

River Thames Trip aboard *m.v. "Princess Pocahontas"*

by Capt. Mike Weston



JUNE 26TH DAWNED BRILLIANTLY sunny, hot and humid. Fifty members of the Society set off to Gravesend in order to board the small river excursion launch "Princess Pocahontas" for our exclusive use on a daylong river cruise from Gravesend to Chelsea and return. The vessel which was originally built and operated in Germany takes her name from the American Indian "princess" who died in 1617 on a ship off Gravesend and is buried in St. George's Church a mere stones throw from the West Street Pier where we boarded the vessel.

Setting off across the river we passed close to the Tilbury Riverside landing Stage, the departure point in years gone by of passenger ships to all corners of the globe and in particular for the P& O and Orient Line vessels with their many 'one way' passage emigrants to Australia. The landing stage now carries the logo 'London Cruise terminal', but even the cruise ships, which used this landing stage have now, in the words of our captain, mainly departed for other ports, "90% going to Dover".

Our journey from here started upstream and we were soon passing the

14 entrance to the Tilbury Docks, home in the past to ocean liners, now home to container ships, this being the Port of London's principal container port. Leaving Tilbury behind we rounded Northfleet Hope and ahead of us lay Greenhithe, which in years gone by was the home of the mighty Everad coasting fleet with their many vessels to be seen lying alongside, moored at buoys and being overhauled on slipways. Now not a ship in sight! Greenhithe was also once the mooring place for the training ship "Worcester" where many of the British Merchant Navy's officers did their initial training. This vessel has long since disappeared from the river scene. This lack of vessels and activity was the continuing theme throughout most of our trip. A once busy river, bustling with riverside industries and ships, employing many thousands of people, has now changed with changing times and 'progress', leaving this great artery devoid of ships and associated businesses.

Greenhithe astern of us, we approached the river's first fixed crossing, the Queen Elizabeth 2 bridge which dominated the skyline. Passing under the structure Purfleet's roll on roll off berths were to starboard and the

Littlebrook power station to port. Rainham Marshes, a gigantic and desolate landfill site appeared beyond Purfleet. According to our vessel's master, this site was one of several in Europe looked at by the Disney Corporation as a possible site for their European Disneyworld. In his words this did not happen "as dumping rubbish was seen as being more important by the local authorities". Barking Reach appeared with its big vacant spaces where at one time two large power stations Barking 'A' and Barking 'B' dominated the scene.

Aircraft could now be seen descending and ascending at regular intervals and this signified our approach to the old group of docks known as the Royal Docks. Now defunct as far as shipping is concerned, it is the site of the London City Airport. These docks, in days gone by, were usually full to capacity with ships, mainly British flagged, sailing to and from worldwide destinations. The entrance to these busy docks through locks into the King George V dock was in use night and day when tides were right. Now it is sad to see this entrance almost entirely silted up and in decay.

Proceeding up Gallion's Reach





Woolwich was passed with its link spans and vessels providing the long established free ferry service crossing. Ahead of us shortly after leaving Woolwich, one of the truly immense engineering projects of the last century hove in sight; the Thames Barrier. One of the greatest concerns in the management of the River Thames has been the risk of flooding. Its waters are rising at the rate of 2.8 feet per century. In the 1970's the Greater London Council settled on building this massive barrier at Silvertown, eight miles downstream of London Bridge. A line of piers from which are suspended ten mighty steel gates with their counterweights were erected across the river. The four main gates weigh a massive 3,000 tons each. They are laid face downwards on the riverbed and in time of a flood risk are swung up by electro hydraulic-machinery.

Once we had safely negotiated this barrier the skyline of London became more apparent. Ahead could be seen what appeared to be a circus 'big top'. It was of course the infamous Millennium Dome situated on Blackwell Point. Our commentator had a few choice

derogatory remarks about this government inspired folly and the sheer waste of money involved in its construction and operation. Passing the 'Dome' to port and the entrance to the old West India Docks system to starboard where the large Canary Wharf buildings dominate the skyline, we rounded the Isle of Dogs. In doing so we had fine views of the Cutty Sark in its permanent dock at Greenwich. Greenwich Reach followed by Limehouse Reach took us past many of the old warehouses, which for decades were served by myriads of lighters and small craft bringing cargoes from vessels discharging in dock systems downstream. Now they are no longer used as warehouses, but transformed into smart and very expensive riverside apartments.

