

Too soon  
for a  
reunion

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# EDP2

Picture: BILL SMITH

## Norfolk's PRIDE



She is an icon of the Norfolk Broads who tolerates even the most hardened of landlubbers, as **STEVE SNELLING** discovered when he signed up for a special Albion cruise to celebrate the historic wherry's continuing restoration

**LOOKING BACK, IT SEEMS ALMOST TOO RIDICULOUS FOR WORDS.** Even now, as I attempt to steer a straight course through a whirlpool of memories, I can't help grinning inanely at the absurdity of it all.

Crazy as it appears, there I was, dedicated landlubber and motliest member of a pretty motley crew, let loose at the helm of the 113-year-old trading wherry Albion, pride of the Broads sailing fleet and iconic symbol of a vanished era which suddenly seemed in serious danger of sinking into oblivion.

Even as I tottered aft to take my turn at the tiller, the pessimist in me was imagining all manner of embarrassing scenarios in which visions of disaster loomed disturbingly large. I could picture the headlines: "Journalist steers grand old wherry into troubled waters" or, worse still, "Historic Albion wrecked: three years' hard graft scuppered in an instant".

But strange things happen at sea and, plainly, stranger things happen on Broadland waterways – even on Friday the thirteenth!

My first test came quickly: an unfortunately located loop in the River Bure required some meandering manoeuvring to negotiate. "Aim for the last tree on the far bank," came the first instruction. It was not an order I'd ever heard before, nor one I expected to hear on a vessel I never imagined sailing, let alone actually steering.

At this point a heron flapped clear of reed beds on an ungainly skywards trajectory while, more or less straight ahead, I caught sight of a pleasure cruiser rounding the bend and heading towards me. Just the kind of distractions I could have done without. But I did as



# Taking a turn with a grand old lady

I was told and, much to my relief, not to mention surprise, dear old Albion responded, smooth as you like.

For a moment it all seemed like plain sailing. But just when I was beginning to think there was nothing to this wherry

sailing malarkey things took a turn. As we closed the bend, the breeze freshened and Albion's great black sail spilled across the deck. The next moment I was hanging on for dear life, all my weight leant against the tiller in a struggle

against wind or water or maybe both.

Once again, though, Albion majestically obliged, answering the helm with barely of ripple of disapproval. Stranger still, my fellow crewmates

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# Albion is

## Norfolk's PRIDE



### From page one

seemed similarly untroubled as they continued to chat or bask in the sun, oblivious of my fumbling efforts

All of which was testament to no particular skill on my part but to the calm authority of the Norfolk Wherry Trust's own Captain Steadfast.

With his white beard and weather-bronzed face, Henry Gowman looks the part of a man who's been skippering wherries all his life. But looks in this case are deceptive. For all his skill at the tiller, the man at the helm of this special cruise to celebrate the Albion's continuing restoration admits to never having set foot on a wherry until eight years ago.

"It's all my wife's fault," he says, an infectious grin spreading across his face. "She organised my first trip as a birthday treat. And that was it. I didn't stop smiling from the first moment to the last."

Prior to that, the last time he'd sailed was as a 15-year-old boy seaman on the Orwell while based at the Royal Navy's training establishment HMS Ganges. Sea-going appointments aboard a second world war-vintage destroyer – "an absolute heap of scrap" – a coastal minesweeper and an aircraft carrier followed during which he reached the dizzying heights of leading hand. Thirty years in the Hampshire Constabulary followed, mainly in CID and Special Branch work, before he headed to Norfolk and that fateful appointment with the Albion.

"I enjoyed it so much I decided to enrol in the trust. I started to do some volunteer stuff, painting and the like, and then, crikey, I found out you could crew. And from that I progressed to trainee mate, mate, trainee skipper and then skipper..."

Now he talks about "coxing and boxing" and "quanting" as though he'd been born to it, and what he doesn't know about the Albion is scarcely worth knowing. "Do you realise," he says while making last-minute preparations for our day's sail from the Norfolk Wherry Trust's Ludham base to Horning and back, "the Albion's mast is from a single Oregon pine?" Well, actually, no I didn't.

