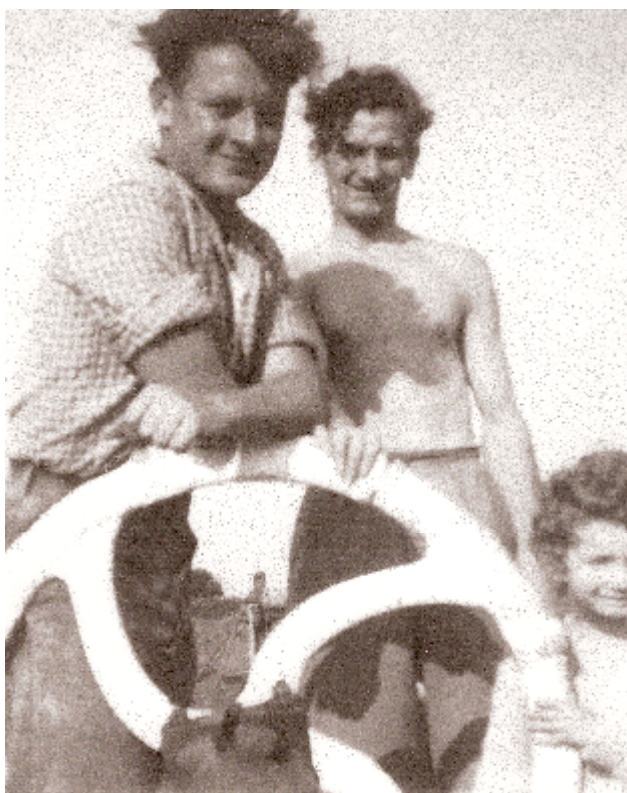


HISTORY RETURNS

A THING OF BEAUTY-A JOY FOR EVER

THE SAILING BARGE-CYGNET

By Laurie Street



About 1.30 pm on Wednesday 28th July 2010 I was running my boat down the Violet creek towards Paglesham when I saw over the Potton Sea Wall near Paglesham Pool the Iconic and unmistakable sight of the topsail of a Sailing barge. I don't get too excited about many things but this was one of the exceptions. She was sailing up river and I thought it must be one of the charter barges from Maldon.

She continued to sail through the moorings and I continued, as she reached the Violet to my surprise she started to turn

into the Violet and started to come into full view. I saw she wasn't one of the Maldon boats as she was only about half the length (the Maldon boats being 75-80 feet). As she was under sail with the topsail and mizzen set I kept clear but moved close enough to read the name on the port bow. I thought 'Could it be' and to my absolute pleasure saw the name CYGNET. My head was in a whirl but I knew it could be no other as I have never seen another fully rigged spritsail barge of that size.

You may wonder why I make a fuss but the CYGNET played a big part in my young life in the 40s and 50s. It also played a big part in the life of the area at that time, not least the time of the East Coast Floods of 53.

The GYGNET was launched on the 3rd August 1881, registered at Harwich and commenced work.

Edward 'GAFFER' Mumford bought her in 1948 to carry cockle shell from the Shell beds off Foulness Island, through the Crouch, Roach and creeks almost to the end of Barling creek where a dock had been made. I was friends with the Mumford family through attending the tiny school at

Barling which only had a few classrooms but catered for all ages when some teachers taught several classes at the same time in one room.

In 1948 I was 13 and used to mess about in the creek with the boats and first went to sea on the GYGNET when I



was about 14. The idea was to go down to the Shell Bank on one tide, moor the GYGNET along the Shell Bank. Her freight was 100 quarters of grain (25 tons), when the tide ebbed away the boat was loaded with shell and left when the next tide flowed and made its way back up to Kimberly road only to be unloaded and made ready for the next trip. Because the shell banks were on the Ministry of Defence firing ranges clearance had to be obtained from them. As they were firing most of the week the trips were made at weekends which suited me as I could go without missing school and later when I left school and went to work (but not on the CYGNET).

I carried on helping out like this for several years. Wherever I was or whatever I was doing my mind was always on the CYGNET. She was also a registered fishing boat and when not getting shell trawled fish and also dredged white weed. This was a fern like sea plant which had become popular as a decoration after having been washed, dried and dyed various colours.

