

"A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST" - The Life of Thomas Mead b.1855 written by his son Ernest Mead in 1984



In today's affluent society, it is sometimes difficult to imagine life in this part of Essex a hundred years ago. Communications were poor, there were no trams or buses, radio or telephone, and the only way of travelling was by horse (or foot) over roads that were for the most part unmade. For most people, housing was poor and overcrowded, the working day was long and hard and there was little reward at the end of the week. Last year we were pleased to receive from Mr. Ernest Mead of High Street, Great Wakering some notes on the life of his father, Thomas Mead, which give a fascinating insight into life in rural Essex during the last century. What follows is about Thomas Mead's life in his younger days, as written by Ernest Mead.

"My grandparents lived at Stambridge near Rankin's Mills, and grandfather worked for Rankin's, driving a pair of horses which drew a covered wagon. There were six in the family, my father Thomas, born in 1855 was the eldest. He never went to school as in those days it was not compulsory, but Miss Rankin taught him to read and write. He went to work at eleven with a travelling hay and straw binder. He used to get up at three in the morning and walk from Stambridge to Barling at the Rose Inn at Silchester Corner. After the day's work making straw bands he would have to walk home, making frequent stops because his feet were so blistered. I did not know my grandparents, but I know that father did not have a very good time at home. Grandmother was fond of her beer and father had to go the Cherry Tree nearby to get it for her. He resented having to do this, and was often in trouble if she was in a bad mood.

In those days, sailing barges used to trade to the Mills, and at the age of 12 father joined the barge "Abergavany" as cabin boy. During his time in this barge, father came into contact with bargemen from the Millhead Wharf at

Great Wakering. At that time about 60 barges traded from Great Wakering taking bricks to London and the Medway and loaded so that their decks were almost awash. Many times during bad weather they had to turn back at the Buxey Bouy as the sea was too rough and at other times were wind bound for as much as six weeks at a time. They got no pay while wind bound as they were paid for each freight when delivered to its destination. Father then moved to the Wakering barge "Butterfly". The skipper's name was Howard and he lived at 36, Shoebury Road.

During his time in "Butterfly" while in the Thames off Shoeburyness, the topsail sheet came adrift and of course father was ordered aloft. He climbed the mast and went out along the mainsail on the head rope to the sprit end to refix the block with hammer and spikes. They were still under sail and the Skipper was watching father and not what the barge was doing, and he let her gybe, that is go off course causing the mainsail to swing. Over went the sail with a tremendous bang. Father let go the hammer and spikes and hung on for dear life. Down he came in an awful rage and called the skipper some very bad names. He told the skipper he would not go aloft again, but that did him no good as the skipper said he would have him charged with mutiny if he did not obey his orders. So he found another hammer and spikes and went up and did the job again. After some time in "Butterfly" father was made skipper of the "Margaret". She was steered by a tiller which made sudden and violent movements when a heavy sea struck the rudder. At times his ribs and sides would be black and blue with bruises from being struck by the tiller.

It was a hard and rough life and when the men went ashore they often let off steam by playing jokes on others. On one occasion father and some others went ashore at Foulness For provisions and visited the King's Head. A local man called Joe Harrod had a donkey and father and another local called Wacker Belton decided to find this donkey and take it in the pub. They managed this, but the donkey finding itself in unfamiliar surroundings jumped about and kicked out with the result that tables were overturned, mugs upset and soon the place was in uproar. At last father took the donkey out and order was restored. For long after that, whenever "Margaret" sailed near Foulness, anyone on the seawall would keep calling "Flee-haw, hee-haw" until the barge was out of hearing.

During the time that father was Skipper of the barge "Margaret", he became friendly with Henry Groves, who was mate on another barge. Shortly after he met my mother, who was Henry's sister, and they were married at Gt. Wakering Parish Church on 16th May 1885. They were both 20 years of age.

During the service a party of bargemen turned up and there was a disturbance when some of them threw some kneeling hassocks at one of the wedding party. Reverend Malim was Vicar then, and told them that he would have to stop the ceremony if they did not behave. Henry Groves did not live very long after father and mother were married. He was sailing to Kent across the Thames one night when he was lost overboard. About a fortnight later, father had to go to the same place and his mate was another Groves, George the present Bill Groves' father. After unloading they started to heave up the anchor, but it would not come all the way up. When father looked over the side, he was shocked to see a body hanging on the chain, and even more shocked to find that it was his brother-in-law Henry.

Almost all bargemen used to have a shot gun, and often used to go ashore at dusk to get something for dinner. On one occasion, father went ashore with George Groves, and took a shot at a rabbit. One pellet rebounded, probably off a stone, and lodged in George's eyelid, just under the skin. Father wanted to prick it out, but George would not let him and it remained there till he died. On another occasion, Father went ashore with the mate from another barge, who I think was called Arthur White. Father told him to stay with the barge, but he got inquisitive and looked over the top of the seawall to see what father was doing. He was wearing a furry hat at the time, and seeing this father thought it was a hare or rabbit and took aim and fired. Arthur shouted "Oh Tom, you have shot me", but apart from one or two pellets in the top of his head he was not hurt. It was the end of shooting for father though, he never used a gun again.

