

Extract from “Portrait of the Broads” by J Wentworth Day (1967) :-

The Glory of the Wherry.

The Sailing Ship of the Marshes – Skippers, Cargoes and Races.

The Norfolk wherry was unique among boats. There was nothing quite like it in Holland. Nothing approached it in design or appearance upon the once wide meres and great rivers of the Fens. That, in itself, is remarkable for the wherry was primarily a trading ship in the not-far-off days when marsh-farmers and those whose land abutted on coastal creeks and estuaries, sent, perhaps, three-quarters of their produce by water. Roads were deep in mud for six months of the year. Farm roads were ‘bottom-less’. At Horsey, for example, the road to Somerton was over quaking bogs in which farm wagons could sink to their axles. Bundles of faggots and reeds lashed together were laid in the wetter parts of the road in the days when Robert Rising was Squire of Horsey.

At home in the Fens in my great-uncle’s time, which was about 1870-80, it took eight hours for a four-wheeled wagon, laden with wheat and pulled by three to four horses, to reach Newmarket only ten miles away. That was the state of secondary country roads. In the sodden marsh country of the Broads, the wherry was the obvious answer. Within my own lifetime they were an everyday sight. To see a wherry, long, low with broad-bosomed bows, sweeping huge and bat-like down a river or through a reedy channel, with its great sail towering high above the marshland scene and touching the reeds was more than impressive - almost awe-inspiring. They were, in fine, the fresh-water equivalent of the great sailing barges of the Medway, the Thames, the Essex Blackwater and the Suffolk estuaries. Those were the greatest sailing ships in the world to be worked solely by a man and a boy. The wherry, of somewhat different construction, was their younger inland brother, although occasionally they took to saltwater.

The average wherry was long and shallow with a towering mast and a vast sail rigged on the principle of the old-fashion Una rig, but without a boom. They were from seventy to twenty tons burden and crewed by two men, a man and a boy, sometimes the wherryman and his wife and, occasionally, by one man only. They could sail very fast, extremely close to the wind and were so handy that they could be navigated among other craft in a narrow river reach, to within an inch or so without scraping paint. There was a tiny cabin in the stern. The steersman stood abaft of this against the tiller with the sheet working on the ‘horse’ on the cabin top in front of him. The mast moved on a fulcrum. The lower end was weighted so that one man, working the foresail, could easily lower it or raise it.

If the wind fell away the wherryman and his mate pushed the craft along with a quant. This is a long, slender pole with a knob at one end and a spike and shoulder at the other. The shoulder was to stop it sinking in the mud. A quant is not unlike the ‘spread’ which was used by Fenmen to propel the turf barges on the Wicken and Burwell Fens in my youth.

The wherryman first went forward to the bows of his craft and then plunged the quant into the water, put the knob against his shoulder and walked aft along the plank-ways or catwalk, shoving as hard as he could. This part is easy enough. The amateur can do it - but

when he tries to pull the quant out of the mud, he may easily find that it pulls him in. Those who have fallen overboard from a punt on the Thames, the Cam or the Isis will sympathize.

One odd little superstition among the old wherrymen was that a quant must always be laid on deck with its point towards the stern whilst the boat hook should be laid with its point towards the bows. Otherwise the voyage would have bad luck. In practice this is, of course, plain common sense. The average quant had a wonderful quality of bend and spring. They were made of the best natural-grown pine and would bend like a sword-blade.

I have been lucky enough to see, and occasionally sail with, some of the last of the wherries. Today what few trading wherries are left on the Broads have auxiliary motors. The old *Albion* which was saved by the Norfolk Wherry Trust is, I believe, the last one still propelled solely by sail. I learnt what little I know about wherries from that splendid old Broadsman, the late Donald Applegate of Repps, fifteen years or more ago when we sailed our boat up the 'Catfield River' to Catfield Staithe. This is what I wrote of it at the time:

"For centuries the wherries sailed up the Catfield River bearing cargoes of coal and stone, granite and marl, and taking away corn, roots and wood. The Riches family who own the Staithe, were famous wherry-owners, and from it sailed those famous wherries, *The Two Brothers*, *The Zulu*, and *The Violet*. They were all trading up to 1910, carrying cargoes of up to thirty and forty tons each.