I go back to the 28th July and watched in awe as the CYGNET continued up the Violet and when opposite Potton Creek dropped anchor. I thought she was going to sail through the GORE and out into the Thames and went back to my mooring at Barling with my head spinning. After a few minutes she weighed anchor and started to make her way up towards Barling, she passed me, the skipper giving the traditional wave of the hand and carried on gingerly but gracefully through the twisting channel between the expanse of saltings, passed Smugglers Island, once used by smugglers to avoid the Revenue Men with their cargoes of contraband reputedly on route to Little Wakering Hall or the Ivy House.

I left my boat and drove round to Kimberley Road just in time to see the CYGNET turn in Baldwins Dock and disappear back towards Paglesham. Obviously the present owner had done some homework and was retracing some of the working life of the CYGNET. To me this was an amazing

sight and all the history flooded back. Over the years I had spent many cold nights in the tiny cabin, many boiling days toiling on the shell banks not to mention being caught out in a few storms.

One night in January 1953 storms were forecast. During the evening the Barling Youth Centre Drama Group had put on a Pantomime at the Parochial Hall. I remember going there on my bike and the wind wasn't too bad. Whilst there the winds reached horrendous speeds from the North and when I went to ride home I was literally blown there.

I changed my clothes and tried to ride back to the CYGNET and other boats to find Gaffer had put out extra ropes and anchors. By now it was about 2 hours before high water and the sea was already coming over the top of the Sea Wall. It was the most terrible night of my life, the wind was so strong and cold that you couldn't face the wind and breathe without covering your face. Although I was a young fit, 17 year old I couldn't stand against the wind at times.

The storm had been caused by a combination of lunar phase, direction and speed of the wind, barometric pressure, heavy rain and perhaps sheer bad luck.

Communications were very difficult. I had no telephone but had a home radio. The boats had no ship to shore radios or little else except a compass and a lead line.

No one slept that night, there was little more we could do at that time. I went to GT Wakering Church where I had heard there was terrible loss of life at the Camp on the Common. The water had reached 'Cottawright' and had come up 'Tinkers Lane.' but had not reached the Church or Churchyard. The Wakering people had done what they could and I went back to Barling. We knew it was going to a difficult time. The information and organisation was sketchy. Any plans seemed to be down to the instincts of the boatmen. We thought about what we intended to do and how we intended to do it.

The petrol for the engines of the CYGNET was contaminated with sea water. We were given petrol by Arthur Bentall from Wick Farm (The grandfather of the present farmers), also straw bales which were put in the hold of the CYGNET for people to sit on.

As dawn broke the extent of the floods could be seen. All the fields were flooded and many things had been swept away. A formidable gang of men had gathered. The instincts took the CYGNET to Foulness towing her 14 foot skiff. The skiff was pulled over the seawall. The scene was heartbreaking. The carcasses of cattle were many. The skiff was rowed from house to house when people climbed out of the upper windows into

the skiff. Foulness is a big place in a rowing boat and a howling gale. Other fishermen and boatmen helped and all foulness people were successfully collected. They all found accommodation on land with friends and relatives. I was told that some had never previously left the Island.

All the arable land had been contaminated with salt water and became infertile. When it eventually dried out it was treated with Gypsum which neutralised the salt and returned it to its full fertility.

The next day the boat went to Oxenham where the farmers and farm workers were again successfully collected and brought to dry land.

Once everyone was accounted for as far as possible it was time to think about repairing the Sea Walls and everything else.

Gaffer had another boat, an ex MOD Tank Landing Craft. This couldn't be described as pretty but it was certainly functional, she could carry 30 tons, had a big door in the bow and drew little water. I think the largest breach was at Upper Raypits and we were asked to carry filled sandbags to the breach from the sea side because the land was still flooded and water was still flowing onto the farmland at high tide. When we arrived we were met by the gang of farm workers from Oldbury Farm who had gone to help and had already filled the sandbags with black, gooey mud from the saltings. The method of repairing the breaches was to lay filled sandbags along the bottom of what was left of the wall in an elongated pyramid, bonded in and held in place with wooden stakes knocked in at an angle in a long WIGWAM form. Soil from a borrow dyke or mud from the saltings was built up to complete the wall. Eventually tough grass was sown on the walls. This was of paramount importance as the roots bind the soil and if the sea should overtop the wall it is flattened and acts as a thatch and prevents the wall from washing away at the rear.

