

Barging has changed little



When roads were poor, much of the country's goods were transported by Thames Sailing Barges. Sailed by two men they could carry 150-180 tons. Fleets of barges plied the coast moving cargo - food, grain, coal, hay, from small ports, farms and beaches. Tides were important. Access was often possible only at High Water. Unladen barges need about 2'6" of water. Loaded, they need around 6'6". The tide could make a huge difference, adding or subtracting as much as 30% to their speed. Sailing barges had no engines and several are engine-less today.

A loaded Thames Sailing Barge, lying at the Town Quay in Maldon, Essex, about 12 miles from the sea would sail down the river with the ebb helping her. About 6 hours later she would meet the flood tide running against her. With a fair wind she could make against this on her way up the coast, or possibly wait for a fair wind, especially in calms. The skipper would know when the tide was high enough to cross the shingle bar at the entrance to the Deben.



Putting the barge aground risked damage to the vessel or cargo. The skipper would follow the channel and avoid moored vessels at Bawdsey through Ramsholt and Waldringfield.



He had entered the river near High Water, so the ebb would soon turn against him. He would need to anchor at the 'Tips' or attach to a barge post and wait for the High Water to dock in Woodbridge.

Barge posts were used for temporarily securing a barge without having to lay out and recover the anchor which was a big job. They could also be used to turn a barge in a narrow channel; fix the bow and let the tide turn the stern.

About an hour before the next High Tide in Woodbridge, the skipper would begin journeying up the more difficult part of the Deben to the Town Quay and his skill would be tested to the full. Even on an unusually high Spring Tide it would be quite a feat to bring his vessel up to the Quay where the unloading could begin. **Shortest passage time over the 40 miles could be as little as 24 hours.**

Compiled by P Clay