been discovered. The vessel's name was only seen on the tiller which is not drawn to scale, while the flags indicate the carriage of Government explosives, the two-crown one being flown when a Government official was aboard. I am not sure how the two crowns were set out. For a spritsail barge the 'Lady' is small, 72ft long by 13ft breadth with a 70 ton capacity although she would rarely be loaded to this. Elizabeth and David Wood of the Society for Spritsail Barge Research have provided all the information, along with Peter Ferguson who prepared detailed drawings of the *Lady of the Lea* to be found in David Wood's book *Powder Barge WD*. Many thanks indeed.

Edward Paget-Tomlinson