We were soon loaded and as the tide made the water was flowing onto the farmland at an alarming rate, we wanted to get the boat onto the edge of the breach but as we neared the breach the tide caught the boat and swept her clean through the breach and beyond. All we could do was to wait for the tide to reach its highest. At slack water we were able to get out again dropping our cargo as we went.

We carried, well thousands of tons of blocks, I suppose. The boats didn't stop day or night. The landing craft could carry 900 blocks at a time. We loaded at all the old barge docks dotted around the rivers and creeks.

There were many breaches in the walls. Although some may disagree many years on it was and is my view that The River Catchment Board did a fantastic job. All the Sea Walls were heightened by three feet, a birm

was built at the back of all walls and the walls were faced with concrete blocks.

I was only told this the other day by a friend who was around at the time when we were loading at Bullmans Wharf. Apparently I was rowing out an anchor in the skiff and Gaffer was watching and talking to someone else about me, he was heard to say, "I keep telling him to go home, but he won't go." This was true, the only time I went home was to have a bath and get supplies of food. I wouldn't leave the boats in case I missed something.

Davey & Armitage were the timber merchants on Wallasea and most of the timber had washed away. We salvaged many tons for them. At one place a large amount had been washed into a bay over the top of the saltings. This couldn't be accessed from the land due to flooding and the boats couldn't get to it. We borrowed a bogey train from Milton Hall, built a railway across the saltings and recovered the timber.

While all this was going on we still maintained the cockleshell business, incidentally the shell was dried, crushed and sold to Poultry Farmers for chicken grit.

The boats worked tirelessly for months but after a while I thought I should get back to my day job which was at Dagenham. When I returned I was summoned to see the Managing Director. I thought I was going to get the sack but instead had my hand shaken and congratulated by the big boss.

Towards the end of 53 I reached the age of 18 and was called up to serve in the Royal Air Force. Wherever I went my thoughts were always with the boats, with Gaffer who was my mentor, a man I respected and admired as much as any I have ever met. Whenever I had leave apart from going home I always made for the boats and a few trips on the CYGNET. For his efforts during and after the floods GAFFER was awarded the British Empire Medal.

After I finished my stint in the RAF I returned home in a big dilemma, What should I do, should I go back to my old job which was still open to me as I was an apprentice but I didn't fancy it, or should I do something else. I spoke to Gaffer, who always spoke 'pearls of wisdom' who after a long discussion said, "Well, if you really want that, you can come back here." So my association with the CYGNET and the other boats continued.

In the meantime gaffer had brought another boat from Tollesbury which I helped bring back while on leave. She was a handsome 33 feet motor fishing boat which fished like a dream but never quite matched the rock

solid CYGNET. WE worked together for a while carrying and crushing shell, fishing or dredging weed. Shell was our main job but then a problem was encountered. Our supply of shell was severely restricted. GAFFER bought a lorry and spent time lorry driving leaving me to look after the shell but he always returned when the boats went to the shell banks.

This carried on and then a bigger problem came. Our supply of shell was completely cut off. Drastic measures were called for. The Cygnet had had a hard life and the signs were showing. We feared she was heading for a watery grave. We stripped out the engines and some other parts and then some one from Leigh wanted her. It was a sad day when we towed her out through the GORE to be collected by a Leigh boat.

GAFFER went back to farming and worked for Arthur Bentall. I followed a new career which I had learned in the Royal Air Force. I had to get the CYGNET out of my life. This wasn't easy. I heard stories that she was being restored which pleased me no end and helped. I couldn't think her life was over.

Since my first encounter with the CYGNET and other boats I have never been without a boat and still savour the magic of the rivers, creeks, islands and marshes of the area.

Seeing the CYGNET again on that summer day just a few days short of her 129th birthday brought back all these memories and more, my only regret was that my hand wasn't on the tiller guiding her back up the creek as I had done so many times all those years ago but I think the old girl knew her way without much help from anyone.

My overriding memory is of the floods of 53 and the courage of all the local people who were either victims or helped to restore the area afterwards and the value of the CYGNET at that time.

I show two photographs, the first taken in the 50s of a young bargeman leaning on the wheel of the CYGNET with some of his family (Yes I did have hair once and plenty of it) and the second taken on that day when she returned to her roots, restored to all her former glory and sailing perfectly.

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