

Keeping history afloat

Clive Tully takes a look at the distinctive sailing wherries of the Broads



Peter Bower on *Hathor*, folding the sail. CREDIT: CLIVE TULLY



A sleek-lined wherry yacht. CREDIT: CLIVE TULLY

IT has to be one of the most majestic sights you'll see anywhere on the Norfolk Broads. A single great gaff-rigged black sail looming over you, and black-painted hull with white nose for night visibility, means you're within spitting distance of the trading wherry *Albion*.

"Back in the days when wherries were used to transport goods," explains Henry Gowman, "they found fish oil – plentiful in nearby Great Yarmouth – to be good for weather-proofing the cotton sail. Only trouble was, it made a very tasty meal for the rats. So they mixed the oil with coal dust to make it less palatable, and so the black sail came about. *Albion*, one of just two surviving trading wherries (the other one is *Maud*), these days has a rather less messy sail which is dyed black."

Before the days of roads and railways, wherries were the main means of transporting goods between Norwich and the ports of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft, and many villages scattered throughout the 125 miles of waterways that make up the Broads. Essentially sailing barges, they were built for the very peculiar conditions of the Broads, so they had a shallow draught. Measuring 50 to 60 feet from bow to stern, they were capable of carrying loads of around 25 to 30 tons.

The single mast was set well forward, pivoted and counterbalanced with a hefty weight. Whenever the wherry approached a bridge over the river, the sail and mast could be collapsed in under a minute, the boat's momentum would carry it through, and the mast and sail erected again once safely on the other side. And the gaff-rigged sail was set high to catch the breeze above the trees.

Propulsion

Even more amazingly, they were capable of being operated by a crew of just two – the captain, and (probably) a young lad. When the wind wasn't up, or the wherry needed to be manoeuvred, the mate would use a long quant pole to provide an element of propulsion, walking the quant from one end of the wherry to the other – extremely hard work.

Originally built in 1898, *Albion's* rescue in 1949 could quite possibly have been sparked by the movement to list buildings of historic importance.



Albion is one of just two surviving trading wherries. CREDIT: NORFOLK WHERRY TRUST

Norwich had been heavily bombed during WWII, and it may just be that the consciousness of preserving buildings filtered through. Certainly it was realised that the wherries were in danger of being lost altogether, so a trust was formed by members of the public with the purpose of preserving an example of a wherry. It turned out that the boat chosen for restoration was the only carvel construction (flush planking) wherry ever built – all the others were traditional clinker (overlapping planks).

The plan was for *Albion* to be a piece of living history, and so the first few years she carried on doing what wherries used to do – transporting cargo. Inevitably it became uneconomic, and she was converted – rather in the same way that many were at the turn of the century when the Broads were first discovered as a tourist attraction – to carrying passengers. And that's how she continues to this day. Her hold has 12 bunks, a table, kitchen and toilet facilities, while the cuddy – the crew's quarters, has two bunks and a delightful little stove. The money she makes from chartering keeps her on an even keel financially, although extra help is still needed.

It was the advent of road and railway transport that sealed the fate of the wherries, and when they first started feeling the pinch, enterprising skippers would clean out their holds, install

hammocks and put themselves out for hire as passenger-carrying boats for people wanting to experience the marvels of the Broads. So it was a logical follow-on that wherries would then be built specifically as pleasure wherries.

Unique

That's where *Hathor*, *Solace* and *Ardea* fit in. *Hathor* (pronounced Heart-or) is unique, not just among wherries but boats in general. She was built in 1905 for the famous Colman (mustard) family, and her insides feature the most incredible Egyptian designs, all done as marquetry in the wood-panelled walls and doors. The saloon has lotus flowers in teak, inlaid into sycamore, while elsewhere there are animals and typical Egyptian symbols. *Solace* and *Ardea* are in private ownership, the latter rescued a few years back from life as a houseboat on the Seine in Paris. She looks particularly lovely, as her hull is varnished rather than painted.

But for some, that wasn't quite enough. Well-heeled Edwardians wanted something a little less akin to the original trading wherries, and so the wherry yacht was born. This was rather more sleek in lines than the pleasure wherry, with a large counter-stern to provide somewhere pleasant to sit away from all the activity concerned with sailing or quanting. The surviving wherry yachts are *Olive* and *Norada*,



The cuddy, or crew's quarters on *Albion*.
CREDIT: CLIVE TULLY



Detailing on *Hathor*. CREDIT: CLIVE TULLY



The mast pivot on *Hathor*. CREDIT: CLIVE TULLY

both owned by the Wherry Yacht Charter Charitable Trust, and *White Moth* – beautifully restored to sailing order, and operated by the Norfolk Broads Yachting Company.

The wherries of the Wherry Yacht Charter and Norfolk Wherry Trust certainly wouldn't be able to keep going without their willing volunteers. Jerry Simpson became involved initially just to help out as crew for the Wherry Yacht Charter, but he also discovered other advantages.

"I'm keen on wildlife," he told me, "and that's something you really get to appreciate when you're on a wherry, because it's so quiet."

