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BARGES ARE IN GORDON'S BLOOD

Mum Nellie was a skipper's mate and worked alongside her husband

By TOM KING
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FOR over a decade, Gordon Wiseman has been engaged on a quest. This journey has taken him, in his own words, "up every creek, river and estuary on the English coast from Great Yarmouth to Portland Bill."

The purpose of his exhaustive mission has been to seek out every surviving Thames sailing barge, not to mention quite a few that are still identifiable as wrecks and skeletal shapes in the mud

been conducted on behalf of the Thames Sailing Barge Research Society. A keen photographer all his adult life, Gordon, 74, has built up what may be the most comprehensive collection of images of these fabulous vessels.

The main purpose of the quest has been straightforward, just to build up a permanent record for the future. Yet there have been other driving forces at work in the background. Gordon has a personal link to the days when sailing barges were working vessels doing a job, rather than heritage boats. More especially, he carries the memory of a remarkable woman.

Many are the legendary tales of the Thames barge skippers and their mates, but they all, without fail, refer to men. Gordon's father William, was one of them. He was in charge of a cement barge for a number of years before coming ashore to work in the Great Wakening brickfields. How many other people, though, can say that their mother also crewed a barge?

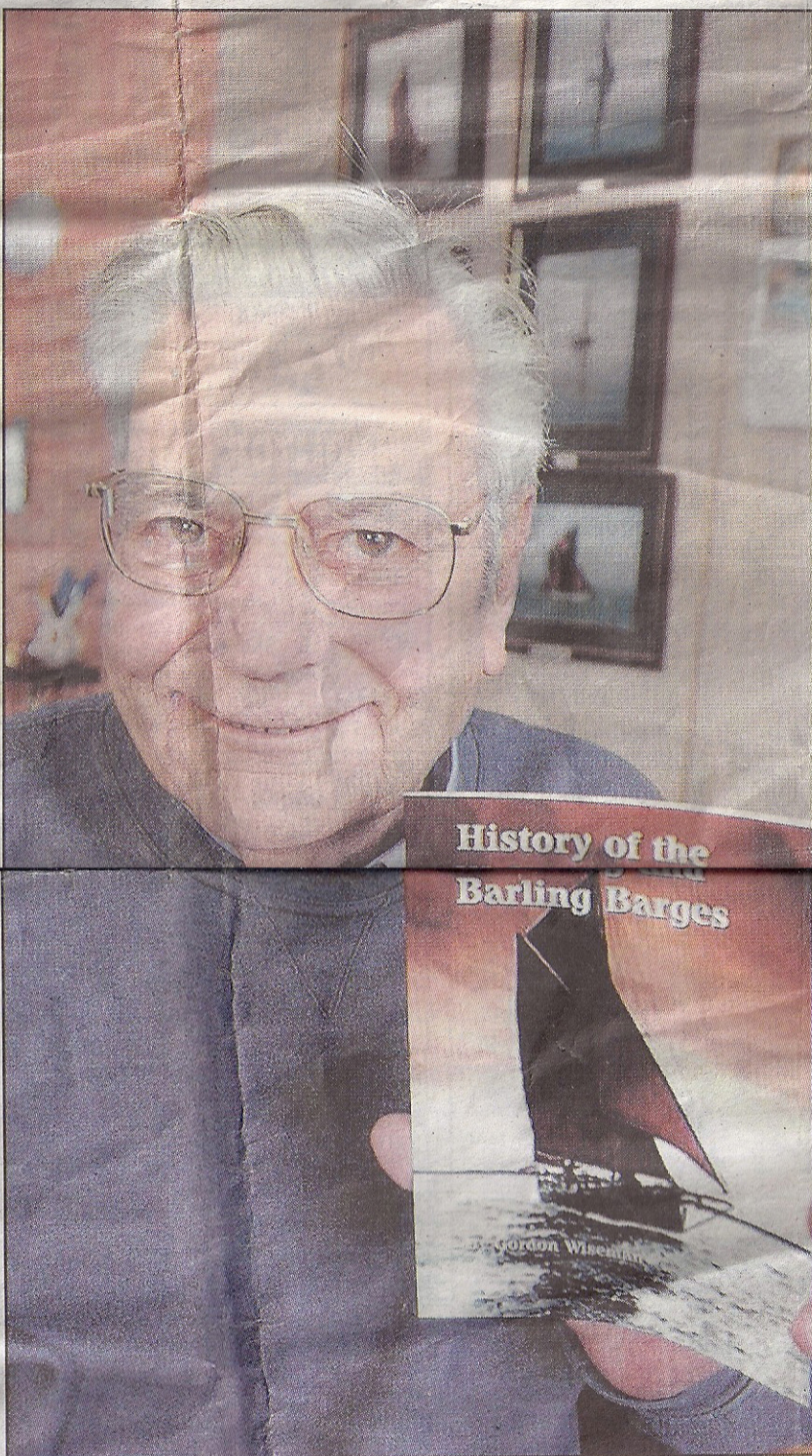
Nelly Wiseman, nee Livermore, worked as a skipper's mate during the First World War, at a time when many of the male barge crews had been drafted to fight in the Army and navy.

"She did everything on the barges that a man would do - all the hard physical tasks," Gordon says.

Nobody, even Gordon, seems to have considered her in any way remarkable.

"She didn't talk about it much," Gordon says. "It wasn't something she took a pride in or remembered with any pleasure. As far as she was concerned it was just a job."