"Old Skipper Childs and 'Dodger' Bob Miller were famous wherrymen who used this river. 'Dodger' lived and died in a tiny brick cottage standing on the banks of the Thurne, in Repps parish between Potter Heigham and Thurne Mouth, not far from Repps Mill.

"When the old man lay dying on a couch his last thought was of his beloved wherry, and they still tell the tale of how the aged Broadsman raised himself with his last gasp and tried to push an imaginary quant with his shoulder. And, falling back, he died. 'Dodger' was a very fine skater in his day, as was old Ted Beales of Hickling, who sailed a wherry called *The Emily*.

"Beales was a very religious man and would never sail on a Sunday. No matter where he might be anchored on that day, he would always leave his ship and trudge across the marshes to worship at the nearest village chapel.

"In the end his wherry was run down by another in a high wind on the Bure between Runham and Yarmouth in the Six Mile Reach, where she sunk with a load of about twenty-five tons of corn. This led to a bitterly contested lawsuit, which was enlivened by much nautical knowledge and hard swearing by wherrymen witnesses before they could decide who had committed the error in helmsmanship.

"Now, since I have talked a good deal about wherries, it is as well, sitting here at Catfield Staithe where one old warrior lies sunk, to describe them. They are unique. No other part of England or the world can show any precisely similar boat.

"To begin with, a wherry is no more than a cargo barge, locally built for local waters and uses. They are usually fifty to sixty feet in length, with a beam of from ten to twelve feet,

and only draw from two to three feet of water, so that they can sail almost in the track of a snail. They are usually from twenty to twenty-five tons burthen, but there was one monster in the '80s or '90s of no less than eighty-one tons.

“The hull of the wherry is for nineteen-twentieths of its length one long hold, covered by hatchways which take off in two-foot sections. Aft is a tiny cabin about eight feet long, which contains two bunks, a small coal-stove, and two tiny wooden cupboards. There is no table, and you can only just sit upright in it, yet in such an incredible cramped dwelling Donald’s grandmother, old Mrs. George Applegate, had three children. They were all born in the cabin, without medical assistance: ‘Cos the doctor was too darned late.’ And there the family lived for months on end, cooking and sleeping in a space about eight or nine feet square. All three children grew to lusty manhood and lived to great ages.

“‘Cripple John’, an uncle, who kept the eel-sett in Meadow Dyke, became semi-paralysed in middle life but he still contrived to sail his boat with one arm and his teeth. He used his teeth to pull in his mainsheet! ‘Cripple John’ lived to the age of eighty-six, while his father reached ninety-two and his mother eighty-six, and as Donald said: ‘They only drank the rainwater off the roof’.

“Old George Applegate built the thatched boathouse at Potter Heigham, which still bears his name, and the long, low cottage which stands end-on to the road near Broads-Haven. In ‘the great March gale’ of eighty years or so ago, when scores of ships were lost at sea, the old man shifted three or four sacks of potatoes to one corner of the house to stop it being blown over!

“Old George would leave Potter Heigham in his wherry at ten in the morning, loaded to the gunwale with corn, and would reach Yarmouth that night - a masterpiece of sailing, for Yarmouth is a good twenty miles and a strong tide often had to be encountered.

“At that time of day as many as sixteen wherries could be seen at one time loading and unloading at Potter Heigham bridge. They carried cargoes of granite, gravel, corn, roots wood, coal, cattle-cake, and anything else that needed transportation. Today if you are lucky you may occasionally see ‘Blucher’ Thain’s *Lord Roberts* taking on or unloading her twenty tons of sugar-beet, and now, thanks to the late Herbert Woods’ fine craftsmanship, the old *I’ll Try*, rebuilt and repainted, is on the river again, under the Thain flag - but, alas! powered by motor and no longer driven by wind.

“It is doubtful if there are more than six trading wherries plying on the Norfolk rivers today, and I believe that only one of them still goes under sail.