But it's not just about sailing the boats. Volunteers help out with maintenance and repairs. The Wherry Yacht Charter's three wherries will all be out of action in 2010 as they receive some TLC, plus they have to make repairs to the slipway at their base in Wroxham. *Albion* will be sailing again in 2010, but the winter months will see them replacing the tabernacle cheeks – the large chunks of oak which support the mast. That's a pretty major piece of surgery!

While *Albion's* success was borne out of the formation of a trust, the other wherries now owned by a charity started out in private ownership.

"We bought *Olive* in 1974 with no pre-conceived ideas," says Peter Bower. "I just wanted a wherry. At that time



Hathor was built for the Colman family, of Norwich mustard fame. CREDIT: JUNE SPLITT

FURTHER INFORMATION:

- *Albion* - www.wherryalbion.com
- Wherry Yacht Charter (*Hathor*, *Norada*, *Olive*) - www.wherryyachtcharter.org
- *White Moth* - www.norfolk-broads.com

the only other wherry you saw sailing was *Albion*, and I thought there must be others around. My friend Barney Matthews had *Norada*, and he joined me. The third one went something like 'I hear *Hathor's* up for sale – we'd better have it'. We'd always intended to form a trust to own them, but by the time that happened, things were already in decline."

Cost

And that's really the problem with keeping any classic boat afloat. They cost a lot of money to maintain. A replacement sail, for example, doesn't leave a lot of change out of £5000, and *Hathor's* new rudder – part of an extensive refit being undertaken over the next year or so – won't be much short of £4000.

The Norfolk wherry could (and should) be regarded in the same terms as the aircraft of the Battle of Britain Flight. With just two original trading wherries left, three pleasure wherries and three wherry yachts, they form an important and



Hathor's interior, featuring Egyptian designs. CREDIT: CLIVE TULLY

irreplaceable part of the history of the Broads, and indeed of sailing in general. And while some are more financially secure than others, those belonging to the Wherry Yacht Charter Charitable Trust – including the unique *Hathor* – are in desperate need of help. While they have assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund, it's on the basis of two-for-one match-funding, and there are other strings attached. In short they need £100,000 – a relatively small amount for a corporate sponsor, I would have thought. Members of the public can become a Friend of the trust for £15 per year, or £18 a year buys you membership of the Norfolk Wherry Trust (*Albion*).



Albion.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Royal visit

THE Queen and Duke of Edinburgh have visited Gloucester to see the canalside development and city regeneration.

The royal party walked from Llanthony Priory to Gloucestershire College, where they met the directors of the regeneration scheme; and also travelled to Cheltenham and the UK's communications HQ (GCHQ) to mark the centenary of the three UK intelligence agencies. Their visit included a boat trip around the docklands.

Broads Authority buys Berney Arms moorings

THE Broads Authority has bought 37m of piled moorings between Berney Arms pub and mill as a safe haven for boats waiting to cross Breydon Water. The frontage on the River Yare will provide free 24-hour moorings to boaters. The land was bought prior to auction for £17,500.

Director of waterways, Trudi Wakelin said: "We decided to purchase these moorings because it will provide safe facilities for people who need to wait for favourable tides to transit Breydon Water and the bridges on the Lower Bure." "We also recognise that it is a very important location with links to Berney Arms, the nature reserve and railway station. We don't want to see it developed for permanent moorings or any other uses so we thought it was important to step in."

Canal trust backs mine move

SUPPORTERS of the Ashby Canal restoration are backing a proposed opencast mine in Measham.

UK Coal is hoping to recover about 1.25 million tonnes of coal and 250,000 tonnes of fireclay at the Minorca site, off Gallows Lane, over four-and-a-half years. The company has vowed to pump significant funds into delivering the next stretch of Ashby Canal between Snarestone and Illott Wharf, to the south of Measham.

The Ashby Canal Trust, which is overseeing the restoration from Moira to Snarestone, says it understands the 'short-term' fears of villagers about Minorca. However, it says the proposals to assist the canal restoration will provide 'significant community benefit' to help offset these concerns.

Leicestershire County Council will decide whether Minorca should be given the go-ahead in the coming months.

Essex Waterways – no fee increases for 2010

THE board of Essex Waterways, the subsidiary company of IWA which manages the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation, having stepped in to save it from closure in 2005, has agreed to hold off imposing any increases in charges for 2010.

Exceptions are six residential moorings at Heybridge and newly renovated moorings at Hoe Mill that have benefited from electrical installations and are to be redesignated as premium moorings in view of the improved facilities.

The board agreed that there would be no increases at the improved moorings at Sandford despite the additional facilities, in recognition of inconvenience caused by the closure of Stonhams Lock.

Commenting on the decision to peg licence and other charges on the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation, Colin Edmond, navigation manager, said: "We aim to run the waterway efficiently, but always conscious of ensuring that we also represent the interests of the user wherever possible."

"We hope by imposing a zero increase on fees we can be seen to lead other larger navigation authorities by example."