

# THE OLD NORFOLK WHERRY

By ROGER FINCH

ONCE as typical a feature of Broadland scenery as the wind-driven pumping mill, the Norfolk wherry is now, alas, to be counted among East Anglia's bygones.

Her simple grace punctuating the flat landscape as she glided past the reed-thatched cottages or, skirts tucked up, chasing the rain squall across Oulton Broad, the wherry was an integral part of Broadland life. She was a unique craft, developed to perfection by unlettered craftsmen for the transportation of bulk goods in an area drained by shallow, winding rivers.

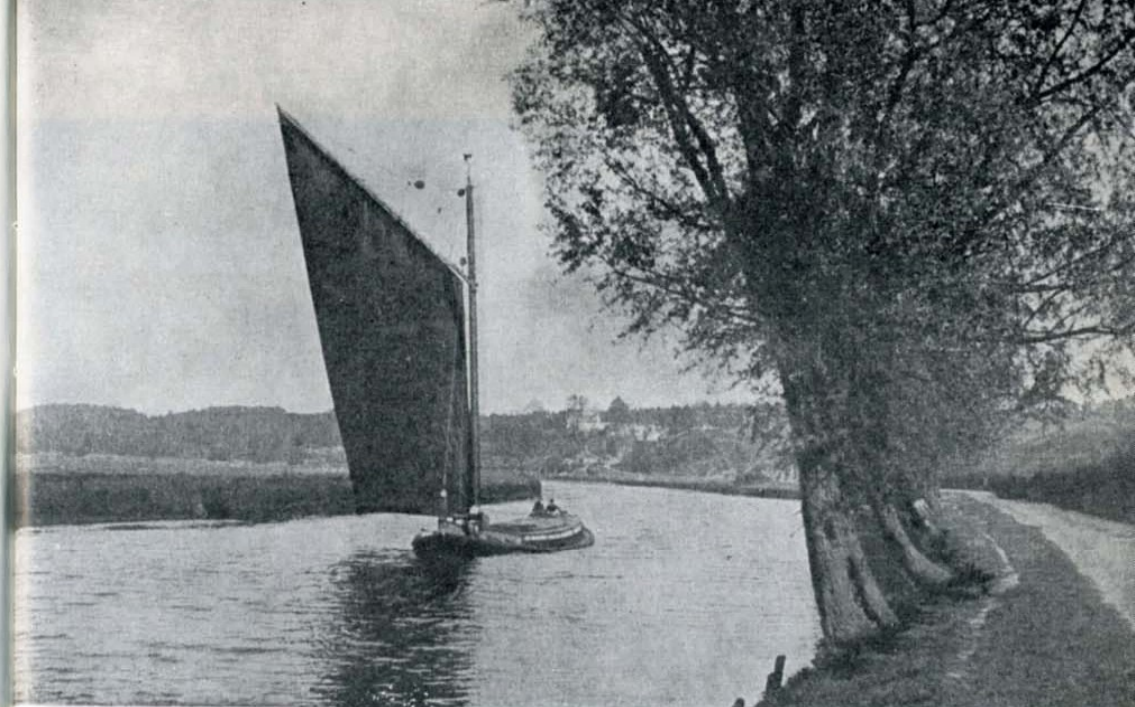
In the harbours of Yarmouth and Lowestoft where the wherries came to collect their freights from the Thames sailing barges, Scandinavian timber barques or worn old collier-brigs from the north, their extreme simplicity of rigging and huge hatchways, their gay paint reminiscent of a fairground brought smiles of mild disdain from the crews of the statelier vessels. But amused interest turned to keen admiration as the "Geordies" and the "Dutchies" watched the wherrymen tack down the narrowest waterway with nonchalant ease and saw how, with the minimum of effort, the tall

masts were brought down to deck level when a bridge was negotiated; and as they recognised that the wherry's shallow hull promised speed and safety given a long reach of water.

