

18 *The Swale* *Sailing Barge Excursion*

DOROTHY SMITH

On a glorious September morning our party of twelve crunched its way down the hard at Harty Ferry, through mud pools and thousands of whelk shells, waiting for us were the Skipper and Mate from the Thames barge *Milrosa*, with the dinghy in which we were to be ferried out to her in the Swale. My run included the barge's dog, Meg, wonferfully muddy and wet after her run ashore in the mud left by the low tide. Fortunately she didn't shake herself.

Climbing aboard the *Milrosa* from the dinghy we were helped by advice on where to place our feet and aided and welcomed aboard by Sally, the Skipper's wife. We were soon down below (quickly learning to duck at deck beams), tucking into hot coffee and croissants, and admiring the trophies and pennants won by *Milrosa* in many years of Thames Barge races. Of interest to older Dovorians was the oar used by Guy Mannerings when he rowed to Sangatte in record time in 1911. The Mannerings owned Crabble Mill and Guy was a noted yachtman with his *Bird of Dawning*. Peter Dodds, *Milrosa's* Skipper, is Guy's nephew.

Milrosa was built in 1892 at Maldon in Essex and until well into this century was trading between London and Essex with hay and straw for the stables of London, returning to Essex with bricks from the London brickfields, and latterly carrying timber. In those days the Skipper and his Mate would have had minimum accommodation, but now the hold is adapted to comfortable living quarters and must be very cosy on winter nights with the iron stove's glowing warmth.

The clanking of the anchor chain had us all on deck to see us get under way - it was thrilling to see the sails being hoisted in turn: the jib, the small aft spritsail, then the large expanse of spritsail which had been neatly looped to the mast; above that the topsail foremast completed the spread of canvas and we were sailing. If my 'naming of the



JOHN OWEN and BRIAN COPE on the *MIROSA*

parts' is 'up the creek' then I hope I'm forgiven, but I did try to show an intelligent interest.

For reasons of wind and tide we set off down river, a gentle NW breeze giving us a stately ride. Opposite Faversham Creek we turned and tacked up-river. If you look at an Ordnance Survey map of the North Kent coast, and note the sandbanks in the Swale,



THE MILROSA ON THE SWALE

you will appreciate the skill required for this manoeuvre. Members of the party took a turn at the helm, but I was relieved that Skipper Dodds didn't wander too far away. It was fascinating to see the way in which the

enormous expanse of sail was manipulated to drive the eighty-two feet of wood and iron. To me there was such a tangle of ropes and pulleys I felt a cat's cradle must be inevitable, but we went smoothly on our way until we dropped anchor off Milton Creek.

There we went below to a super lunch of home-made soup, a lavish ploughman's with copious beer and wine, and as we relaxed we agreed that sailing a Thames Barge wasn't half bad, although as

this enjoyable meal had been prepared by Sally in a very small galley - with much juggling of ingredients and utensils - we decided we wouldn't ship as cook.

The clank of the anchor had us on deck

VICE-PRESIDENT PHILOMENA KENNEDY SIGHTS LAND!



20 again to brilliant sunshine and the river like a millpond. Now this was serious! *Milrosa* hasn't an engine, which meant that no wind, even on a falling tide, was going to call for real seamanship. The light north-westerly which had blown as we set off up-river had now gone and an even lighter north-easterly which didn't help, for that was our direction. To see the Skipper making the most of every ounce of wind and the advantage of the falling tide was to watch a work of art – and hard work at that. The sails went from port to starboard with great regularity and although our ambition had been to stretch out on the hatch cover to bask in the sunshine, we prudently stayed aft as the mainsail swept from side to side.

The return, which should have taken a couple of hours, took four, Peter and the Mate, Jimbo, not stopping in the working of ropes, pulleys, leeboards and helming. I don't suppose that they had time to appreciate the beauty of gliding down the path of the setting sun as it turned the ripples of our wake to gold, or the heron,

comorants, oyster catchers and other birds arriving on the sandbanks for their evening feeding.

I have no real what you might call *adventure* to record in my log; nothing to set the lamp swinging round a suburban dining table (although that isn't because of the want of encouraging someone to do even a 'Man Overboard!'). However, it was a day of much laughter as our knowledge, or lack of it, about sailing was aired. There was the joy of being on such a wonderful old craft with its memories of the hard graft of the men who sailed her in all conditions and the enjoyment of the hospitality of Peter and Sally, of Jimbo, and, of course, Meg. As we chugged back to the Hard in the dinghy and looked at *Milrosa* looking so dignified in the setting sun, I felt very proud to have been, if only for a day, part of such a great tradition.

AFTERNOTE: As we were leaving, two men came aboard who are making an adaption of George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* for TV. *Milrosa* is to be used in one of the scenes of the film, to be shown on Christmas Day.

THE END OF A PERFECT DAY

