

THAMES SAILING BARGE PUDGE

John Hawes organised this trip for Monday 19 August until Friday 23rd.

Maria Hawes; Janet Stiles ;Mike Pilbeam; Lestyn Jowers; Richard Rivett; Adrian Farley; David Alcock; Gary Alderson; Roger Thyer-Jones;

Skipper Mick and Mate Steve

Mike and Diane Armson sadly couldn't make it for family reasons.



Built in 1922 by London & Rochester Trading Co., Pudge is a Thames sailing barge with a hull constructed of pitch pine on oak with a flush deck, with the steering wheel on a 'short spindle' without the usual raised cabin top. Originally spritsail rigged with a bowsprit she had an auxiliary oil engine made by The Bergius Co. Ltd of Glasgow and was installed in 1932. Pudge is one of the last wooden barges to be built, Pudge spent much of her working life carrying goods between London and Ipswich.

Forget the journey across motorways to Maldon on the Blackwater estuary in Essex and the endless roadworks and think about excellent fish and chips in the Queens Head with a decent pint. Gary, however, was still looking for the elusive car park which simply had disappeared before he eventually found a free parking spot.

19.30hrs saw us joining the reconstructed Pudge with a hearty welcome by our jovial skipper Mick and his mate Steve. A miracle! You could actually stretch out in the bunks and even the giants among us could sleep without contorting themselves into banana shapes.

You step back in time when you board. To get to Pudge we had to cross two sister barges avoiding a whole lot of ropes, pulleys and huge winches which could make a dent in your shins. The barge, however, was in great shape. Recently fully refurbished with headroom that left your brain intact and, three heads, one with a shower. Luxury for me after years of hiring yachts and as last on board with the crew, mine was alway the banana berth next to the bilge.

Midnight Sail

A falling tide would have meant a late start on Tuesday and our skipper decided that we would leave our berth just after high tide at 2200hrs, follow the river in its serpentine twists and anchor off Osea Island. It was exciting to leave under a midnight sky with our mate Steve acting as a spotter with his sweeping beam. Starboard hand buoys could be seen flashing but keen eyes had to spot the unlit port handers. There was a super moon but we saw only glimpses of it.

Fortunately our skipper had cats eyes and safely negotiated the bends under a cloudy sky to our anchorage. Down went the huge anchor with 20 metres of chain tearing after it. Keep fingers, hands and all body parts away from that forward winch...an Elastoplast wouldn't do....It was about 0200hrs so time to stretch out and learn to live with wide variety of animal noises that echoed through the barge as sleep set in

Tuesday and our breakfast watch went into action producing a traditional sailors breakfast from stores that we could have crossed the Atlantic with. Skipper Mick had planned for Harwich then back to see the airshow at Clacton on Thursday but a threatening forecast scuppered his plans. Brightlingsea, however, was achievable so off we set with a main and a foresail driving us on.

Now, with every sail flying, I am told that the barge could reach 8 knots+. We sailed at about 3 +. Sailing a barge is an art form. Often to achieve a mark you have to go sideways and winching the one ton dagger boards located on the sides of the hull to balance the boat needs an expert hand.



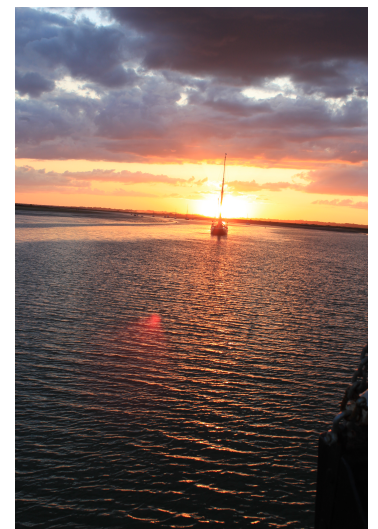
Watch out for the main sheet traveller travelling like a rocket on the horse and the same for the foresail. There was so much fun to be had avoiding losing a body part but our skipper and mate looked out for us and many had been on Pudge before so we kept safe.

Try helming. Now seven turns will get the rudder right over but do not expect that she will respond in your time. Patience, anticipation and a skipper who is not inclined to boot your rear end when you make a mistake is helpful.