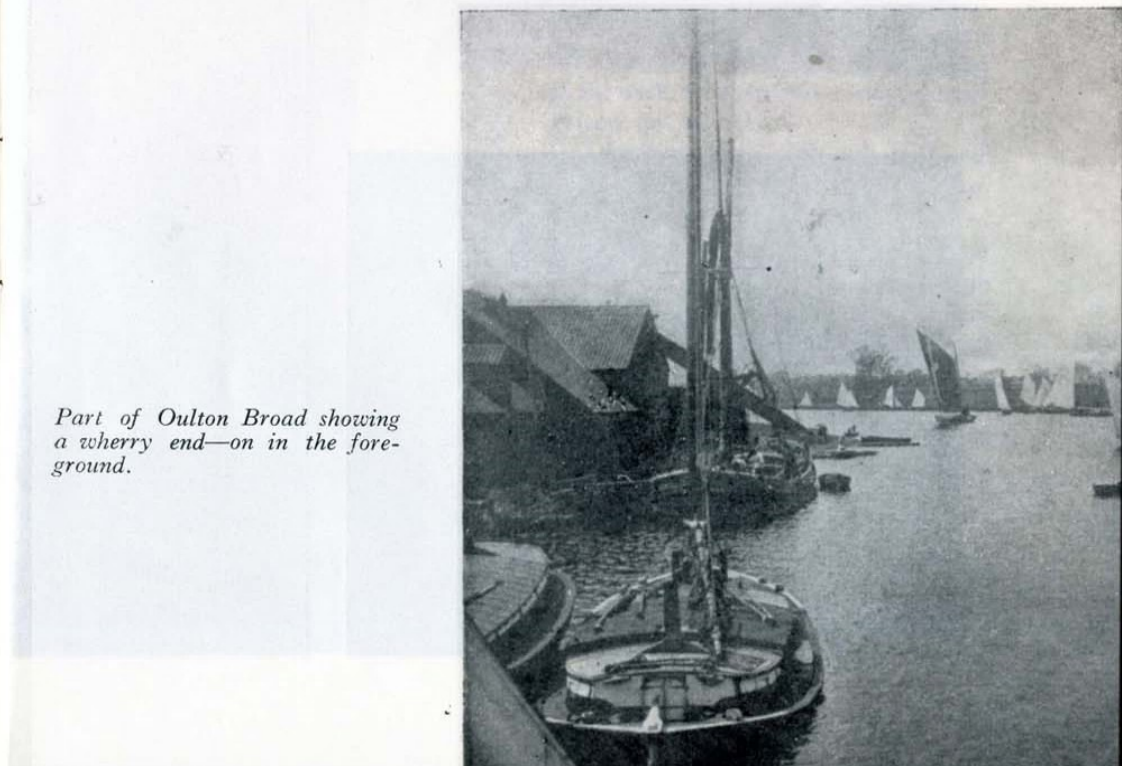
The wherry, herself made obsolete by motor transport along improved roads, superseded the Norfolk keel of antiquity. The keel herself had changed little since the 9th century and retained the open hold and single square sail of the vessels which brought the Jutish invaders from across the North Sea.

THE crew lived in a little hutch-like cabin in the bows. But even those confined quarters must have seemed desirable after long hours trudging along slippery banks towing the cumbersome craft, or quanting from icy decks with long iron-shod poles against the wind and stream.

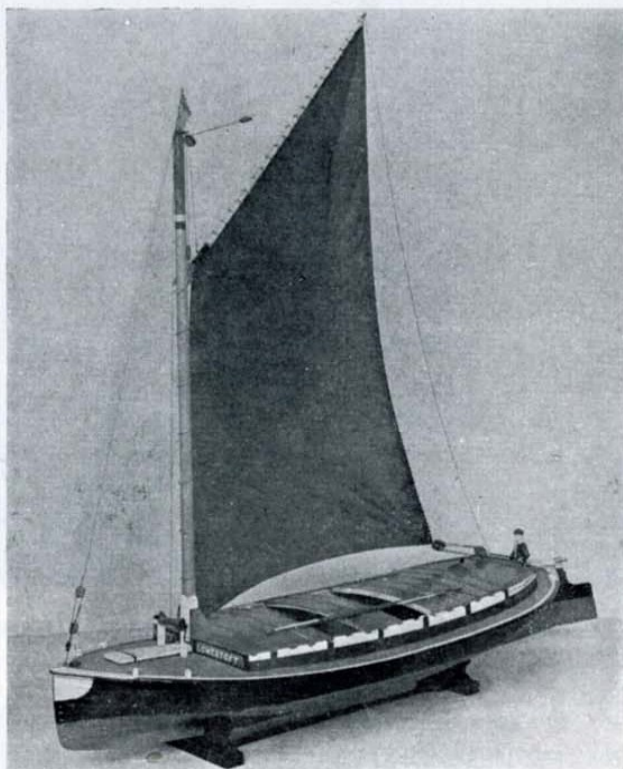
Besides loading grain, malt, hides and tallow, the keels were passenger carriers. They brought people to market and took the place of the carrier's cart and the broad-wheeled wagon of the heavy shires. These passenger keels naturally placed speed and reliability first and the improvements they incorporated gradually affected all the craft until they