Truth be told, before beating a path to Womack Water you could have put all I knew about wherries on a single page of a very small notebook and still had space left over. And even then, most of what I understood had been cribbed overnight from a handful of faded tomes of dubious reputation.

It was in one of these that I'd stumbled across the art of "quanting". What sounded like something out of a Harry Potter adventure was, I learned, the method by which wherrymen toiled to shift their becalmed vessels in the manner of Venetian boatmen, only with far longer poles requiring rather more muscle-power.

I found out also a little about the days when wherries were, in Henry's words, "the HGVs of the Broads", delivering cargoes of grain, coal, timber, bricks and the occasional horde of contraband from coast to city and an assortment of communities inbetween.

Designed to be crewed by a hard-working skipper and his boy, they were sailing barges unique to the broads. They ranged in size from the five-ton Cabbage which, as her name suggests, ferried garden produce from Ludham to Great Yarmouth, to the 80-ton Wonder, with the majority weighing in around the 25 to 40-ton mark.

Theirs was a workaday reputation peculiarly suited to the winding



**BOAT LEGS:** Steve Snelling gets use to the feel of being on the water before taking a turn on the tiller of the Wherry Albion.

# still casting her spell

Pictures: BILL SMITH



**OVER TO THE EXPERTS:** Skipper Henry Gowman, left, with Bruce Lindon aboard the wherry Albion.

waterways of Norfolk and north Suffolk. Notable for their ability to "beat against a head wind in a remarkable fashion" and distinctive in their gaudy livery and huge black sails spread by a heavy gaff, they were a trading force to be reckoned with which could also double as an up-market hire cruise fleet to meet the lucrative demands of a new-found spirit of adventure.

Wherries, either temporarily or permanently converted into luxury pleasure cruisers, transported the well-heeled on their broads explorations in a style that was usually in stark contrast to their traditional trade. Some were even said to rival "the best house-boats on the Thames".

But the story that stayed with me as I prepared to board the Albion was a supernatural tale of the unexpected involving the hapless wherry Mayfly, a murderous skipper and a nautical damsel in distress.

As related by the countryside writer J Wentworth Day, it stretched belief to breaking a point: a wherry skipper murders his mate, kidnaps the owner's daughter and makes off to sea with a cargo of bullion only to founder. But the weirdest of wherry stories doesn't end there. Precisely a year later, the only survivor of these dastardly deeds, a cabin boy, is sharing a punt with the grieving owner when, beneath a full midsummer moon, a phantom Mayfly careers across their bows in full sail. At that moment, as the ghostly wherry was swallowed in the darkness, "there was a thud in the fishing



punt. The boy looked round. The owner had dropped dead".

Strange to say, but the bizarre tale of the Mayfly is reputedly rooted in the waters of Oulton Broad, just a few miles from the Lake Lothing birthplace of the Albion and the childhood stamping ground of Lowestoft brewer and historic boat supporter Tim Dunford. But there the coincidences end.

For where the Mayfly's ghostly passage is the stuff of legend, the enduring saga of the Albion is as real as Tim's boyhood memories of fishing from her deck while she wintered on the north Suffolk broad, not far from where she began her remarkable career as the one and only carvel-hulled wherry in 1898.

In all those years since, Albion has proved herself a true survivor. Nearly lost forever when she sank near Great Yarmouth bridge in 1929, she has endured the ignominy of being reduced to a wartime lighter, the loss of a mast and even her name.

Rescued from likely oblivion more than 60 years ago by the Norfolk Wherry Trust, she has become the most famous trading wherry of them all, one of only two of the original 300 still afloat and now, following three years of painstaking restoration, arguably in the best shape she's been since she was built.

All of which seemed well worth toasting with a drop of the Green Jack Brewery's aptly-styled Albion mild bitter Tim had brought with him as he joined an assortment of journalists and filmmakers for a commemorative cruise to celebrate her continuing preservation.

