

*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 26 of the series:-*

### **Medway Memories of an old Boatman 26**

It was said by one of our oft-quoted wise men - which one I cannot remember, but I might as well attribute it to Shakespeare since he is the source of most of our sayings, "Young men dream dreams- old men remember". In the last few years I have found out for myself how true this is. I seem to spend less and less time in using my boat and more and more time recalling old memories.

This was brought home to me recently when I found myself thinking about the sort of boats with which I started out in the late nineteen forties and early fifties. In the early days most of my boats were converted ships' boats, nearly all of clinker construction, and it now strikes me how vastly different they were from the modern G.R.P. cabin cruiser. The modern boat is usually well made, extremely efficient, quite seaworthy, and, in fact, everything which a boat should be. It carries you from place to place with very little trouble, it keeps you warm and dry in bed, it provides for easy cooking, gives you hot water for washing up and in many ways could not be bettered. Yet, human nature being what it is, I still find there is something lacking amidst all this perfection. There is, about this up to date factory made perfection, a distinct lack of individuality. If you go aboard two boats of the same make you can predict the behaviour of the one from its twin sister ship - if one rolls like a pig in a quartering sea you can bet that the other will be precisely the same. If one does a given speed, so will the other. There are no surprises, good or bad!

Compare this with the old fashioned hand made boats. Although each boat might have been made by the same craftsmen in the same yard from the same materials and even have been made for the same ship, no two craft were ever exactly alike. This is accounted for by the infinite variety of operations which went into the making of the ordinary lifeboat. The keel was made, more often than not, of a single piece of timber - usually English oak. On this was laid the hog & kelson which gave the boat the bulk of its longitudinal strength. At the ends were the stem and sternposts, each supported by massive knees and backed up by the apron, which was usually of elm, triangular in section, to which the ends of each plank would eventually be fastened. The frames were made of oak, each steamed into a malleable state, bent to the correct curve while still hot and fastened to the kelson. The difficult part was the shaping of the planks - the garboards were not too bad, as they were almost straight for most of their length, being housed in the "rabbet" of the keel, and only curved at each end where they turned up into the stem and stern posts and copper-nailed into the aprons. The following planks became progressively more tricky - as the boat became wider and the turn of the bilge more and more pronounced, each plank had to be cut from a wider piece to allow for the more extravagant curves. Each plank was fastened to its predecessor by "clenched" copper nails every two inches or so - hence the word "clinker", which was originally spelt as "clencher". The nails themselves were of square section, the better to grip the domed copper washers or "clenches".

Each of these had to be placed over the pointed end of the nail, tightened up by a hammer at the nail head and a heavy "dolly" over the washer. When the washer was driven tight, the end of the nail was cut off and the stump rivetted over to ensure that it could not slip. This process was repeated ad infinitum until the planking was complete - each boat contained thousands of individual fastenings. The planking was topped off, of course, by the rubbing bands, gunwales of heavier timbers, and gunwale cappings. Stem and stern were finished off with knees, the timbers of which were often grown to shape by careful manipulation of the trees from which they were taken, and the structure was further stiffened by the rowing thwarts, held in at each end by "hanging" knees. When it was finished, the boat had to be caulked by the careful tapping in of

caulking cotton into the joints- more particularly the garboards, where they were tucked into the keel rabbett.

By the time these boats came to be used for pleasure craft, they had all served their time on their respective ships. They were sold off by the shipping lines, bought by small boat yards or by private individuals, and converted to pleasure use, fitted with engines of varying degrees of efficiency according to taste or depth of pocket and provided with cabins of all shapes and sizes - usually rather badly! One of the worst I came across was my old "Susan" - the first boat I ever owned - her cabin was a crudely planked box covering her forward half with no attempt at style or elegance. One of the best was "Aquarius", which I wrote about in my last piece for this bulletin. She had a nicely shaped conversion done in marine plywood which blended in well with her original sheerline.

One of the more difficult arts lay in making the decks watertight. This was usually done by laying cloth over the deck, having first got rid of all one's unwanted paint by sloshing it over the deckplanking. The laying of the material without wrinkles was an art in itself. You usually started from the centre line of the boat with a row of copper tacks down the middle and stretched the cloth out and over the cabin sides by the judicious use of wooden stretchers. The trick lay in holding the material taut with one hand while tacking the stuff down round the edges with the other. When this was done, it was a comparatively simple matter to finish off with a piece of half-round section round the edge. The job was completed by as many coats of paint as could be managed, ideally put on while the underneath coat was still wet. This had the effect of preserving the cloth. Incidentally, the process was known as "canvassing" the deck, although in fact the material used for the job was nearly always unbleached calico.

Given the infinite number of variables in the building and conversion of these craft, it is not surprising when I say that no two were ever alike. Each was an individual in its own right - each behaved differently according to the degree of crankiness built into it by its original builder, and, even more, by its converter. The wide variety of engines and the differing ideas on the installation of the stern gear added to the interesting behaviour of these boats - one favourite way of installing the shaft was to offset it to one side, passing it through a block screwed to the planking, rather than to risk the highly dodgy job of drilling through the stern post - one misjudgement there meant that the boat was ruined. As may be imagined, this practice made boat-handling quite interesting, especially in confined spaces.

It must be obvious that the modern factory-built boats must be better in every way than the oldies, but still, perhaps an old man may be forgiven for looking back at them through rose-coloured spectacles!

More next time,

Jim.