“A wherry sail is an enormous affair of tanned canvas, a loose-footed mainsail with a towering gaff but no boom. The mast stepped right forward in a tabernacle, and up to forty feet in height, is raised by a number of leaden weights, weighing up to a ton and a half each, attached to its heel. A windlass helps to pull this enormous spar to its full height, but it is an extraordinary fact that there is no standing rigging whatever.

“Although a wherry can sail closer to the wind than any other craft that floats, there are times when a dead head-wind means that she must be shoved along by sheer brute force. Then the quant comes into play.

“When under full sail a wherry fairly swoops down the river, looking like a huge brown bird from another world. The deck planking in the waist of the ship surges under water for two or three inches, and a continual stream of water washes on to it and off again. It is a thousand pities that such noble craft, noble in their native strength and simplicity and their fitness for the task, should have been elbowed off the rivers by the march of so-called progress.

“Every wherry was sailed by the tell-tale indications of an iron weather-vane fixed to a short two-foot rod at the top of the mast. A three-foot length of silk swallow-tail bunting flew from the end of the vane, showing every whim and eddy of the wind. These vanes often took fantastic forms, the figure of a woman or an animal cut in iron being affixed at one side. Donald had one of a woman. He had painted her skirt green, her blouse red, her legs pink, and given her black shoes on a field of green grass.

“Well, I’ll change the owd gal’s colour-scheme next year,’ said he. ‘Must keep the gals in the fashion, you know.’ This vane came off a wherry called the *Fir*, now owned by Percy Thain, son of ‘Blucher’.”

The forerunner of the Norfolk Wherry was a craft known as the Norfolk Keel. The first wherry is recorded about 1706, so the wherry must have either pre-dated them or the keel was coeval with the birth of the wherry. I remember that patriarch of the Broads, William Hewitt of Barton, whose family have been in Broadland for centuries, saying that his grandfather sailed a Norfolk keel. I pointed out that this would date from 1706 or earlier.

“Yes, there or thereabouts”, said William Hewitt. “You see, these old tales run over hundreds of years in old families like ours, especially when every one of us lives to eighty or ninety” - with a laugh.

“You can soon cover a few hundred years with three generations that way. But I don’t believe there’s a keel left anywhere, unless it’s in a museum; and I’ve never seen a picture of one, although they do tell me there’s a pub in Norwich called “The Keel and Wherry”, in King Street, which has some old pictures of the keel.

“I used to have one or two trading wherries myself, and I won the silver cup given by your friend, Captain Fanshawe, when he was M.P. for these parts. That was in 1931. A real nice gentleman he was too, and a proper Conservative. We could do with him again.

“I won that cup with the *Lady Violet*, and a lovely wherry she was, but I sold her soon after, and now I hear the Catchment Board have got her and have rigged her with a derrick for dredging up mud. What a come-down for a boat that could sail like a witch!”

Christopher Davies, almost the first historian of the Broads, and certainly the first man to write about them at length as a holiday resort, had a good deal to say about wherries,

wherrymen and a highly interesting passing reference to a Norfolk keel. In his classic *Norfolk Broads and Rivers*, published in 1883, he said:

“There are a large number of men employed in this kind of navigation, and as a rule they are sober, honest, and civil men, ready to give any assistance in their power to the yachtsman. A great weakness of theirs is a fondness for tea. This they boil in the kettle, which then never ‘furs’. The wherries are built entirely of English oak, and a large one will cost about £500, including the sail and the ton and a half of lead which is bolted on to the heel of the mast, to act as a balance on lowering and raising it. They are so solidly put together, and the ribs are so close and strong that they last a very long time. Their ‘lines’ are very graceful, with a hollow entrance, and long fine run aft. Those interested in such matters will find drawings and dimensions in an article by the writer in the *Field* of 20th March, 1880. A small wherry of thirty tons burden would be fifty-two feet long by thirteen broad and could only draw when loaded two feet six inches of water. A wherry’s mast, having no stays to support it except a forestay, must be very stout and strong. They are made of spruce fir, and

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