*Passing the high ground at Bramerton with the help of a fair easterly wind. This and other illustrations are taken from old photographs.*



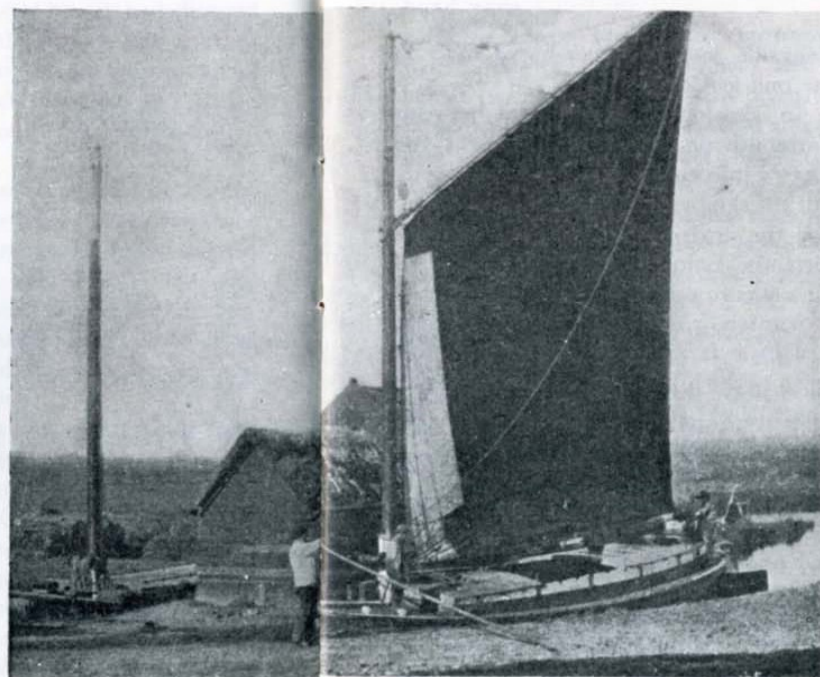
*Part of Oulton Broad showing a wherry end—on in the foreground.*



*Above. Model of a Norfolk wherry in the Science Museum, South Kensington.  
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*Right top. Materials being unloaded from a wherry for building a bridge at Beccles.*

*Right bottom. A wherry by the staithe at Bacton Broad, about to lower sail and make up for the night.*



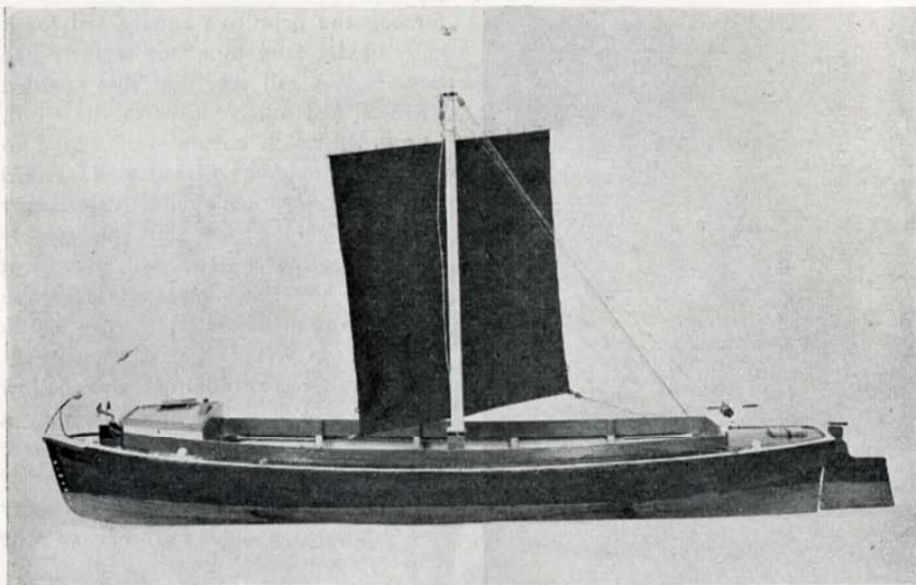
forsook the primitive square sail for a gaff, boldly launching out at forty-five degrees. A sail set from this enabled them to sail much closer to the wind. Cambered hatch covers were added to the hold, the mast placed well forward and the wherrymen's snug little cuddy built aft. Her one sail was deeply tanned—perhaps just as well, because it disguised the blackening effect of the smoke which issued from the cabin stove chimney.

The hull, oak throughout, was shallow and shapely, a flaring bow matching a pointed stern, although one or two were built with a narrow transom and their construction allowed for an elasticity and life which added much to the wherry's speed.

