

THE LAST OF THE NORFOLK HORSE FERRIES

By J. WENTWORTH DAY

THE inn stands, rose-red and ancient, alone amid reed-beds and flat marshes, its face to the broad river. A great Spanish oak shades the front of the house and droops above the cobwebbed stables and cart-sheds, where geese wander and hens cluck lustily.

If you go in at the front door there lies on the left a cool brick-floored bar-parlour of the sort that Morland would have painted, with wooden trestles and long oak tables, black-beams above the wide fireplace and stout beams across the ceiling with the adze marks plain in their faces. By day the sun filters through the shifting leaves of the great Spanish oak. When night falls and the marshes are an ocean of light-footed mists an oil lamp gives soft yellow light.

There are still plenty of such inn parlours in country places where the gin palace has not

all over the Broadland area. They played a most important part in the lives not only of the marshmen, but of towns and villages miles away. They were vital links. They have disappeared.

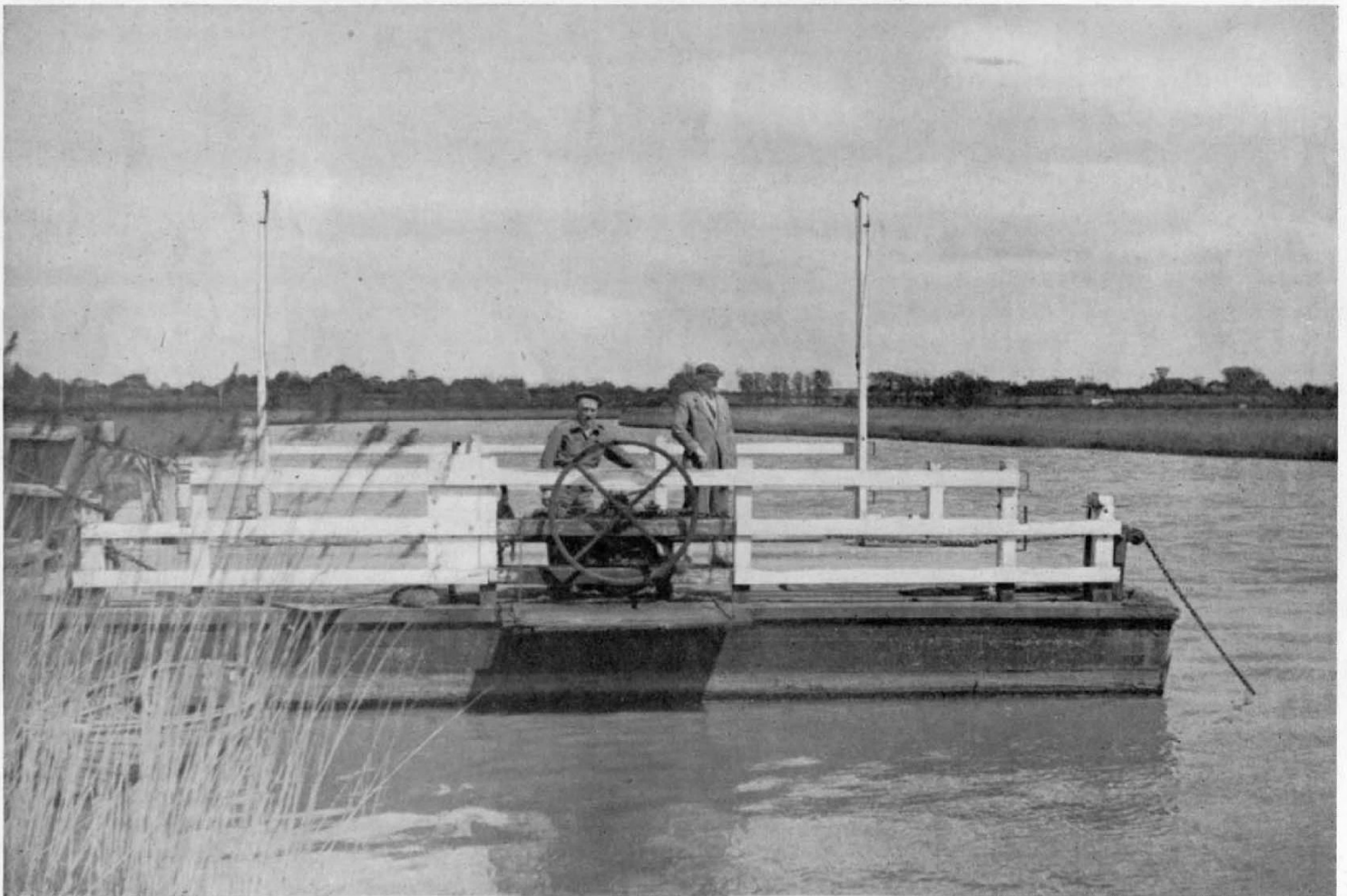
If one looks at the map there is no road bridge across the wide and deep River Yare on all its forty-two bends and reaches between the City of Norwich and the Port of Great Yarmouth. For that matter there are only two railway bridges, at Reedham and Runham Vauxhall. So the inhabitants of the towns and villages on either side of this considerable tidal river are cut off from each other so far as direct access by car or horse and trap is concerned. Reedham Ferry alone is working.

