THORPE HAMLET HISTORY GROUP

Article 5 : A PASSAGE TO NORWICH
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In about 1974 I was skipper of a little ship called the 'Peter Robin' and we worked in the coasting trade; our company was based in Bishopsgate, London. Most of our trade was in cargoes from deep sea ships who were discharging in London for onward shipment to small east coast ports and taking cargoes from the same ports to be loaded into large ships for shipment all over the world. When my ship was empty I phoned the office for orders and was told to proceed to the Co-op Cutting in the Victoria Dock to load 200 tons of Canadian wheat for Reed's flour mill Norwich. The 'Peter Robin' was laying on the buoys at Gravesend where we bought enough victuals for the upriver trip to the Royal Docks.

We collected our boat from the Isolation Hospital pier sculled to the ship hoisted the boat aboard and started the engine, let go from the buoy and turned up the River Thames to carry the flood tide up to the Royal Docks. On reaching the docks we tied up to the lock entrance of the King George V Dock. I jumped ashore and ran to the Dock Master's office to see when the next lock in would be, he told me that it was nearly high water and a deep sea ship was about to lock out and if we stayed well back we could lock in on the return water. After about 15 minutes the lock gates opened and two tugs arrived, picked up the deep sea ship (one at the bow the other at the stern of the ship). With the familiar cry of "let go" and whistle signals from the Dock Master the ship a Blue Star ship was manoeuvred into the river and the tugs let go for her to proceed down the river and thence to sea. The Dock Master then called us into the lock and signalled us to move to move up to the lock gates as an inbound deep sea ship was coming into the lock behind us. She had been stemming the tide just upstream of the lock gates. The ship came into the lock behind us with the assistance of tugs, she was another Blue Star ship which was good for us as she ws going to the Victoria Dock to discharge her cargo of meat etc..

Why was it good for us? Because the two bridges we had to get through would have to open for her and we as the smaller ship could slip through first and not be in the way. Without this help we could be kept waiting a long time as small ships counted for very

little in the London Docks. The lock gates slowly opened and we let go the mooring ropes and the P.L.A. (Port of London Authority) tugs stood by to tow the Blue Star ship to her berth. As we approached the bridge between The King George V dock and the Royal Albert dock opened and we motored through and motored up the Royal Albert dock to the Connaught Road bridge between the Royal Albert and the Victoria dock. We had to slow down and wait for the Blue star ship to catch up. When the ship was three quarters of the way up the dock the bridge swung open and we went through into the Victoria dock. The Co-op Cutting was a small wet dock just through the bridge on the port (left) hand side of the Victoria dock, well out of the way of the Blue Star ship's discharge berth. We tied up at the vacant berth just below the silo and stepped ashore to see the silo foreman about loading. He said they were busy loading lighters for the rest of the day but he could fit us in first thing in the morning. This gave us time to walk to Silvertown to buy victuals for our passage to Norwich and a bit besides in case of bad weather. With the grub cupboard topped up (no fridges or freezers aboard then) we turned in after a swift beer at the Connaught Tavern just outside the dock.

In the morning we uncovered the hold and moved under the loading spout of the silo. After a hold inspection, which we passed with flying colours we started to load the wheat. If we had a good stow we would be full right up, so we helped the dockers shovel wheat into the after cupboard as if this was not full the cargo could shift in bad weather. The dockers were a good lot and worked well after we made them a cup of tea each. The PLA tea wagon comes round but the dockers preferred our tea and biscuits. One of my jobs when we loaded was to pump out the water ballast from the after ballast tanks so the ship would float a little higher and load to her Plimsoll mark. Unfortunately the after ballast tank valve would not open, the shaft just spun round and round leaving the water ballast still in the tank, it would make us look overloaded. The valve could not be removed when the ship was deep loaded as the water in the tank would transfer itself into the engine room bilge.

I decided to risk it and sail for Norwich where a repair could be carried out. After loading, signing the bills of lading and clearing customs we let go and motored down the dock after waiting for the Connaught Road bridge to swing for us. This time we locked out of the Royal Albert dock basin which being downstream of the King George V dock gave us a 15 minute start on our passage. We were lucky and carried the ebb tide down the river. It was a good spring ebb and we carried it to the Black Tail Spit navigation buoy (below Southend). Here we met the young floodtide which slowed us down but gave us plenty of water over the Spitway.

The Spitway is a shallow area of sand between the Swin or Kings channel and the Wallet channel, if you are bound Maldon, Colchester or Ipswich you normally cross it judging your tides and feeling your way with a boathook or a lead line. If you are bound for Great Yarmouth or Norwich you can avoid it but the passage is longer, the average time for an 8 knot ship from London to Yarmouth is 16 hours but can be longer with bad weather. Luckily the weather was fine with light south west wind about force 3 or 4. It was a good

job the weather was fine or we would have been like a half tide rock. We cleared Orford Ness with the ebb tide under us and carried that ebb all the way to Great Yarmouth we entered Great Yarmouth in the dark and tied up at Dalgetties's quay for the night, making sure the fenders (car tyres) were over the plimsoll mark and hoping the Board of Trade inspector did not see we were over loaded.

In the morning the agent came to see us and asked when I would like a bridge lift as the tide at Norwich is about four and a half hours later than at Great Yarmouth. I ordered the bridge (Haven Bridge) for 10am which was about one and a half hours before high water at Great Yarmouth, this gave me most of the flood tide to Norwich. As I had never been to Norwich as master before the agent gave me an Ordnance Survey map of the Norfolk Broads to follow. We let go and motored through the bridge and entered Breydon Water the flood tide helping us up. When we got above Seven Mile House I noticed we seemed deeper in the water, I gave the wheel to the mate and went down into the engine room to investigate. I checked the engine room bilge and found it empty so I went out onto the after deck and soon got wet feet as the after deck was 4 to 5 inches under water but I soon realised what the problem was; we had come from the salt water sea into the fresh water river which is less buoyant also the good stow the London dockers had given us plus the engine's power had drawn the stern down. I eased the engine down and the stern floated a little higher and the further up the stream we went the speed limits slowed us down and the stern floated a little bit higher. Reedham Bridge swung as we approached; there was no v.h.s. or any sort of radio on our size ship at that time. At Hardley Cross we entered the Port of Norwich area.

The river at this point is part of Thorpe Hamlet, just the river not the banks. We went through Trowse Bridge and Carrow Bridge without incident and berthed at Reed's flour mill. They were waiting for the wheat so we removed the hatches and they started grabbing out the wheat. After about 4 or 5 grabs we were on our marks and safe from the Board of Trade inspectors. The fine for being overloaded was £300 per inch for my size ship. As soon as we were empty I took out the faulty valve and had it repaired and





Top image : coaster approaching Carrow Bridge, passing the Boom Towers

Bottom image : the scene today after redevelopment for residential purposes

replaced it, we were legal again. I posted off the freight sheet from the post office on Carrow Hill and booked a bridge lift from John Dann the bridge master and we were away down river off to new ports and places.



Reed's flour mill, now converted into residential accommodation, seen beyond Carrow Bridge.