

# Dick Gregory Assists The Dunkirk Evacuation

Article by Richard Kirton

## DUNKIRK



This article should appeal to all of those who are passionate about Thames Barges and how they became to be used during World War II.

**Yvonne Flower** honours her hero and grandfather, Dick Gregory, who played his part as Master of the Thames Barge '**Viking**' during the Dunkirk evacuation.

The Viking was one of many little Ships that went to the aid of the British Expeditionary Force during '**Operation Dynamo**' in 1940.

The objective of Operation Dynamo, also known as the **Miracle of Dunkirk**, was to evacuate Allied soldiers from the beaches and harbour of Dunkirk, France, between 27th May and 4th June 1940.

Dick was born in 1885 and died on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1959. Dick is pictured above, with his daughter, Yvonne's mother. At the

time of the war Dick was living with his family on Wakering Common.

### 'Viking' Journal during Operation Dynamo

On 30<sup>th</sup> May 1940, **Dick Gregory**, Master, accompanied by Sub-lieutenant T. R. Rumbold of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, sailed to La Panne aboard the Thames Barge '**Viking**', and ferried all the forenoon.

On 31st May the Viking ran aground on the beach and damaged her bows and forward gears, so that she could only go astern. She had 150 troops on board.

At 0500hrs that day between Dunkirk and La Panne the Viking hailed the '**Dwarf**' for assistance. 34 troops were transferred to the Dwarf, which took Viking in tow. The tow rope broke but another attempt was made; in the course of the latter attempt the tow rope failed the Dwarf's rudder and could not be cleared. About half-way on the return journey the trawler '**Olvina**' took the Viking in tow and the Dwarf proceeded independently. The Olvina and Viking arrived at Dover at 2200hrs and disembarked 70 troops.

On 1st June at 1200hrs, the Viking sailed for Bray arriving at 2100hrs. The Viking's clutches burnt out and the vessel was beached.

On 2nd June the Viking managed to kedge off, and was apparently towed to the Downs whence a tug towed her to Ramsgate.

The engineer, Mr G. Ratcliffe, estimates that about 1,000 troops were rescued by the Viking [presumably by ferrying]. (*Source: "Southend Standard" report dated 13th June 1940*).

## **'Viking' - Specifications**

The Viking was constructed of Pitch pine on oak in 1895 at Rochester's Co-operative Barge Yard, and her first master was William Jarrett of Upnor. She was 87ft long with a 17ft 4ins Beam. Her draft was 3ft 6ins and her displacement was 63 tons and she was built without an engine.

By 1934 Viking had been converted into a yacht barge, and soon afterwards passed into the ownership of the Whiting family - well known Medway barge owners whose fleet numbered half a dozen vessels in the 1940s.



Prior to the war the Viking was a well-known trader around the Medway and the East Coast. She sailed around the East and South-east coast ports: Norwich, Great Yarmouth, Ramsgate and Felixstowe, and twice crossed to Calais. With the London and Rochester she had Yarmouth - Dover limits, but a considerable diversity of cargo. This included imported grain and animal feedstuffs from London's Victoria and Millwall docks consigned to the merchants of Ipswich; Canadian and American wood pulp for the big paper mills, and sawn timber from Scandinavia and Canada for the traders at Maldon, Essex. On her return journeys she often carried bags of cement, destined for the emerging third world countries, for industrial buildings and new airports.

After Dunkirk she continued her war service as a balloon barge, from which anti-aircraft barrage balloons were flown. After the war she was re-rigged at Whitstable for cargo carrying as a coastal barge. At the end of that decade, Whitings were taken over by the London and Rochester Trading Company and throughout the '50s Viking worked for them.

## **Association of Dunkirk Little Ships**

In May 1965 to mark the 25th anniversary of 'Operation Dynamo' Raymond Baxter the famous radio and TV presenter organised and assembled a fleet of 43 of the original Little Ships of Dunkirk to return to Dunkirk to commemorate the epic of the evacuation of the BEF in 1940, in which they played such a significant role. It was decided that such a unique assembly should not be allowed to disperse into obscurity and the 'Association of Dunkirk Little Ships' was subsequently formed in 1966. The object of the Association is to keep alive the spirit of Dunkirk by perpetuating for posterity the identity of those Little Ships that went to the aid of the British

Expeditionary Force during Operation Dynamo in 1940 by forming a registered association of their present-day owners and of those closely associated.

Qualification for full membership is simple; the current ownership of a proven Dunkirk Little Ship. Membership wins the right for that vessel to wear the Association's warranted House Flag, the Cross of St George (the flag of the Admiralty) defaced with the Arms of Dunkirk. Little Ships are also entitled to display a plaque marked 'DUNKIRK 1940'.

Over 100 Little Ships are presently represented by members of the Association. The Association organises several meetings 'on the water' each year where the Little Ships may be seen and appreciated by the public. Every 5 years the Little Ships, supported by the Royal Navy, return under their own power to Dunkirk. Considering the youngest Little Ship is now over 70 years old, this is no small undertaking. In 2008 the Association was privileged to have HRH Prince Michael of Kent GCVO accept the invitation to become the Association's Honorary Admiral.