

When barges worked up the River Welland

My sister Marria Eggar regularly sends me snippets from your paper.

I left Spalding 55 years ago, but being my birthplace, I still think of it as home.

A recent article in your papers, regarding what you say may be the last barge to use the river, prompts me to remind readers of how it used to be in my time - happy childhood memories in the late 20s/early 30s. In those seemingly not-too-far-off-days, the Welland was still used commercially most of the year by G F Birch Ltd, High Street, Spalding.

Their residence, almost next to their premises, was what is now the Cley Hall Hotel. In those days it was an elegant place with its own dairy and many servants. The gardens at the rear were extensive and on occasions were open to the public.

Behind the gardens and extending all the way to Halmergate was a large park, now built on. On at least one occasion I remember South

.Lincolnshire Agricultural Show there. As a schoolboy I was lucky enough to be accepted by the men who worked the barges.

I spent all my spare time and nearly all my summer holidays with them on the river, or down at Fosdyke Bridge, which was the port of entry for all produce - to be stored in warehouses and later trans-shipped to barges and towed up river to the granary in the High Street.

There were two wharfs and warehouses at Fosdyke, one either side of the river. The one near Fosdyke village remains almost as I remember it.

The main buildings complete with static crane on the wharf have all but disappeared, one small part only being left of the building, and a few small stumps in the mud showing where the wharf was, all this next to the new bridge.

The two coasters I remember unloading at Fosdyke were the Castle Rock and the Lizzie and Annie, this latter at that time being the oldest ship on Lloyds Register.

For transporting the cargoes up river (mainly cattle cake, maize, corn

MEMORIES

by ARTHUR EGAR

and fertilizer) Birch's owned a river fleet - a tug The Violet Birch, a motor barge Pride of the Welland (nicknamed pom-pom because of the sound of its diesel engine - also used for towing), a large ex-sailing barge Agriculture, and three smaller barges - Sarah (about 40 tons), Harold (35 tons) and Nelson (30 tons).

The largest coaster to visit High Street granary was the Girton. She had to have good spring tides to get up that far. I remember her skipper used to jump ashore as soon as she berthed and make a bee-line for the Ship Albion in Albion Street (very likely meeting my father there: his tailor's shop was conveniently situated opposite).

To reach that far the river traffic had to pass Albert Bridge, affectionately known as Chain Bridge.

This cantilever bridge had the mechanism on the High Street side. The footbridge itself rested on a structure protruding about ten feet from the opposite riverbank. On either side of the bridge was a long steel rods, which when tightened by means of a hefty spinner, lifted the far end and so enabled it to be swung.

My job was to place a chain and gate on the far side to prevent access.

Many a complimentary thing was said at this time as there was only High Bridge as an alternative (West Elloe Bridge not yet being built). I remember at one time when the bridge was closed for repairs some bright chap started a ferry service. It was kept very busy.

The last harbour-master was George Dodd, the blacksmith whose premises have recently been turned into a museum. He was assisted by his son Banks, father of the present well-known Geoff Dodd's who makes the frame-work for the Flower Parade floats.

He used to send me to Birch's to ask Mark Moon, manager, if there was to be any shipping that week and if so on what day.

I remember once that Bart Cresswell, bargee, and myself one summer day placed our cycles on the light barge Nelson and poled her to Fosdyke. She touched the side at the very awkward bend at Surfleet Seas End, but we jumped over the side and pushed her off.

The water was very shallow in the summer, but eventually we arrived and moored her, then carried our cycles ashore and rode home: Spalding to Fosdyke, nine miles.

About two miles up river from Fosdyke Caudwells Farmers had their own shipping. I recollect seeing their tug (I think it was the Leo) and a steel barge, the Blake, moored alongside. High and dry on the bank were three very large wooden dumb-barges. There was a wharf and crane, none of it was in use in my day.

Other happy memories were the blazing hot summers I remember (which experts today tell us did not occur) - in particular going "down below" (into The Wash). On one occasion all my family were guests on Ike Stapleton's power yacht Rob Roy. Does anyone remember her?

The Welland must have had a big influence on my life because I joined the Royal Navy and have lived near the sea all my life. I'm still never happier than when afloat.

I well remember the gasworks jetty and the crane which ran on lines. The crane was still there, but I never saw a ship there. My older brothers did though: in fact one had a trip north to fetch coal. I think the vessel was called the Fern.

Just below the gasworks opposite Willoughby House the banks were cut out to allow barges to be swung, known locally as the swinger.

I have been to the Ascoughfee Museum and Spalding Gentlemen's Society for photographs etc on this matter without success.

If anyone has any, I would love to hear from them. I visit Spalding occasionally.

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