Travel up the Bure from Yarmouth to Wroxham and you find only one bridge on the whole long journey—Acle Bridge. Stokesby Ferry and Horning Ferry are both memories. As

The last horse ferry at Surlingham was built by Mr. W. J. Breach at his boatyard at Coldham Hall. It was made of fir and was in active service until 1943 or 1944. Stokesby horse ferry went out of use about the beginning of the 1914-18 war and Buckenham ferry, I believe, soon after. Horning ferry, perhaps the best-known of all, a landmark to tens of thousands of Broads holiday-makers, was in use until recent years.

The present Reedham boat, operated by Arthur Benns, is oak-built throughout, the handiwork of "ole Tom Purdy" in 1914, but it was overhauled and made ship-shape again by Bill Breach in 1930.

This ferry was planned to take forty tons dead weight, yet, without a load on board, it draws no more than between two to four inches of water. Fully loaded with a large lorry and a



THE FERRY AT REEDHAM, ON THE RIVER YARE, THE LAST OF THE NORFOLK HORSE FERRIES

yet opened its chromium portals to display its railway station attractions. But when the traveller at this inn of which I speak calls for his pint there appears from that cool back-cellar, in which barrels rest in rotund dignity, a Viking-like figure with a blue-grey North Sea eye, a sweep of moustaches that might have decorated the faces of Hengist or Horsa.

Arthur Benns, seventy-year-old landlord of the Ferry Inn at Reedham on the Yare, in the heart of the marshes of Broadland, is the last of the Norfolk horse-ferryman. I doubt if there are many left in England; albeit my mind dwells lovingly on the ancient horse ferry which still cranks doggedly across the Cam under the white eaves and red roofs of that most felicitously-named inn, the Five Miles From Anywhere—No Hurry, at the hamlet of Upware, which sits, busy only with geese and ducks, hard by the edge of Wicken Fen.

A few years ago there were horse ferries

for Runham Swim and Mautby Swim, where, in the old days, marsh farmers used to swim their herds of cattle across the river in bellowing, surging forests of heads and horns that had an oddly jungle-like appearance, I doubt now if any farmer or stockman ever dreams of using them.

On the Yare, Buckenham and Surlingham Ferries have gone. Yet half a century ago the black hulls and white-painted rails of the great, floating, box-like ferries with their cargoes of farm wagons, farmers' gigs, market carts and the village carrier's cart were as much a part of the peaceful rural scene as were the pink sun-bonnets of the marshwomen and the felt wide-awake hats of the marshmen, who wore their pale blue or white "slops" square cut at the neck with full-length gathered sleeves. On Sundays they turned out in double-breasted moleskin waistcoats with long sleeves and reefer jackets of stout blue cloth with a seafaring smack about the whole rig-out.

saloon car it draws between two and three feet. The chain which pulls it back and forth across the river, down which the combined tide and current flow at about six knots, is of half-inch links and weighs just over a quarter of a ton. This massive chain is fastened to huge baulks of timber on either side of the river and runs over four pairs of rollers round a wheel two feet wide on the up-river side of the ferry-boat. The whole thing is operated by a crank-handle.

Arthur Benns, although past his seventieth birthday, thinks nothing of cranking twenty or thirty tons of dead weight across the river, sometimes with the tide running strongly and an easterly wind off the marshes cutting like a razor. He has had his adventures and high points of danger.

There was the lorry, for example, which, fully laden with six tons of corn, and with its brakes off, "tipped up the ole boat" and shot straight into the river, which is twenty feet

deep in places. They had to get a caterpillar tractor and a chain fit to lift a battleship before they could pull it out.

"But," says Arthur, "loading the heaviest vehicle on to the ferry ain't no trouble to anyone if only the driver du as he is told, and ain't cock-sure! If he put his engine into gear when he hev switched off, it won't take no hurt, and ten men couldn't mov it . . . In the dark the lorries go over with their lights on, and make it bright as day . . . The ole pump don't give me a mort of trouble, for the float is as tight as ever, and only a little rain get in t'ru the deck in wet weather."

Reedham ferry could tell a good many tales of the cargoes of smuggled goods which used to be run across the marshes in the old days when the defunct Cockatrice Inn on the opposite bank, now a respectable farm-house, was a notorious store-house and changing place for cargoes of spirits, tobacco and other "free trade" goods. The marshmen had their own telegraphy in such matters and very effective it was, for practically every mill-man was in league with them and many a mill, set lonely as a lighthouse in the midst of the marshes, held its transitory store of duty-free luxuries.

