

Waterman's Hall; I hadn't seen the Parthenon then, the Palace of Versailles or the Taj mahal so number 18, St Mary-Atte-Hill was the most glamorous, historic and exciting pile of masonry in my small world.

Outside it's all big stone slabs with carved ornaments on the front, water babies, each with a pair of curly fish-tails, heraldic devices and the stone head of Father Thames himself; inside, all old dark oak, a huge model of a man-o'-war made entirely of whale bones under a whacking great glass case. Up in the Court, Master Barge Owners in fur-trimmed gowns sat like judges under old dark portraits I didn't have time to look at properly for the ceremony of swearing in to The Worshipful Company of Freemen of the River of Thames, taking oaths of loyalty to Sovereign, Present Company, Future Employers and to my Master, Dad – to Learn my Art, to Dwell and Serve upon the said River of Thames, to do no hurt to my Master nor see any done to him; nor waste his Goods, Play at Cards, Dice, Tables, neither haunt Play-Houses or Taverns, nor Commit Fornication or Marriage during said Term of Apprenticeship, so Help me God. For his part, Dad had to swear to Teach, Instruct, Provide Meat, Drink, Apparel and Lodging for the following five year and out we came passing other lads and their Dads waiting to go in, me with my skinny little chest stuck out like a cock pigeon but a bit disappointed the stone water babies weren't blowing on their horns, old Father Thames didn't give me a grin or there was no guard of honour of King's Watermen on such an auspicious occasion.

Next evening, being Union branch night, Dad took me to a room over the Prince of Orange public bar where, at Any Other Business, he requested my enrolment as an Apprentice Member of the Waterman's, Lighterman's, Bargeman's and Tugman's Union, threepence weekly, instant disbarment if eight weeks adrift with subs. This being granted, all duly dispersed to the bar downstairs, me outside with a celebration shandy and cheese biscuits 'til Dad finally emerged wiping his lips and telling me he'd had to stand a lighterage foreman two pints of best and a double rum in exchange for a start for me next Monday. On the way home he took on board rock and chips three times, sharing out at supper and telling Mum I'd need a bit of meat putting on if I was going barge-fighting. I forget a lot of things but not that following week, Mum putting mustard on my fingers to stop me biting my nails while Dad wrote in his brand new pocket diary with the tide times and phases of the moon, names of points, reaches, bridges, tidal sets, parts of a barge and how to get to different wharves, docks and watermen's stairs by bus, tram, train (and back of a lorry to save a copper) – start of an education no Oxford or Cambridge could learn youse.

Come Monday, I was on the Canal Lock at seven am to see Mr Williams, foreman, who handed me over to Perce Hobbs, an apprentice of six months and as superior to me as a prince of the blood. Perce, envied possessor of a Company barge key, opened a quayside locker, loaded up with a coil of rope and a hitcher like a small tree and, him swaggering, me staggering, led me along the towpath of the Grand Surrey Commercial Cannel – and I first clapped eyes on *Rosie*.

Didn't have a lot of words then, all that time ago; only feelings, impressions, but I well remember what a good-looking, right-looking tidy craft of a barge she was, like, I suppose, a favourite horse to a drayman. Iron hull, timbered deck and ceiling, oak dollies, bitthead bollards, rowlock mounts and fairleads; sheer-swimmed, flare-jawed, rubbing bands of pine and smooth rounded coamings raking in sweeping lines from fore to aft. On deck a pair of clean smooth eleven foot oars of ash, leather gaiters laced at their rowlock bearing points; her hatch bars lay tidy stowed in their cleats, hatches on after sheets and gratings stacked against her sides in the clean-swept hold, her having been discharged yesterday.

Over the years, like the rest of us pensioners, she'd show her age, ribs staring as wallops, side-winders and head-onners caved her plates, splintered her bow-boards, freeboards and rubbing bands – as work, wear, wind and weather flaked her paint and gouged out the caulking 'tween her deck planks.

'Sixty Ton Reg', it said on the forrard coaming, 'But everyone knows timber don't go be tonnage', said Perce, 'goes be the Standard. And everyone knows a Standard of oak's different from one o' soft wood'. No novice me, at boarding barges, I thought I'd show Perce a thing or two and chested myself onto *Rosie's* deck, crunching the brand new ticker in my waistcoat pocket, the timepiece presented by Mum and Dad just last week with the advice that time, tide and dock masters wait for no man.

Unmooring, we got *Rosie* under way for the Canal Lock and didn't she glide like a swan, Perce showing me what my cap and choker were for – padding shoulders against rope-burn on tender skin and bruises from the hitcher's haft socketted 'twixt neck and collar bone as I poked off other craft, the towpath and the mud in shallow water.

'Don't you let her go aground,' hollered Perce, perched on a bitthead and lighting a dog-end; 'Poke off, poke off. Put some beef into it. Bend that pole but don't go aground or you'll lose time, lose the next lock, the Freeman waiting on her'll lose tide and you'll lose your job. Worse'n that, you'll have your papers 'ung up.'

