Extract from “The Thames from Source to Tideway”:

Thames Wherries by Peter H. Chaplin

To begin the story we must go back to the time, long, long before the advent of steamers, when people used the river as a highway. The earliest known type of craft used for carrying passengers was known as a ‘wherry’. It should be noted, however, that the ‘Thames wherries’ bore no resemblance to the cargo-carrying sailing wherries of the Norfolk Broads which, historically, are relatively modern. The Thames craft were lightly built of clinker, or clincher, construction: that is, all of her timbers, or ‘strakes’, were so attached to each other that the lower edge of each timber overlapped the upper edge of the timber below it, the timbers being ‘clenched’ or ‘clinked’ with copper nails and ‘roves’ (small saucer-shaped copper washers). The action of clenching or riveting the end of the nail into the rove pulled the timbers tightly together. Wherries were designed to glide over, rather than through, the water. They had little freeboard and long, pointed bows raking well forward; the stern was pointed and cut vertically. Dimensions varied, but a typical wherry would have a length of 26 feet with a beam of 5 feet 8 inches. During the 17th and 18th centuries, people relied to a large extent on using a wherry as a quick and easy means of transport; wherries, depending on size, could carry up to eight passengers, also luggage, subject to the following condition: ‘That in all cases when luggage is carried by any of the persons or passengers in the boats licensed under the provisions of the bye-laws, the number of persons or passengers such boats are permitted to carry shall be reduced one respectively from the number of persons or passengers contained in such respective licenses, for every complete hundredweight of luggage so carried as aforesaid.’ A passenger wishing to be taken across the river, or on a short journey, was said to be ‘taking a pair of sculls’ — a wherry sculled by a single waterman (using a pair of sculls). For a longer journey one would take ‘a pair of oars’ that is, a wherry rowed by two watermen each pulling a single oar. On very long journeys, or travelling fully loaded, large wherries were rigged ‘randan’ — that is, handled by three men, the midships man pulling a pair of sculls whilst bow and stroke would have a single oar. Occasionally the crew of three would all handle a pair of sculls. Wherries, in experienced hands were pretty fast craft. The beam at the gunwales where the rowlocks were placed, was far greater than the beam on the waterline, which reduced to a minimum; this gave the effect of a flared gunwale and gave the sculler (or oarsman) the leverage, and elevation of sculls required for speedy propulsion. This idea and design pre-dated the outrigger by some 300 years, the latter being developed in 1844 by Harry Clasper, a Tyneside waterman, who later set up a well-known boat building concern the Thames.

Where river crossings consisted of a ferry, it was not unusual for the craft to be a wherry; wherries were also used for carrying light cargoes and, in the heyday of houseboats in Victorian and Edwardian era, provisions, groceries, wines and spirits, as well as laundry were delivered by wherry.

In 1514 Henry VIII had passed a statute regulating watermen and their fares, recording that it had been a laudable custome and usage tyme out of mind to use the river in Barge or Whery Bote’. The watermen carried on acting independently. However, an Act of 1555 appointed rulers of all watermen and wherrymen working between Gravesend and Windsor and so the Watermen’s Company was born. The same Act introduced apprenticeship for a period of one year for all boys wishing to learn the watermen’s trade. A further Act, in 1603, extended training to seven years. This was a forward-looking provision which was of

inestimable value to both watermen and their industry. In 1700 the lightermen, who until that date had been members of the Woodmonger's Company, succeeded in their petitions to Parliament so that under an Act of that year they were brought into the Watermen's Company, making it 'The Company of Watermen and Lightermen of the River Thames'. The arms of the company were granted to the watermen by Queen Elizabeth I and by the end of the 16th century the company became the proud possessor of its own hall.

Watermen were the first public servants to wear a uniform; in fact before the navy or army had any distinct outfit of clothing, the Thames watermen were known by their uniform and badge. The livery consisted of a pleated coat, knee breeches with hose and a cap with a stiff peak. Upon the arm was a plate or badge, either of the Waterman's Hall (denoting they had the freedom of the river and were licensed) or the badge of his employer. Any person rowing or working a wherry, boat or other vessel for hire who had not served his apprenticeship incurred a penalty of £10.

Watermen used their wherries for racing at the local annual regattas; they were standard craft but made lighter by removing the 'burden' (floor) boards and all surplus gear. Wherries were so representative of life upon the river that in 1845 a race called the 'Silver Wherries' was instituted at Henley Regatta; the race was for pair oars and presentation prizes given to the winners consisted of model wherries in silver. In 1850 the prizes were altered to silver gilt cups with the subsequent re-naming of the vent to the 'Silver Goblets'.