Unlike most cargo-carrying craft, they were clinker built (one plank overlapping and not abutting its neighbour) and the pitch-pine mast pivoted on a tabernacle. As the wherry approached a bridge, the forestay was slipped and the mast and sail gracefully descended to the deck, for there was a lead counter-balance at its heel.

A distinctive part of the wherry's gear was her wind-vane, proudly flown from the mast head. Five feet of coloured bunting was balanced by an emblem cut from sheet metal and revolving on an iron spindle. These emblems varied. Stars and centurians were known, but most common was the figure of a dancing girl, whose popularity had been due to the fact that a famous racing wherry had originally carried her to victory atop the mast in many regattas.

**W**HERRIES loaded between 20 and 50 tons according to their size. Some carried as little as 12 tons. But



*A model of a Norfolk keel in the Science Museum, South Kensington.  
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pig food, coal, rice or reeds were all the same to the wherryman and his mate. The largest wherry ever built, the *Wonder* of Norwich, could stow some 80 tons of grain in her ample hold.

They traded between Yarmouth and Norwich. To sail the 20 twisting miles along the Yare in five hours was quite common. Up the Waveney they went to Beccles, and the smaller craft penetrated to Bungay.

Wherries had an exterior keep which could be removed to enable them to deliver a cargo up some particularly shallow waterway, such as the Waveney beyond Beccles. A row of keels, lying on the river bank like so many doffed hats, indicated that they were delivering freights where every inch of draught counted. Many sacks of golden grain have been hauled from wherries lying

alongside such weather-board mills as the one at Coltishall.

An occasional passage by sea between Yarmouth and Lowestoft brought the wherry into contact with deeper waters. But the skipper had to "choose his time" and the cross-channel trip of one was certainly unique. The wherry's real forte was to push up some bird-haunted backwater or dyke and load from carts at a little farm staithe, and then ghost down to the high warehouses at Norwich where, the mast utilised as a derrick, the freight would be discharged.

First the fussing steam tugs towards the end of the 19th century, and later the internal combustion engine ashore and afloat, drove the wherry either to the indignity of becoming a towed barge stripped of her wings, or to lie forgotten, her paint peeling in wind and sun, the

rejected symbol of a more leisurely way of life. Some luckier craft, little changed outwardly, were converted to pleasure wherries or house boats.

But our story has a happy ending. A band of enthusiasts has arranged to

preserve a wherry, not as a museum piece but as a working craft sailing the waters she once dominated, relying upon the goodwill of tradesmen to provide occasional freights and the enthusiasm of amateurs to fill the mate's berth.

## Letters to the Editor

### Horse Language

IN Norfolk and Suffolk the terms "weesh" (go right) and "cuppy weesh" (go left) are generally used, while in the bordering county of Essex the older type of farm horseman invariably uses the term "woo-der-wee" (go left) and "cuppy weesh" (go right). I find the word "weesh" is always used, with or without other words, for the right hand turn.

These terms are usually employed with a drawn out smoothness and a velvet harmony of tone with a perfect understanding between the horse and its user. The better and more masterful the horseman the more frequently these terms inspire a spontaneous response from the horse. A good horseman loves his horses and they have a reciprocating fondness for him and will turn faster or slower according to the amount of emphasis he employs.

Should such concordant expressions pass from our language, so much more character and colourful country harmony will also have passed, leaving us that much poorer.—*Ronald N. Creasy, Cranley House, Eye, Suffolk.*

IS there any possible derivatory parallel between the "cuppy whey" for a left turn for an East Anglian horse and the

common term "cuddy whifter" for a left-handed person in the Newcastle-on-Tyne area?—*Max Millhouse, "Treen," The Street, Horham, Suffolk.*

### Yarmouth "Grottoes"

THE theory of Mr. G. A. Dunn on the possible association of Yarmouth "grottoes" with St. James' Day (E.A.M., April, 1950), is both interesting and feasible.

I was resident in London until 1940 and I well remember that boys used to make these grottoes in the streets there. They were constructed in a manner similar to those seen by Mr. Dunn and the boys used to utter the same rather plaintive plea of "Please remember the grotto."

They used also to employ an intriguing variation of the oyster shell construction, by building little tiers of boxes or wood blocks rising one behind the other, covering the whole with a cloth or piece of patterned material, probably "borrowed" from mother's linen cupboard. Upon this structure they would place cherished china ornaments and they would also call these arrangements "grottoes."

My father recalls that in his boyhood he and his friends made such grottoes of broken bricks and clinkers and