



## Cambria Trust Newsletter

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#### From Cambria's Cabin

As you will already be aware, the Charitable Company will be holding the first AGM shortly. We look forward to meeting as many people as are able to attend, and will arrange for visits to Cambria and the Visitors Centre afterwards.

The last year of the rebuild will also be a busy one for the administrative side of the operation. Our educational advisor, Brian Clayton, is already heavily involved with preparation of an educational package to be used by schools attending the barge. The website will have to be altered to enable bookings to be made, and a group formed to look after the business side or running Cambria including the working up of a programme of sail training, educational visits, demonstrations / open days, and any corporate functions.

It is envisaged, at the moment that educational visits will be concentrated initially at a few sites and build up from there. These visits will occur during the winter months when students are not involved with exams and long holiday periods allowing sail training to take place in the more settled months of the year.

Funding continues to be a vital and difficult job for those engaged in it and will need to carry forward into our operating years. It is our intention to start the programmes with a surplus of funds to tide us over until working monies come through.

The Apprenticeship Scheme continues to run well, there have been recent visits from the accreditation body that spent a considerable time at Standard Quay and were very satisfied with the course being run and the work produced. The entire scheme has been supported by the local council with great enthusiasm and funding. We have had several requests for places in future apprenticeship schemes and hope this bodes well for the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has volunteered their services at the week-ends to open the Standard Quay and SB Cambria Centre, along with Cambria herself keeping the visiting public well informed. We are now counting numbers of visitors and during the past year 1500 people came to visit. The income from Cambria and the Visitors' Centre as reported in the September newsletter has risen to just short of £3000 at the close of the year.

Basil Brambleby, Cambria Trust Secretary

#### Barge Bits and Bobs

We are indebted to Tony Farnham chairman SSBR, who left in our care, a large section of his collection of barge memorabilia. Among them are two wheel covers belonging to the great Everard racers; SARA and VERONICA. Included are twenty racing pennants from Thames and Medway matches, I understand one of them was won by CAMBRIA; these are of great historic value. There are numerous other pieces which will be of considerable demonstration value when Cambria is in commission and engaged in her teaching program.

Tony was part of Cambria's crew in her working days and it is apt that this connection has been made again. Very many thanks Tony.

Basil Brambleby

## Here is the second part of Alan Sporne's Article.

My new skipper was Bob Gosling, one of a barging family, whose father retired when he was 84. Bob was a great bloke; he was always laughing, and had a reputation as a grafter. As he had a large wife and two sons, he said he had to work hard as his wife had a large appetite.

When the Clara was ready to go to sea we went upriver to Ipswich and loaded peanuts for London. We exchanged peanuts for fish and shrimps from fishing smacks, and one sack was given to a Thames river police launch crew after they had pushed us upriver for the length of their beat, as we had a foul tide and wind. Bob was very popular on the London River, as the Thames was known amongst the fraternity. After we unloaded the peanuts we went into Victoria dock to load wheat for Felixstowe Mill. On Saturday evening Bob introduced me to the last remaining music hall in London —the Queen's Music hall in Poplar. I saw many famous acts there, among them the Sand Dancers dressed as Egyptians, I went there quite often.

We arrived at Felixstowe dock, it was a hairy place to get into with the wind in the S.W. as there was no room to turn once you were in, so you had to let the anchor go to stop the barge from crashing into a dozen or so motor torpedo boats that were moored along the N.E. wall of the dock. They were made of plywood and we would only have to had to nudge one to punch a damn great hole in it. We visited Felixstowe many times, once after we had unloaded we had to sail to Ipswich for our next cargo, and 4 naval officers asked if they could come with us and pull ropes and set sails and play bargees for the day. They bought a load of duty free cigarettes and a bottle of gin with them as a gift, and as they did the entire pulley haul and all I had to do was make the tea it was fine by me. Felixstowe was the home of Commander Scott's famous M.T.B flotilla. We saw them bring in a captured German E. boat one early morning. The M.T.B's were often shot up and damaged when they got back from patrol. Whilst we were in Felixstowe dock on one of our trips there, Bob said "How would you like to take the dinghy across to Harwich, and pick up our new bow sprit?" We had sprung our present one and it was unsafe to use. Off went sculling across to Harwich across the ebb tide, if I had rested I would have been swept out to sea, by the time I got there I was shattered. The bow sprit was 30 feet long, so I lashed it alongside with the front end cocked up out of the water, and set off at slack water, allowing for the set of the flood tide. I don't remember how long it took; I ended up towing it astern and rowing with two oars instead of sculling. I have worked in Harwich harbour several times since and am amazed I managed to tow a large telegraph pole across it at 16 years of age.

