



THE NORFOLK WHERRIES

by Stuart Mitchell

The Albion, seen on the Norfolk Broads. Photo by kind permission of the Norfolk Wherry Trust, who now own her.

THERE IS NOTHING more Norfolk than a wherry under sail. Her low hollow-lined hull with the traditional white 'eye' on the bows, her blue, white and vermillion paintwork, the huge black sail tarred and dressed with herring oil, the fathom of blood-red bunting flying from the masthead all contrive to give an impression of barbaric splendour. This is hardly surprising because the ancestor of the Norfolk wherry was the Viking longship.

The Vikings came to Norfolk more than a thousand years ago, perhaps to plunder, but also in search of herring, a staple foodstuff which had suddenly disappeared from the Baltic. These barbaric adventurers found the Broadland district pleasant, married local girls and built settlements which survive today in place names such as Horsey, Winterton and Somerton.

Their longships provided a ready made means of transport along the rivers and estuaries. These craft were clinker built, sweet lined and double ended. Amidships was stepped a single mast which carried

a square-sail. The specifications, length 70 ft, beam 17 ft, depth 6 ft, were practically the hull shape of a Norfolk Wherry.

As time passed, modifications were carried out to make them more suitable for river work. The best features of the Saxon 'coel' were incorporated and from these new craft sprang the Norfolk 'keel'.

For more than 500 years the square-sailed keel was the commercial carrier of the district. But a demand grew for quicker and more reliable means of transport which, through lack of an adequate road system, had to be satisfied by more efficient use of the river highways. The trouble with the keel was that she could not tack — the square-sail was only effective with the wind astern. The answer lay in the fore and aft sail which could drive a vessel against the wind. However, this revolutionary rig was unheard of on this side of the Narrow Seas.

Then, in 1568, several hundred Dutchmen fleeing from the religious oppression of the Spaniards came to Yarmouth in their flat-bottomed, fore and aft



Left above: Wherries at Coldam Hall taken in 1891. Photo by Payne Jennings.

Centre: Horning Lock No. 1, North Walsham Canal, taken in 1901. Photo by P. C. Dewhurst.

Below: Pleasure Boats, at Hickling, Norfolk, taken in 1899. Photo by Payne Jennings.

These three photographs are from the Library of Mr. L. A. Edwards, Hon. Secretary, East Anglian Waterways Association Ltd.

sprit-sailed vessels — craft which looked not unlike the Thames sailing barge of yesterday. Seeing these, local shipwrights conceived and built an entirely new vessel — the prototype wherry — capable of carrying 20 passengers and 5 tons of express goods, including mail.

In designing these experimental craft to earn quick money in the passenger trade, the Norfolk craftsmen kept to the well proven Viking hull shape. They borrowed only the details of masting and rigging, which they improved upon by discarding the sprit and hoisting the loose-footed (i.e. boomless) fore and aft sail on a gaff.

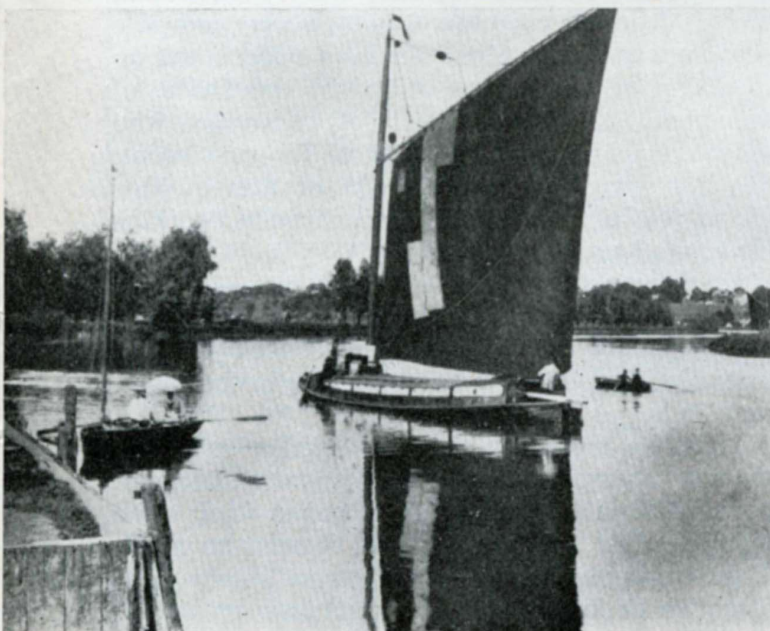
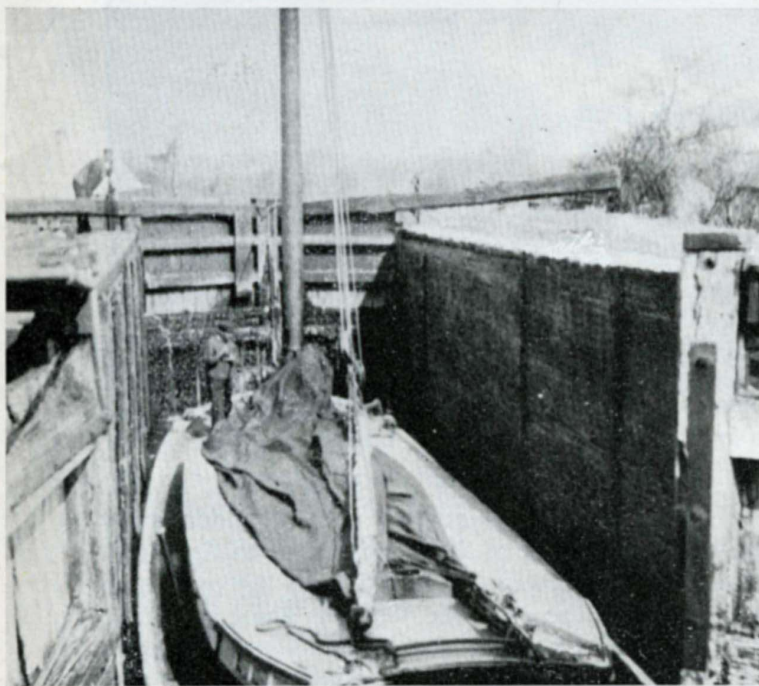
This subtle marriage of Viking hull and Dutch rig proved an immediate success. The term 'wherry' was borrowed from the Thames where rowing boats known as 'wherries' plied for hire like taxis. The ponderous keels continued to carry bulk cargoes but, before long, the speedier wherries began to cream-off the best of their trade.