Hung from the yard-arm, hung up by the thumbs, yes; but to have one's papers hung up, revoked, withdrawn – career blasted on my first day, never. So you can lay the rent I had *Rosie* to the lock in good time, thrilled to the raising of the lock water, *Rosie* lifting with it 'til, all A-level with the main Greenland Dock, me, Perce and *Rosie* came out of the Canal into another world.

Greenland Dock: talk about Blackheath Fair on Bank Holiday, you couldn't see water for barges, launches, tugs, ships; hands poking and pulling craft to and from ship's sides and loading bays, quays, warehouses; sailormen cranking their gear; dockies, stevies, stackers shouting, swearing; ship-workers tic-tacking, crane drivers on donkey engines swinging pallets, slings, nets and hooked bales across the sky. Truckers trundled trolleys, humpers in leather backing-hats and sacking shawls humped crates and sacks from ship's holds to barges and deal porters trampolined along swaying gangplanks, long lengths of boards bouncing in rhythm on their shoulders. Rumbling and rattling on tracks on cobbled

quaysides, ran cranes looking like the drawings of space invaders in that book, *The War of the Worlds*.

‘All a-hurry in the Surrey,’ said Perce.

A lordling in cloth cap, choker and large boots, mackintosh over his shoulder, stepped aboard *Rosie* – the Freeman who was taking her over, out of dock and into the wide, wide river outside, us Apprentices being restricted to inner dock work only.

He graciously allowed me to poke, shove and haul *Rosie* through the log-jam of traffic onto the inner lock gates and, from the quayside, watch spellbound the great King-King gates yaw open and swallow her in along of dozens like her, all so tight-fitted you’d hardly get a Rizla paper ‘twixt and between ‘em.

Lock water dropping to river level, outer gates gaping, all were heaved out by capstan and swooped on by an armada of steam tugs and launches. Tow ropes and lines snaked out, were caught and made fast, this and that barge winkled out and towed away. Or one of those Freeman – heroes to a first-day Apprentice – swung sweeps out and sculled away to places unknown to me then but become as familiar as my own back yard since. Watching, from Greenland Pierhead, *Rosie* being took away, I felt as if something just given had been snatched back again and I reckon as it was then, half a century back, I made myself the promise that I’d own her one day. [ And he did!]

‘That’ll be us when we’ve done our Two’s,’ said Perce, ‘barge driving. That’ll raise some blisters on yer German Bands. Arter dinner you got half a dozen empties to pump out, make a start on them blisters.’ He took me round Round Town, Rotherhithe Street, for fish and chips in Harry Wilson’s....

... Back up the Canal after grubbo, day-dreaming of how Kitty’s lips would have the flavour on ‘em of rock and two-pennorth, I spent the last hours of my first day as a lighterman levering the rusty handle of a shifting pump cultivating a batch of blisters an Apprentice could be proud of.

Those following two years and that little lad so proud and eager in his outsize cap and big boots, he shines in the memory like something bright shimmering through murky water as he goes whistling up and down the Canal from Peckham Arm to the Greenland Dock, in and out of Canada Yard, Norway Yard, *Quebec*, the *Russia* and *Lavender* with loaded and empty barges, pumping ‘em out, sweeping ‘em up, running docking notes to Customs; trimming stacks and pulling plugs in barge’s bottoms to let in a drop of water to lower a high-stcked craft for getting under low-slung bridges, re-plugging and pumping out once through; replacing splintered hitchers, broken-bladed oars, worn line and barge’s headfasts from the firm’s lock-up; coiling and lashing the old rope into handy bundles for the freemen to sell to the ropies sculling about round Dock entrances. A bob a bundle, they took it ashore to the spinning mills who used it for oakum, stuffing ship’s fenders and for tug’s deck matting. The same boaties were always in the market for quality timber become salvage by falling – not always by accident – off the back of

barges. It went for auction at Condemned Hole, a percentage to the salvager who settled up with the bargee later in Charlie Lunn's Tea Romms, the Ship and Whale or Dog and Duck.

He did some barge-driving, the lad, out on the tideway with Freeman. From the Greenland to Bow Creek, Barking, Millwall, the Pool of London, his early attempts were with the nine and eleven foot sweeps, having his feet off the deck 'til a Freeman's grip joined his on the hafts. And if, back in days before the war, you happened to be crossing Tower, London or Southwark Bridge, holding on to your bowler in a blow of wind, your broolly nigh lifting you over the breastwork, you looked down at a high-sided lighter, tarpaulins a-flap, the figure of a man, the titchier figure of a boy struggling with a pair of paddles like telephone poles to keep from popping rivets on a bridge butment, you were probably looking at me learning to be a lighterman.

Extracted from Tales of a Thames Lighterman, by Ernest G. Murray, Chapter II pages 21-26