On one visit to Felixstowe we had to leave 30 tons of wheat in the middle of the main hold and take it up river to Marridge's other mill at Manningtree. We didn't even bother to cover the hold as it was only an 8 mile trip. When we got to Manningtree we performed a typical barge trick of dropping both lee boards to dig into the mud to use as a brake as we went alongside. After we moored up, Bob told me to winch them up while he went to the Mill office. As I was lifting the port lee board the ratchet was not engaged, so when I let go the handle it flew back and smacked me across the top of my nose and split my right cheek. When Bob came back I was lying on the deck covered in blood with our dog "Wacker" licking my face. We decided to go home for the weekend.

I arrived home at Maldon with "Wacker" on a piece of rope and a kitbag half full of dirty washing and half full of Demerara sugar that weighed a half hundred weight. The blood on my face had congealed and the eye had closed and was black and blue. My mother had a fit, but the sugar helped to calm her down. Wacker was brilliant; he would let anyone down the cabin, but wouldn't let them out unless we said it was ok. We could leave the barge even in the London docks and be sure that nothing had been pinched while we were away. He was even a good radar set in the dark or fog. He would stand right up in the bows and bark and look in the direction of a buoy or anchored vessel that we couldn't see. He could hear the tide rushing past the buoy or vessel long before we could see it. Summer or winter the pace never slackened, going home was a rare occasion. We took many cargoes of wheat to East Mills at Colchester. The mill was up river from Hythe Quay under three very low bridges. The Clara was the biggest barge to be able to get to the East Mills. We had to lower the masts and sails down flat on the

top of the hatches then be towed up to the mill, heave the gear up again, unload, lower it down, go down river to Hythe Quay and heave it all up again. The mast and sails weighed several tons, so it was a slow job; we had muscles on our muscles. Once we had to do it at East Mills where we loaded flour, then take the flour to Marriage's Mill upstream of London Bridge where we had to lower it and go through the whole routine again, we earned our money that trip! Bob decided to take his family on a holiday trip in the Clara. I moved my gear forward and we waited for his wife and two boys to arrive. When she did it was like a comic opera. She was very large and jolly with two huge suitcases. We got the cases down the cabin, but there was no way we could get the wife down there. She was just too big. She was screaming with laughter, Bob was swearing, Wacker was barking and running up and down the main hatch. Me and the two boys were holding our sides and rolling about laughing. A crowd had gathered on the quay side. They were all laughing. The end result was no holiday for Mum and the boys, but a story that went up and down the East coast a long-time afterwards. At least I got my bunk back down the cabin. Bob's wife was a lovely lady and treated me like one of her own. I had many a huge meal in Bob's house while at Colchester as he lived not far from the quay.