This was the pattern until the latter half of the 18th century. Then, as a result of the Turnpike Acts, road improvements were made and the wherry owners found themselves faced with competition from horse-wagons. This challenge was met by the idea of a super-wherry, combining the wherry's speed and handling qualities with the cargo capacity of the keel. From this sprang the trading wherry we know today. By 1800 they had grown to between 20 and 40 tons burden and had literally sailed the keels off the river.

The 19th century was the wherry's heyday. There were over 300 'black sailed traders' plying the Broadland waterways. Some made the sea-passage from Yarmouth round to Southwold and then up the Blyth Navigation to Halesworth in the heart of Suffolk. They carried cargoes of every imaginable kind — coal, timber, bricks, grain, maize, sugar-beet, beer, coffins — and provided the isolated villages and lonely marsh mills with the only all weather, all season link with the outside world.

Combining beauty with utility to perfection, like the deep-sea clipper ships, they became known as the 'clippers of the tideway' — an appropriate term in view of their superb sailing qualities. The advent of steam-power brought about their downfall and today *Albion* is the sole survivor still under sail.

However, the threat from the railways coupled with the 'discovery' of the Broads as a holiday play-





Archway which was used for loading grain into wherries at Neatishead.

ground in the 1860's led to what may be regarded as the wherry's final development — the pleasure wherry. The fashion for pleasuring by wherry became so popular that a number of specially constructed and luxuriously equipped wherries were built solely as pleasure craft.

In appearance and internal lay-out they differ from the traders. The sail is worn white instead of black, the woodwork is 'yacht finished' with varnish, the hold space is fitted out with cabins, saloon and galley, and the right-ups (i.e. coamings) replaced by dead lights (i.e. windows). The fact that pleasure wherries perpetuate the hull lines and rig of the class overrides the argument that they are not true wherries.

There are probably no more than a dozen Norfolk wherries afloat today. *Bramble* and *Hathor* at Martham, *Sun Dog* at Wroxham, *Solace* at Coltishall, *Olive* at Oulton Broad, *White Moth* at Neatishead, and *Reed Bird* at Thorpe are the known pleasure wherries. There is another one reported berthed at Horning Ferry, and I have just heard that *Olive May* is on the Thames near London, having been refitted at Geldeston and towed round after being sunk for 15 years at St. Olaves.

There may be one or two others hidden away privately and news of them may come to light as a result of this account. In addition to *Albion*, which is owned by the Norfolk Wherry Trust members and is unique because she is carvel-built whereas all other 'black sailed traders' were clinker-built, there is definitely one other trading wherry complete with mast and gear. She is the *Lord Roberts* and up to a year or so ago was owned by the Thains of Somerton, that famous family of wherrymen who have owned and skippered wherries for generations. She has since been acquired by the firm of May Gurney & Co., Ltd., who hope to extend her working life for as long as is possible.

There may still be one or two others — such as the *Fir* and *Go Forward* which I saw along the River Ant as recently as 1965 — stripped of their gear and motorized, scratching a humble living in the sugar-beet trade.

These few remaining Norfolk wherries are among the very last survivors from the bygone age of wind-power. When they eventually go to their final moorings the like of them will be seen no more. Their story may become a chapter in history or as forgotten as the art of wherry building.