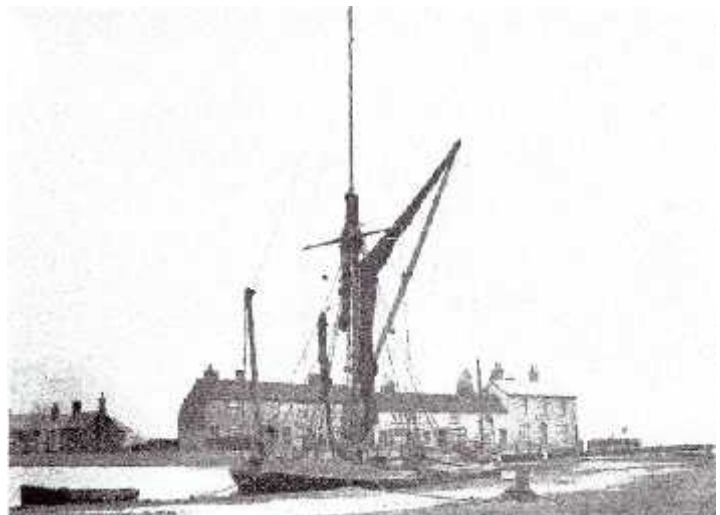
During the Flood in 1896, father was sailing down the Thames with a freight of London house refuse which was used for firing the bricks at Millhead brickfield. He had a fair wind, and came in through the Haven, where there is a bridge now carrying the road to Foulness. On arrival he was told to place the barge across a breach in the seawall. A quantity of bricks and a further load of house refuse were dumped in the breach which successfully stopped it up, and the wall was made good again.

A little time after father and mother married, they both embraced the Christian faith and joined the Congregational Chapel. This did not go down well with father's mates on the barges, and he had a very rough passage as they tried to deter him from his religion. On one occasion, he was tied to the topsail halyards and hauled to the top of the mast, head down. But nothing could come between him and his newfound faith, and eventually he was left in peace. After becoming a Christian, father would never leave Millhead on a Sunday. He would leave on Monday morning, and always seemed to have a fair wind out through the Haven

and up the Thames. On another occasion, father had to move the barge from one dock to another at Millhead to load a special cargo of bricks for export. His mate was a local Salvation Army man named Sonny Everard, and it was blowing a gale when they arrived at Millhead. Not daring to move in these conditions they sat in the cabin until it was almost too late due to the falling tide. They decided to go home, but just as he was stepping off the barge father said to Sonny "Let's go below, and say a prayer". They did that and then went up on deck and cast off. As the last rope let go the wind died, and they had to pole the barge to the other dock. They tied up again, and as the last rope was tied the gale began to rage as badly as ever.

During the lime father was skipper of the barge "Elizabeth", there was a strike for more pay, I do not know how long it lasted, but when it was over the men got no extra money. Father's next trip was to London with a load of bricks, and when he arrived he asked the owner to lend him a shilling as due to the strike he had had no food for several days. The man replied that as father had joined the strike he would lend him nothing, but afterwards relented and handed over a shilling. The money bought a dozen herrings and a loaf of bread, so they had a good meal after all. Sometimes he would take mother and one of my brothers to London with him. On one occasion, they dropped anchor opposite the Houses of Parliament. The next morning, when my brother came up on deck he looked round and said, "Where have the Houses of Parliament gone'? He did not realise, of course, that the tide had turned in the night and the barge with it, and the Houses of Parliament were behind him!

When the chance came to get a larger barge, father look it and became skipper of the "Joseph", which was owned by a Mr Juniper who was in charge of Millhead Brickfield. It was intended that he would lake over the "Gascoigne" which, together with "Juniper", "K.C." and "Anthony" were the last barges to work out of Millhead. When Rutters, the brickfield owners, sold out, these barges were sold off to the skippers. Mr F. Stow bought the "K.C."and Dicky Gregory, the "Gascoigne". Mr Chapman (or "Teddy Wick"as he was generally known) had "Juniper" and the "Anthony" went to Mr Springett.



By then father was getting deaf so he left the sea and went to work for the Wedd family at Whitehall as a gardener and handyman, and I was born while he worked there. Mr Edward Wedd had two sons, and one of them was a keen yachtsman, so it was not long before he had father as a member of his crew. One day they were sailing on the Crouch with Mrs Wedd on board. She was sitting on deck writing a letter when the wind blew it overboard. Father tried to retrieve the letter by jumping into the dinghy but it capsized throwing him into the water, and turned over on top of him. The yacht was sailing at a good pace, and by the time the barge could be turned it was some distance away, and father, who was fully clothed, was having difficulty in keeping afloat. Eventually, the barge came about and reached father and although he was able to climb aboard he was almost exhausted. Father told me that if it had not been for thinking of home and us children, he would not have had the will to keep afloat. But these thoughts saved his life, and he had many more years at home with his family, and remained a deeply religious man to the very end.