

## River transport

**At Erith, being a riverside settlement, boats have been used as a form of transport from early days, if only in pursuit of primitive survival - fishing.**

"Tis the set of the sails and not the gales, which tell us the way to go".  
An apt quotation adapted to water transport, at least up to the time that steam superseded sail.

Although the coming of the railway encouraged and developed industries in Erith, it was the natural resources through water transport, which brought the town ultimate success.

Before the advent of the steamship, sailing barges provided local transportation services, whilst sailing ships fulfilled such duty coastwise and larger ships carried goods from the Thames to all parts of the world. In the early days of the nineteenth-century, wharfage facilities in Erith were rather restricted, being mainly served by a wharf on the site of the present Riverside Gardens which had been in existence since the middle ages. At the upper end was a fitting out berth, used extensively by the Admiralty, and close by on the wharf was a great storehouse wherein were stowed masts and spars. After discharging cargoes in London, ships loaded ballast as a safety measure before venturing to sea again, either at Charlton or Erith. The ballast hole at Erith started in 1805 and loaded into ships at this particular wharf, then at the adjacent wharf, named as the first ballast wharf, later as the lower ballast wharf, now known as Station Wharf. About this time in the eastern part of the town, brickfields opened and bricks with the trade mark J.B.W. (James Bazely White) were loaded into sailing barges at Anchor Bay Wharf, taken up to the Docks and shipped to all parts of the world. The manager of Erith Brick works was a Mr. John Stone, who, to improve stowing space in the barges, hired certain types of barges and became so intrigued that he started a barge building business in Erith.

It was about 1865 that steamers began to supersede sailing ships on the Thames especially in the coastal trade and the 700 ton "George Pyman" began a regular run from the North of England to Beadles' Wharf at Erith where in the meantime rail connections had been made with the South Eastern Railway system. In 1864, Messrs. Easton and

Anderson who had a large engineering business in London, wanted to put up works in the country and came to Erith looking for a suitable site with access to both water and rail. This they found at Erith and erected works previously occupied by Turners Asbestos Company. They had large contracts with Egypt and elsewhere and imports of raw materials and exports of machinery etc. were dealt with at their own and Beadles' Wharves.

Unfortunately after the death of James Easton, some 35 years later, the works closed but they had been the means of introducing Erith's facilities to the notice of other manufacturers who wanted to build works in favourable conditions and led to Fraser & Chalmers, Vickers, Callenders and other big establishments coming to Erith in later years. Before the close of the century, Erith handled a larger dead-weight tonnage, roughly a million tons a year, than any other place between London and Southampton.

With the talk of a hovercraft service to London, it is interesting to note that way back in 1843, two lines of fast boats, the "Diamond" and the "Star" ran from Gravesend to London Bridge, calling en route at Erith. Later this mode of travel was affected with the coming of the railway to Erith.

Charles Dickens in his **Dictionary of the Thames** of 1880 claims that the sailing barge fleet numbers three thousand. In 1885 there were 2,100 sailing barges officially registered and this figure was maintained until 1910 but since that year numbers have declined and today it is a rare sight to see a barge sailing off Erith.

Mention must be made of the open river barges, usually called lighters or dumb barges, developed from the punt during the nineteenth century. Before tugs were used for towing purposes, such barges were moved from place to place by men with long oars. "Under Oars" or driving being definitions of the operation.

Before the war there were close on 10,000 barges on the river, now the number is whittled down to a mere 1,500 and tugs are disappearing in the same proportion. 1939 saw some 500 tugs on the river, 1976 views about 70. In due times steamships have given way to motor vessels and although coastal, continental and worldwide traffic continues, it is not on the scale it used to be or which would be expected in view of the advantages and opportunities presented.