Another cargo we loaded at Colchester was baled straw for the paper mill at Ridham docks in Kent. We filled the hold and then made a stack 6 bales high on the deck. All the ropes and halyards had to be made fast to a spider band that was clamped round the mast about 4 feet above the top of the stack. The stack had a tarpaulin laid over the top and was tied down with chains and wires fastened to slips along the side. This was in case one had to get rid of the stack at sea in bad weather (not uncommon). A gale of wind and a saturated stack and heavy seas and you were in trouble. It's difficult to sail a haystack in those conditions. Straw was a good freight as with good luck you could do two trips in a week, it only took 6 hours to load and less to unload, and with a fair wind and tides it was a doddle. The only snag was at Ridham there was Kings Ferry Bridge that connects the isle of Sheppey with the mainland. This had to be lifted to let a barge through, a pilot or huffer was required to go through the bridge as it was a main road and rail bridge. There were only certain times they would let you go through and if the wind was awkward you could have a long wait. The huffer was an old man about 70 but what a seaman. I've been through that bridge like a speed boat (a haystack in half a gale and a spring tide helping it along can be exciting). I've been through it sideways with the sails shaking head to wind and I've been through it like a dinghy going through Tower Bridge. Never the same twice! I

One of the things about Ridham dock was the rats they were as big as cats. Even Wacker got worried. We barge mates used to clamber over the huge stacks of waste paper with large sticks and chase and kill rats. It was a great sport, mostly the falling about off the stacks was the fun part as it was a soft landing however far you fell; killing the rats was secondary.

Bob was very superstitious and would get upset if I whistled on deck. That would bring wind and was only used when you wanted wind. If we were becalmed he would whistle quietly and occasionally would throw a halfpenny overboard in the direction he wanted the wind to come from (this was buying the wind). If you were desperate one would stick a knife in the mast with the handle pointing in the direction you wanted the wind from. He got me believing it, one day I threw a sixpence over the side to buy the wind, he saw me do it and he said it was too much money and that we would get more than we wanted. That afternoon we were under shortened sail running for shelter into the river Crouch in a South Easterly gale. Every time I looked at him he said "I bl .... told you so!" We lay there for a week; wind bound and ran out of fresh water and most other things.

Normally if you needed stores, the skipper would put the mate ashore in the boat and he would walk to the nearest village shop, I have walked miles along the Essex and Suffolk sea walls carrying bags of bread, milk, rations and vegetables pinched out of the fields. But this time we needed water so I had to take the thirty gallon tank we kept on deck and skull up to the yacht club at Burnham. A matter of 5 miles there and back, "That will teach you to throw a tanner over the side" says Bob. I can still hear him mutter as E rowed into the sunset. I got back in the dark guided by the riding light on our forestay. I only had one chance to fetch the barge, if I got it

wrong I would have a long hard pull against the tide. We hoisted the tank on board with the tackle on the Davits. Then I had to cook dinner; fried spam, peas and spuds; I can smell it now! I became just as superstitious as Bob.

We were deep loaded with wheat bound for East Mills and having a private race with another Colchester barge the "Leofreda". Both barges had just turned into the Whitaker channel and were neck and neck, we had just gone about, and without knowing it, the shackle holding the port standing backstay had got crossed in its ringbolt, as the weight came on it after tacking, the shackle parted and the topmast broke off at the upper cup. As it was the size of a telegraph pole it made a hell of a bang. The wreckage fell down the lee side of the mainsail, the skipper put the wheel hard a port and put the wheel brake on to hold it there, as she came round we both hauled the sail and top mast onto the deck and lashed it down and by the time the barge had sailed full circle we were back on course again, we lost the race.

We picked up a new top mast at our yard in Colchester and shipped it at East Mills while the gear was down. We never had time to rig the sail but we prepared it for rigging on the way to London. We sailed light (empty) for London to pick up a cargo of timber for Maldon. Bob was fretting because we had no topsail as he was in a hurry as always.

It was midwinter and the weather was awful. Rain, snow, wind and ice on the rigging but Bob wanted his topsail, we anchored in sea reach just downstream from Gravesend, on the Kentish shore, and it was dark by now. Bob said make us a cuppa and we will have a fry up then we will rig the topsail. The sail was stopped up like a sausage with the halyard and sheet attached. I went up and sat on the mainmast head with the topmast between my knees, and a large ball of spun yarn (very thick string soaked in Stockholm tar). Bob hauled on the halyard and when the first eyelet appeared alongside me I lashed it to the first of eight wooden hoops that attached the sail to the mast. As each lashing was completed Bob hoisted the sail until the next eyelet appeared, and so on until all eight were secured. By now it had started to snow heavily and blow, we were in a blizzard.

