

## **Medway Memories of an Old Boatman**

*The following article is published by kind permission of the author Mr. "Jim" Paine whose son David now operates Bridge Boat Service at East Farleigh. Jim wrote his boating memories in the 1980's and first had them published in the East Farleigh Cruising Club magazine. In this issue we reproduce Bulletin 25 of the series:-*

As I write this, at about ten o'clock on a miserable wet day with persistent rain, very poor visibility and, mercifully, very low wind, David is bringing his boat back from Ramsgate, where it has been berthed for some days after his recent "holiday" - a quick trip to Calais and back simply because he happened to feel like it. Admittedly, things did not go entirely according to plan - we were surprised to see him back after a couple of hours when he first left, having got nearly to Allington when an oil pipe burst, flooding the engine room with several gallons of highly expensive oil, and causing him to use the full extent of a vocabulary which reminded me of my own unregenerate days in the Air Force, but after that unfortunate start, he went off the following day and did the trip with no trouble at all - Ramsgate the first night, and across to Calais the next morning, returning to Ramsgate the same day, only to become weather bound there for the next few days.

By the standards of the boats we were accustomed to in our early days on the river this was an astonishing performance - even to get as far as Stangate or Queenborough was a major adventure, calling for careful planning, good weather and a meticulous attention to the details of tides and winds, not to mention a large slice of good luck.

I well remember one occasion when we organised an early version of a "Club run", when five boats agreed to have a weekend voyage as far as we could reasonably get. As I recall, there was George and his wife in a little twenty foot ship's boat conversion, Jim and Margaret in an ex naval fast motor boat with a Scammel petrol engine, Peter and family in another converted ship's boat - I cannot remember what type of engine in this - Bob and Vee with "First Venture" - the only purpose built cabin cruiser in the lot, driven, when it worked, by a big Gray Marine petrol unit, and myself and Kay with my old faithful "Aquarius" - a ship's boat powered by an old Ferguson petrol/paraffin tractor engine, this being the only reliable engine of the whole sorry collection.

Our troubles started even before Allington - George's engine overheating soon after Maidstone bridge. He was taken in tow by Bob, and managed

to get the engine running again while we were locking through Allington. After that, things went reasonably well until the same boat broke down again round about the New Hythe paper mill area. This time, I took him in tow, as Bob's engine was showing signs of distress. Soon after this, it was Pete's turn to break down, so I took him in tow as well, while he frantically tried to restart his engine, leaving his wife to steer. This left me towing one boat on each quarter while the other two carried on under their own steam as best they could - both suffering, as we found out afterwards, from trouble with faulty magneto's, the trouble being brought on by damp and heat in their confined engine boxes - the hotter they got, the worse the symptoms.

The Scammel in Jim's boat was the first of these two to give up entirely. This happened just under Rochester bridge, and the tide carried the boat, twisting and turning in the turbulence, down towards the bend into Rochester reach. As I could not go to the rescue, Bob nobly took him in tow although his own engine was suffering in a similar way and, with much difficulty, brought the pair of them into Strood pier. I, with my two boats in tow, did the same thing, Tying up to the downstream end of the pontoon and leaving the two towed boats streaming astern.

Under the circumstances, this seemed a good time to have a break for lunch, while the respective engines cooled off and the owners did what they could to rectify the faults. After about an hour or so, all five boats were working again, and off we went. The ebb was not so strong by now, and we realised that it was out of the question to try for Queenborough, so it was decided to go just as far as the tide took us, and then to turn round and come back up for the night.

In fact from Strood pier onwards, things took a turn for the better. All five boats ran reasonably well, and we staggered on without any further disasters through Rochester and Chatham, past Upnor and Hoo into the Gillingham reach. It was here that we finally ran out of tide, and progress became so slow that we finally realised that we could not even get to the Darnett fort, where i had hoped to moor for a time before returning up stream. Accordingly, we turned round and started to make our way back up. By this time, all the engines were beginning to give trouble again - all except my good old Fergie, that is. I was kept busy going from one ailing boat to another, towing first one and then the next. As each failing engine was started again another would break down, but we eventually all managed to end up in one heap safely moored to the buoys at Strood Yacht Club. This voyage had taken us all day, and in spite of all the

difficulties, we had all enjoyed ourselves immensely. We spent the evening visiting each others boats, and all mucking in to ready the offending engines for the next day's adventures.

Our return journey was very much a repetition of the first day - on the way up river every boat ( except Aquarius) broke down at least once. I remember at one stage having three boats in tow at one and the same time - George on one quarter, Peter on the other and Jim's boat on a long line astern. During the trip, there was only one boat which I did not have to tow at least once, and that was "First Venture". She had had her troubles, but had managed to keep going throughout the whole trip, thanks to Bob's heroic efforts with his ailing engine.

We eventually arrived back at East Farleigh totally exhausted, but all the owners having learned a lot about practical boating over the weekend, and, strangely enough, all of us having thoroughly enjoyed ourselves!

Incidentally, "Aquarius" is still on the river under a different name, still has the same old Ferguson engine in her, and still giving her owner good and faithful service. Her hull is now over a hundred years old, and, although the conversion work is visibly suffering, the hull still appears to be in good condition. Although there is no ideal material for boat building, a really good wooden one still takes a lot of beating!

By modern standards, this trip was downright pathetic - we had got virtually nowhere, we had achieved nothing and we had been woefully inefficient for the whole time. It was, however, about normal for the time - we got our fun not from dashing about from one marina to another, but from coping with the difficulties which were inherent in the boats of the time. The boats were leaky and uncomfortable, the engines were totally unreliable and our standards of seamanship were unbelievably awful, but we still managed to enjoy ourselves.

More next time,

Jim