I loved the feel of the helm and the link to history But Pudge must have been a nightmare to manoeuvre with a full hold and a fierce wind....not for an amateur I think but the skipper encouraged us all to take the helm and with unfailing good humour almost got the best out of us.

After a decent sail we anchored off Brighlingsea having had a splendid lunch with endless cups of tea provided by the next watch. Dinner was our watch, Adrian, Gary and me, and with excellent home made gin and spiced rum for pre dinner drinks provided by Mike we attacked a spagbol washed down with various wines. This loosened vocal chords for the evening entertainment.

I knocked out a few tunes on my 60 year old Framus guitar and had great support on the choruses but, the skipper was the real star. With a great voice just made for shanties, accompanied by the melodium, a reed instrument beloved by barge skippers, he entertained us. My favourite was the Pirate song which I must learn. Even Maria, known for an early turn in, stayed up for music, stories and poems. Not one phone was even looked at for hours. In great humour we departed for our bunks with the skipper promising an early start.



Wednesday saw us with an early start beginning with getting the anchor with its 20 metres of chain in. With two men on the winch handles and one flaking the chain, the job was hard going as essentially you are pulling 120tons of barge towards the anchor before you can lift it. Covered in seaweed and mud it was interesting work, almost as interesting as winching up the dagger boards.

We were off and tacking against a westerly wind. You don't actually make much progress and a low spring tide saw us almost grounding once or twice as we approached the massive dead nuclear plant, Bradwell, commissioned in 1962 and guarding the mouth of the river Blackwater, rather aptly named given the radiation....It is still being considered as a site for a new model, Bradwell B.

With not too much help from the tide against a strengthening wind the skipper had enough of going both sideways and backwards often helped by the helm at the time, and started the two ex bus diesel engines to push us through the racing dinghies that buzzed us, careless of our size and inability to manoeuvre.

We passed close by the Radio Caroline ship, Mi Amigo, which these days is a bit of a tourist attraction but looks rusty and uncared for now. The first ship, the MV Frederick, a former Danish passenger ferry was owned by Ronan O'Rahilly an Irish businessman who started to broadcast in February 1964. I still remember my small black transistor radio playing pop music as it hung on the wall by my bed.

With the wind promising gusts of 40mph on Thursday and Friday we headed back to port and at 1530hrs and tied up after the skipper had made some tricky manoeuvres showing just how much expertise it takes to sail and berth the barge in difficult conditions. It takes about 10 years to get your ticket and your last exam is in front of barge captains who grill you for about 5 hours. On the website it encourages you to become a skipper...I don't think that I will live that long.....:)



After a splendid dinner prepared by the Maria watch, the evening entertainment began. I love the poet called Robert Service, a Scottish Canadian who wrote poems about the Yukon, set in the North West Canada, and the madness of the goldrush. My favourite is Dangerous Dan McGrew. Of course I needed the company to play a part.

The villain had to be the skipper, Mick while the anti hero was John and his light of love, Janet. I needed a noise for the guns and initially Gary was chosen but a less than impressive noise saw him relegated to understudy for Adrian, a natural. The roles of piano player fell to Lestyn while the screaming woman was Maria who has probably screamed at more doctors in her time as incompetent than anyone I know. The scene was set and the drama unfolded, of course ending tragically. We had great fun and then our skipper, in fine voice gave us a great performance of shanties before we rounded off with an Irish song or two and many others followed. Whisky found its way to the table which helped the parched throats.

Thursday saw our departure home as clearly there would be no more sailing. We were disappointed but realistic. Some of us had been sailing on Pudge previously and some, like me were newbies. But we all enjoyed the trip, the company, the organisation by John and the victualling by Janet, Diane and Maria and all you who helped make the trip a special one. Our thanks to skipper Mick and mate Steve for their unfailing good humour, expertise and advice while keeping us safe from harm. Our admiration for all the volunteers who keep the Thames Barges alive is boundless and I invested in a wide range barge memorabilia to help a little with costs.

But what happened to the lunch crew: Adrian, Roger and Gary? Why was there no afternoon tea and cake served? Exhausted by our almost perfect lunch, which included imaginative food presentation, a meeting was called in the Queens Head to review our contribution. This meeting, however, took longer than expected as Adrian had several pints...oops..points to make. Please accept our apologies .