The job was done and I tried to get down, but could not move, my legs were numb and I could hardly grip with my hands. Bob had to come up and get me down. I was a big lad by now, easily 12 % stone. When I got down he gave me a large tot of rum; my first but not my last, we arrived at Surrey commercial dock on the south side of the river. After we had got through the dock gates, it took us all day to get to the Greenland dock at the other end of the complex of docks and wharfs. We had to pull apart banks of lighters and barges and squeeze through, with no engine or power winches. It was hard work and very frustrating; mind you it kept you warm as everything was covered with snow and ice. We left for Maldon with a full stack of timber on deck. Having a stack in the winter made it awkward when you were cooking a full dinner on a stove down the forecastle as you had to climb a ladder up onto the stack forward, negotiate the length of the stack covered in snow and ice with no hand holds. If the barge was listing with a strong breeze you could lose the lot. I would take the skipper's meal and take it down the cabin and place it on the table on a wet cloth (this stopped it sliding about) rush up to take the wheel and the skipper would go down and have his meal and a roll up and then relieve me at the wheel. I would then have my meal in the forecastle with the warmth of the stove.

A regular moneymaking sideline was seagull eggs. When the nesting season was in full swing and we were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, we would land on Rat Island in the river Colne and collect two or three hundred gull's eggs (they never seemed to decrease in numbers). The bargees had been egging at Rat Island for generations. We kept them in a cool place till we got to London docks, where we sold them for 4 pence each. I couldn't stand them. The Colne was a nice river, Fingringhoe creek had a flour mill at the top end of it, and we took a freight of Canadian wheat there once. The creek bends and twists and there is no chance of sailing, so the barge is pushed along using 30 foot poles and a thin wire called a dolly, This is wound on a small winch above the windlass. The mate jumps in the boat with the end of the wire, wraps the end round his leg and under his foot while he stands up and skulls ahead of the barge. When he finds a suitable spot to land he slams a small anchor into the sea

wall, fastens the dolly wire to it, the skipper takes up the slack and heaves the barge along. If all goes well when the barge gets near the anchor, the skipper slacks the wire and the mate frees the anchor and continues up the creek in the boat and repeats the whole process. The art of this process is to not let the barge stop, as long as the barge keeps moving it is a lot easier. Once it does stop; its hard work to get it moving again. When you can't use the dolly wire; outcome the poles and the pushing starts. This is all done on a rising tide so if the barge runs aground she will eventually float off again. Returning downstream on the ebb tide with an empty barge is a lot easier, but if you go aground you have a long wait to float again.

Sailing up the Thames Estuary off Southend in the Clara in a force 8 gale. The barge was empty, but we were laid over so far that the lee deck was only 6 inches clear of the water. Bob and I were both on the wheel (one each side), One man couldn't hold her. We were surrounded by continuous lightning and rolling thunder. The sky was black and the sea was white and electric blue in the flashes. We were wearing our Southwesters back to front to shield our eyes from the flashes otherwise we couldn't see a thing. We overtook a freighter; God knows how fast we were going. Bob said later, he would never know why she was not dismasted in the squalls.

It was a great life, hard work but good comradeship and the good times always made up for the bad. By the end of 1945 the war in Europe and the Far East was over. The Canadian Ross rifle we had been given for our own protection had to be handed back to the Admiralty with its ammunition. We had no ammunition, we had used it all up shooting at ducks and floating objects, even used for making holes in other barges top sails. I had spent V.E. day with the crew of a French ship in Trafalgar Square, we were loading china clay from her for a brickfield in Colchester. During that trip we spent 2 days stranded half way up a sea wall where, despite having put out two anchors we had been blown in a force 9 gale. We had to wait for the top of spring tides to float us off. By now, having watched all types of ships coming from foreign parts, gazed at warships in Harwich and Sheerness, I was getting itchy feet. My last barge trip was very profitable. We were laying down stream of Southend pier, bound for Colchester. Just about a mile downstream was the wreck of a Collier that had hit a mine. At low water springs you could get into her engine room which was full of brass fittings and copper piping. The mate of the Leofleda, an old school chums from Maldon, and I went off to her in the dinghy with hacksaw and hammers etc to collect salvage. The fishermen had been there before us but there was a lot left for us to have. We salvaged so much we nearly sank the boat. We halved the spoils and on the way to Colchester e cleaned it all up. We took it to the scrap yard at Hythe Quay and gloated over the 514.00 we had made between us. I had volunteered for the Navy when last in Ipswich and had been accepted. It was February and they said it would be March or April that I would be sent for.

