

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Hydrogen,
104 Canterbury Road,
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2.4.74

Dear Alan,

Thank you for the copy of T.B.S.C. Journal that Harold Farrington brought round the other day. It's very interesting. I knew it was coming as Harold Coward had told me all about it and had consulted me about one or two matters relating to his article. After all, I sailed in HYDROGEN for 11 years and 8 months, under "special conditions" which I will tell you about, if ever we get into conversation on these matters.

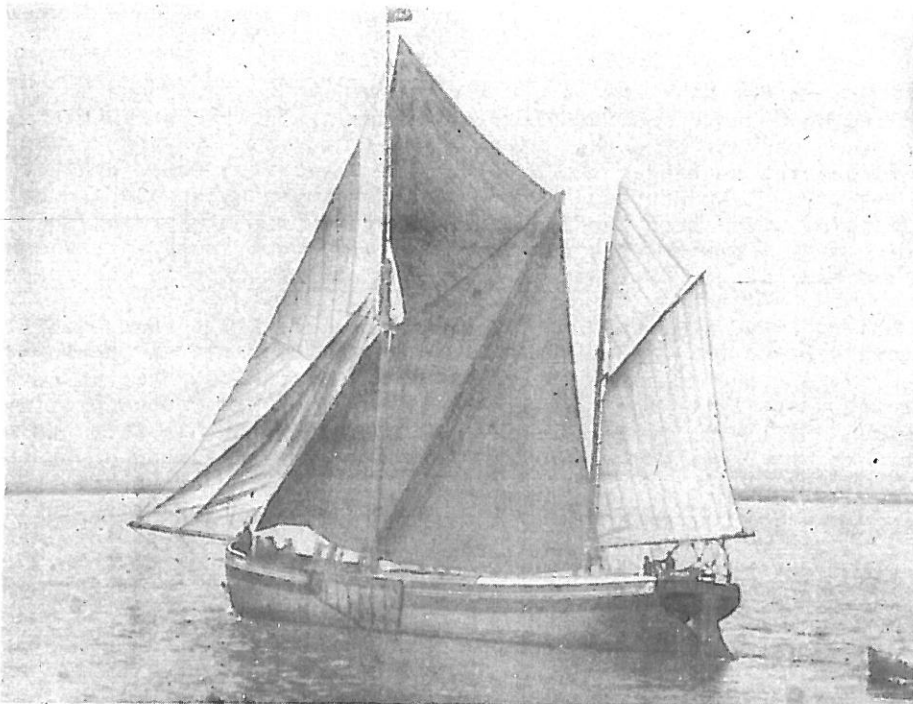
A lady who lives across the road, Mrs. Daniels, is old Mr. Fenteman's daughter; there must be a connection here somewhere with you, as the old boy owned the YIELDSTED. I saw her go out of Sheerness harbour as I was coming in on the afternoon of Dec. 29th 1914. This was just before the great gale that took 8 lives and the loss of 4 Sittingbourne barges, the ADA MARY, FRANK and RUTH (of Smeed Deans) and one of Burley's, a stumpy sailed by old Joe Dean and his mate. I cannot recall her name, but she sank in Sheerness Harbour, just outside Queenborough Spit. The YIELDSTED was near Chapman Head and of course had to bring up at dusk that night, as did all the others, as no navigation was allowed during the war below Chapman Head after dark; that's how they came to be caught in that W.N.W. gale. The YIELDSTED was saved that night by her skipper, old Jack Hambrook, "Scranny Jack" as he was known, a superhuman effort standing on her fore-castle hatch tending her chain as she dragged down in between the other craft.

I was in the MARY ANN at the time, coke loaded, and rode it out under the West Shore in Sheerness; when daylight broke next morning there was a picture of sunken barges up the Medway. Saltpan reach claimed several Rochester craft, also some Government-owned craft. The RUTH was drove into Southend Pier. Skipper Teddy Wyles and his mate both were drowned, their bodies were picked up at West Mersea; the FRANK's crew, Frank Pilcher and his mate, were both found in the cabin when she was raised, like Ginger Houghting and his mate in the ADA MARY.

One of Smeed Dean's little stumpy barges the ELIZA (Bert Aspin skipper) dragged down the river until she hit the sands at Shoebury and sank. He and his mate sat up on the throat of the mainsail as it was above the water after she sank until taken off by the Southend lifeboat at dawn. Old Bert, dead now since 1948, always said his life was saved by the cat which was tucked inside his coat as they climbed up to the throat of the sail when she sank because it kept him warm until they were taken off. His cottage, which was only a few yards from where I live now, was always full of cats. I once counted seven when I went to visit him. I ramble on about these things once I get started, Alan, after all I did 49 years afloat so I suppose I do know a bit about it, 21 years in sailing barges, 3 in the Merchant Navy (New Zealand trade, A.B. and quarter-master), 25 years as skipper in four lighters of Lloyds, later Bowaters. These big lighters used to carry the newsprint to London from the Mills. They were magnificent craft, each having its own skipper with living quarters, beautifully fitted cabins and the skipper being responsible for the upkeep of the lighter. The only difference from sailing barges was that you towed instead of sailed. They were big craft, the large ones being 200 tonners, they were nearly all manned by sailing bargemen,



MARY ANN as she is today, in use as a house barge at Hoo.
(Photo. by Alan Cordell)



How's this for a mule rig? HYDROGEN in all her splendour,
c. 1910 (Photo. by Alan Cordell from an original in the
possession of Harold Coward).

and you wanted a pedigree to get in them. Some of the men spent nearly all their working life in one barge. Bob Hills, still alive, was skipper of KEMSLEY for 31 years, Alf Fisher was skipper of MAFEKING 29 years, Jim Coleman was skipper of GROVEHURST 30 years, and so on. At my finish I was skipper of the ADELAIDE loading 180 tons of wood pulp from the ship GLADYS BOWATER at Northfleet on Jan 11th 1960 (being then 64 years and 9 months) when I got my foot crushed between 2 lighters. That was the end - 16 weeks in hospital and 8 ops followed. Now I have just started on my 80th year.

Now, Alan, I wrote an article for "Sea Breezes" in 1953 called "Sailorman Remembers"; it was published in the July issue of that year. Its about my early days - how I started in the big iron coasters at E.J. & W. Goldsmiths, all big 300 tons barges. If at any time you want any copy for your little magazine you are welcome to reprint it. Also another article by me was published in Sea Breezes about the voyage when we lost the HYDROGEN at Easter 1922 with 200 tons of cement on board, in the river Ouse in Yorkshire, all data if you want it.

Yours sincerely,

H. Butcher.