Our sail took us sedately and magnificently via the winding Thurne and Bure into Horning and back to the Womack Water base that has been Albion's home for the past 30 years. It was a return journey that could have been covered in around 20 minutes by road, but took us the better part of eight hours on a glorious nautical amble through a Broadland landscape of bewitching beauty.

The pace itself is half the appeal. "You can't hurry," Tim smiles. "It's a total contrast from normal life. From what seems like a million miles an hour to five miles an hour. It's absolutely brilliant."

And he's right. The hurly-burly of everyday living seems a world removed from our passage into a sailing time-warp. There's time not only to wonder at the toilsome endeavours of numberless wherry-men but to marvel at the serenity of scyres barely changed in centuries and only slightly marred by the churning

procession of pleasure cruisers. For surprisingly long stretches, nature still holds spellbinding sway. Beneath a blue sky flecked with cotton-wool clouds, marsh harriers hover and reed warblers call out from the breeze-combed reeds fringing the river. Dreamy views across wide pastures speckled with windmills, flint-flecked church towers and the ruined remains of St Benet's abbey present classic pictures of Broadland rendered almost perfect by Albion's stirring presence.

With the wind in her great black sail and a pennant streaming from her mast, she is in her imperious element, a waterborne celebrity for whom all other craft make way amid a fusillade of clicking cameras.

"I often think that if we had a bucket on a long pole and took a pound off everybody who took a photograph we'd be extremely well-funded," says Henry, with a wry smile.

Few appreciate more Albion's importance in the Broadland scene or the special affection in which she is held. "I know it's a bit of a hackneyed phrase," Henry adds, "but she's almost unique, one of just two trading wherries left in the world and the only one that does charters and encourages people to take an active role in sailing her."

"Skippering her is more than a privilege, it's an absolute joy and many's the domestic chore that doesn't get carried out at home in preference for being on the river. She so epitomises the Broads and Norfolk. It's a real buzz just stepping on board."

Along with our crew for the day, Bruce Lindon, Hugh Tusting and Jayne Tracey, Henry is one of a legion of enthusiastic volunteers dedicated not just to keeping this flagship of the Broads afloat, but in good enough shape to excite a new generation of admirers from both the nautical fraternity and from among landlubbers like me.

It's not been an easy task. In what has been a prolonged labour of love, Albion has been transformed over the past few winters. "It started when, to use a non-technical term, we found she was going banana-shaped," says Henry.

"She was designed to carry heavy cargo which would have kept the void in the middle of the hull pressed down, but without the cargo the void started to rise, so to speak. So, after a lot of deliberation, we decided to hack off the old keel... and allowed her to settle on a trestle until she came to her shape and then we put on a steel keel."

The only trouble with that was that, in restoring her fine lines, everything else was thrown out of kilter. "Every other timber was out of shape," explains Henry. "So the last two years have been about reshaping those timbers. But now it's all done we're hoping next year's going to be a doddle!"

In truth, the work never stops for this never-ending project. Thoughts are already turning to finding a new mast with the real prospect of a break with tradition in the shape of a first laminated version. All of that, however, remains in what Henry believes is an ever-more secure future for a piece of nautical Norfolk living history.

"We're very fortunate," he says, "because among our volunteers we have a shipwright, a millwright who can turn his hand to shipwrighting skills, a boat builder and the rest of us who're dab hands with chisels and screwdrivers and paintbrushes. So, with good planning, I think she's here for perpetuity."

It was a bold, heartfelt statement, but on a day when Albion appeared fully restored to all her former glory who was I to disagree? After all, if this grand old lady of the Broads can cope with nautical numbskulls like me at the helm, she can surely cope with anything. Long live Albion and all who sail in her!

**■ If you want to charter the Albion or are interested in becoming a volunteer you can find out more information by visiting the website at: [www.wherryalbion.com](http://www.wherryalbion.com) or you can contact the charter secretary Pam Shallcross on 01692 630593.**