For all this nonchalance, however, the more Gordon talks about his bargewoman mum, the more exceptional she appears. The cement barge was not just a workplace. It was also a home for Nelly



■ Barge historian - Gordon Wiseman

Picture: STEVE O'CONNELL APND2

during the early days of her marriage to William. During this period she also gave birth to at least two children. "When she knew her time was near she'd simply take a room ashore in Corringham, for the birth," Gordon says.

The red ochre sails of the brickfield barges could often be seen towering above the sea wall

It is hardly surprising, then, if Nelly Wiseman failed to see the romantic side of Thames barges. Eventually she and William simply walked away from the life.

"There's a story in the family about how it all ended," Gordon says.

"They were at anchor and a big storm blew up. The barge dragged its anchor in the night and eventually it crashed into a pier. They simply stepped on to the pier and said: 'That's it, that's us finished with barges,' and walked away."

For Gordon, though, it was different. He has been caught up by the beauty and fascination of Thames barges since childhood. Nobody taught him to admire them, it was just instinctive. He recalls this early love affair in a book he has compiled about the vessels that drifted around the edge of his home village of Great Wakening.

"As a young boy coming home from school during the early years of the Second World War," he

writes, "the red ochre sails of the brickfield barges could often be seen towering above the sea-wall. To me it was the ultimate in excitement. I would run all the way down to the creek as fast as my short legs would carry me, then sit on the sea-wall for hours with my elbows resting on my knees, watching those huge sails gradually wending their way up the River Crouch. My mind would often run riot, imagining I was sailing to some far distant part of the globe."

This fascination only grew as Gordon learned more about these extraordinary vessels.

"They were so versatile," he says. "They could carry every cargo under the sun. I have a picture of the Hadleigh Castle transporting a threshing machine."

There are around 40 barges still under sail all 100 years old all going strong. How many other cargo vessels have lasted that long, let alone been seaworthy?"

The sailor, alas, can't be said of the barge crews. Sadly, the bargelady of Great Wakening died tragically young, while still in her 40s. She was simply worn out, as Gordon says, by overwork, worry and the stress of bearing and raising 11 children.

"She went into hospital for a minor operation in 1944," Gordon says. "My father visited her on a Sunday afternoon and she told him 'I'm feeling tired, William. I'm just going to sleep.' That was it. She never woke up."



■ Thames sailing barge - a familiar sight in the estuary in the 1940s, and inset, Gordon Wiseman, aged 17, who is still fascinated by them

He also admires their resilience. "They nearly all sunk at one time or another but they were raised up and then just carried on working."

My mind would often run riot imagining I was sailing off to some far distant part of the globe

There are around 40 barges still under sail all 100 years old all going strong. How many other cargo vessels have lasted that long, let alone been seaworthy?"

The sailor, alas, can't be said of

Life was tough for families in the brickfields

THEY were an ordinary working family, living in Great Wakening in the 1940s. Their circumstances did not appear in any way abnormal at the time. Yet seen from an early 21st century perspective, their lives seem incredible.

Could this really have been Essex, just 60 years ago?

The Wiseman family consisted of mother, father and 11 children. William Wiseman worked in the Wakening brickfields. It was tough work. By the age of 56 he had already suffered two strokes.

They were brought on by the hardships of the life, according to Gordon, his youngest son

who took back-breaking work in the potato fields when it was available. On these joint wages, the family got by, but in what nowadays would be considered unbearable conditions.

The family slept four-to-a-bed, "two at each end", as Gordon Wiseman recalls.

"Sheets were a luxury we didn't know. We just had rough horse blankets."

Hot water was another unknown luxury and washing was done under the sink tap.

Nobody starved, but Sunday lunch consisted of sausages.

The family counted itself fortunate in having a 100-yard garden stretching behind the house. This was given over to

growing fruit and vegetables and raising chickens.

"All that was the responsibility of us children," Gordon says. "We looked after the garden. Our father didn't have anything to do with it."

For all the hardships, Gordon remembers his childhood as a happy time. Much of the period coincided with the Second World War.

"For me it was a most exciting time," Gordon says. "As a six or seven year old, you would watch our planes shoot down an enemy bomber and it was as exciting as a local football match."

One day Gordon was standing with his brother Norman, watching a flight of Spitfires attack

a Heinkel He 111 between two trees, taking its wing-tips off, and came to a standstill near New Road. The crew were rounded up, then a detachment of the Essex Regiment was posted to guard the plane against souvenir hunters.

But Gordon recalls: "My mother took on the task of preparing the soldiers' meals. While they were in the house eating, my elder brothers took advantage of their absence and stole some of the batteries and light fittings from the plane. They used them to rig up a lighting system in our air raid shelter. It was probably the only private air-raid shelter in Great Wakening to have electric lighting. We didn't even have it in the house."

were more than just a job for his mum and dad. As for Gordon, he has worked out his fascination for, and huge knowledge of, barges, by acting as their historian. His general record of barges has been published by the Thames Barge Research Society.

But Gordon has carved out a smaller volume dedicated to the barges that serviced the farms and brickfields of Great Wakening, where he was born, raised, and continues to live. They are the vessels that entranced him as a child. Now he has found a way to say thanks for the memory.

"History of the Wakening and Barling Barges is privately published by Gordon Wiseman.

Copies can be obtained from Gordon by calling 01702 218242.



■ The Wisemans - Gordon is front right