Meanwhile my family had moved to north London, so I left the barge. Bob had no trouble getting a new mate and we parted amicably with a hand shake and a wave.

Thinking back on my time on the barges, it was the most exciting time of my life even though I travelled the world and went to many out of the way places in later life.

Alan Sporne

### **Fleur de Lis Photographic Exhibition, Faversham.**

On Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> February for a period of 3 weeks we will be holding an exhibition of pictures in the Fleur de Lis Gallery depicting some more unusual aspects of the rebuild of SB Cambria. The intention is to give people a different aspect from the distant one they had from the viewing gallery on the barge.

**Project Manager's Picture of Progress**



**Stern deck beams**

**Sweeping lines of port wale**

**Top view looking forwards**

**Presentation of Swale BC funding contract**

**After planking runs**

**Underside of mast case decking**

## Restoration News October –December 2009

It is hard to believe that the restoration has now entered its third and final year and for once weather conditions have been slightly difficult, with timber disappearing under snowdrifts and some very cold hands. However, progress remains on schedule and the vista from the viewing platform has been ever changing.

Over the last 8 months visitors to the barge have been able to use the scaffolding extension to the access platform to view restoration progress from close quarters. However, this has now had to be curtailed as the shipwrights have commenced laying the forward deck and the associated covering boards, so the main access walkway has had to be dismantled for the time being. 3" decking has been laid across the central mast case deck and similar sections fitted at the stern end. During the period, 24 short oak deck beams or carlings have been fitted. These timbers support the side decking and stop at the margin planks that will eventually carry the longitudinal coamings.

Both outer longitudinal wale planks have been shaped, fitted and fastened to the stem and hull frames. These are deep, heavy structural timbers requiring steaming at the extremities. The lodging knees mentioned last month are now all fitted together with the adjacent partner frames. Completion of these items allowed the shipwrights to plane down the tops of all timbers ready for the covering boards that run from stem to stern and create the outer sections of the deck.

Necessary slow progress has been made with the outer planking in way of the forward runs. Each piece of this double planking has to be individually shaped and steamed to take the hull shape. This is a highly skilled operation where timbers are often twisting some 90 degrees and bedded on a hot tar, horse manure and felt mix.

The apprentice scheme continues to move forward and two major visits took place during the period. Firstly the Senior External Verifier from the City and Guilds carried out his first audit and was most complimentary. On the 6<sup>th</sup> November a press morning was called to officially announce a funding agreement between the Cambria Trust and Swale Borough Council. This financial grant will support the apprentice scheme over the next two years.

Orders have been placed for all the spars. The main mast and spreet will be manufactured from steel tube with the remaining items made from timber. A local shipwright has been contracted to build the scuttle hatches, skylights and the interesting whale backed open fronted wheelhouse, so typical of the large coasting barges. Cambria had opening side windows in the wheelhouse, which were operated on leather straps similar to the train windows of a bygone era.

A chance telephone call led to a visit from the niece and nephew of the last Cambria skipper/owner Bob Roberts. During a meeting at the barge large amounts of very interesting barge memorabilia was handed over by the family for safekeeping including the complete cargo log book from 1954 to 1970 all in Bob's own hand writing. This priceless document not only mentions the cargoes but also the dates, tonnages, destinations and agents.