Wapping with its various well known riverside pubs glided past to starboard and suddenly ahead of us was Tower Bridge, the first of the many bridges spanning the river through the heart of London. No need to raise the spans for "Princess Pocahontas" - she slipped easily under this famous structure and we were in the Pool of London with the



permanently moored World War II cruiser HMS Belfast to port and the Tower of London to starboard. Moored also in the Pool was the brand new, small but very luxurious cruise ship "Hebridean Spirit" on a public relations trip to London.

We now sailed under a succession of bridges: London Bridge, Canon Street Railway Bridge, Southwark Bridge, the new Millennium Footbridge (the 'swaying' bridge closed to enable the builders to correct a design fault), and Blackfriars Bridge. Many places, facts and points of interest (far too many to enumerate here), were explained in great detail by our very knowledgeable and articulate captain, as we sailed through the heart of London. Blackfriars Bridge was followed by Waterloo Bridge and the Hungerford Railway Bridge which take the trains into

Charing Cross station. Coming out from under Hungerford Bridge a splendid view was to be had of the London Eye, where a few weeks previously a number



of our Society members had enjoyed, on another very warm day, a trip on this great wheel with its spectacular views over London. Having passed the 'Eye' we sailed on under Westminster Bridge and were then presented with beautiful views of the Houses of Parliament. Lambeth Bridge, Vauxhall Bridge, Battersea Railway Bridge and finally Chelsea Bridge followed in quick succession. In Chelsea Reach with fine views of the Chelsea Royal Hospital "Princess Pocahontas" was expertly turned and we began our return trip to Gravesend seeing the various sights again but from a different aspect.

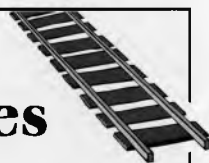
Passing Thamesmead we had the excitement of a very rare sight in the Thames, in fact so rare that its presence had made headlines in the national papers. A dolphin was seen swimming

alongside us. This animal had entered the Thames a few days earlier. The fact that a dolphin could survive in this part of the Thames testifies to how clean the river has become compared to forty years ago when the water was black with scum and nothing lived in it!

The trip continued uneventfully back to Gravesend. We have to thank the crew of "Princess Pocahontas" for an enjoyable and informative river cruise brought to life by an extremely knowledgeable and interesting commentary. For me, having spent some of my youth in Gravesend and having spent a lot of time on the waterway, it was particularly nostalgic. The superb weather which we enjoyed and which enhanced the trip was obviously ordered by our social secretary Joan Liggett!



Vines, Wines... ...and Railway Lines



by Richard Liggett

The title of the outing was a vote catcher in itself. On 21st July, a lovely summer day, we arrived, eagerly and too early, at the vineyard and had to await the arrival of our guide. This gave us a chance to sit in the sun over a drink!

After a gentle stroll around the vines, learning of the early struggles to grow a decent crop from one third of an acre to the present twenty-two acres. The grapes are mainly of German origin. The next stop was the winery, which has modern wine making machinery. Harvesting usually starts in October and bottling in March. Cider is also brewed, using locally grown apples.

A large ploughman's lunch followed. There was only one slice of bread, about half a loaf!

Our next port of call was the Kent and East Sussex Railway, which is one of the many railways built by Colonel Stephens. There is also a great collection of railway artifacts, including the world's smallest standard gauge steam engine, named Gazelle. This locomotive was used in Shropshire. It was wonderful to travel through the lovely Kent and Sussex countryside at a speed which left enough time for us to enjoy it, not forgetting the cream tea on the return trip. After all that eating my shirts have shrunk!

Arriving back in Dover, clutching our wines and ciders, we sounded just as if we had arrived off the ferry from France!