If a cargo was landed at, say, Hopton or Hemsby, or Winterton, and was destined for a place twenty or thirty miles inland, its time of landing, route, time of departure and expected time of arrival were all semaphored across the flat, wet lands of East Norfolk by the marshmen, who had their own secret code of signals by which they set the sails of their windmills.

If the bar parlour of the old Ferry Inn at Reedham could talk, a new book on a vanished side of English life could be written.

When I was sitting in that bar parlour not so many evenings ago, with the sun going down in a slash of crimson across the lonely marshes, a heron flapped slowly past the inn window, beating low over the reeds and the pewter-coloured river. Arthur Benns waved his pot at it.

"There goo the head eel-catcher! Owd Walter Harnser! He don't never miss. He's as sharp wi' that owd beak o' his as owd Fred Mutton, the mashman, used ter be with his muzzle-loading gun. I rec'lect when old Fred shot so many golden plover one mornin' that

his owd gun got too hot for him to hold. But there, talkin' o' birds, I think them little moorhen chicks are sharp little mites. I've seed they take to the water wi' their shells still on their backs—tew seconds arter they'd hopped out o' the egg. We used to have a tidy lot of reed pheasants (bearded tits) in the rond across the river. I went one mornin' by a rond arter snipes and there were fower or foive on 'em a-hoppin' through the reeds as quick as little hosses, a-keepin' time wi' me as I walked on the wall. They got voices like little bells. I couldn't no more shute them than shute meself."

Arthur Benns is not only a kind and gentle man with animals, a rare old sportsman, the last of the chain ferrymen and a good farmer, but he is also a champion skater. I had heard many tales of his prowess in the past, so here was the time and place, sitting in that snug, stone-paved inn bar with the last dying glow of sunset turning the river to crimson, to revive memories of winter days.

"Well, behold ye now!" said Arthur. "The rummest thing we ever done when I were a boy was to skate from Reedham Ferry to Geldeston Lock with a gang o' pals. We was all strong, active lads. Must be fifty-five year ago or more. We took a poker and a hammer and when we got to Geldeston—that's right up the Waveney River as ye know, gittin' on to Bungay way—we knocked the poker in the ice twice an' made a couple o' holes. Then we stuck two forked sticks in the holes and put a long reed across between the two on 'em. That made a jump. Then us lads took a run at it on skates an' one arter the other we jumped it—four foot high an' no mistake!

"There was a

gennleman from one of the big housen on the Geldeston hill, he reck'ned he could do it just as well as us. He wanted to bet five pounds. We knowed he hadn't got the trick but we didn't like to say so, so we lowered the reed by half till the jump warn't only tew foot high. The gennleman took a run at it on his skates, tried to jump, fell on the back of his head an' dam nigh killed hisself. We thought he was dead at fust. They had to take him away on a hurdle, white as a sheet, pore chap, an' he warn't never the same agin."

"But there, behold ye, I make a jump on skates once what I pray may never happen agin. That wore one winter about fifty year ago. Rare hard owd winter tu. All the broads was laid (frozen hard) and most o' Breydon tu. I skated from here to Berney Arms and on the way down the river I seed owd Pluggs Banhams, the mashman, a-cuttin' ice across the river. Owd Pluggs was allus afeard to go on the ice. A rum owd pup. He'd allus cut a lane across the river, even if the ice was a foot thick, so as he could git his owd boat across. I comes back that night when that was bright moon, swingin' along gay and hearty like, at forty mile an hour or more. Us young mash chaps could travel on skates when we got goin'—dam near a mile a minute. That was bright, white moon."

"All of a sudden I sees right ahead o' me in the ice a great black lane of water from one bank to t'other. That owd fool Pluggs had cut a passage for his boat from one bank to t'other nigh on fifteen foot wide. The river's twenty foot deep there an' the tide 'ud be runnin' under that ice at a good six knots. Not a hope for young Arthur if he'd gone in there! I'd a-bin crab meat on Breydon next mornin'! An' it warn't a mite o' good a-tryin' to put the brakes on. I wore travellin' like the wind!"

He paused with the countryman's right instinct for the moment of drama.

"Yes," I said. "What did you do?"

"Jumped it," said Benns laconically. "Flew it like a bird wi' me heart in me mouth an' the good Lord above holdin' me hand. I cleared that cut by a good six foot an' went on without a flinch. But, Lor! did I sweat!"

That picture of the long, leggy young marshman, alone in the white winter silence in the heart of the houseless marshes, flying that black gurgling deathtrap of racing waters like a great bird under the moon, represents, to my mind, one of the high moments of drama.



THE REEDHAM FERRY-BOAT WITH A 3-TON LORRY ABOARD



ARTHUR BENNS, LANDLORD OF THE FERRY INN, REEDHAM, AND THE LAST OF THE NORFOLK HORSE-FERRYMEN