

Historical Gaff Cutter visits Brightlingsea Ex River Police Gaff Cutter “Victoria”

The Colne River Police, were first established in 1891. as a section of the Colchester Borough Police Force, and was to be based in Colne Road, at Brightlingsea, and Sergeant Thomas Poole, who was formally with the Essex Constabulary, was to be in charge, and at that time he was afforded a healthy living wage of 30s. a week. Under him were three Constables **CG, Simmons, CF. Absalom, and E,J. French.**

They had two boats built for them by John Houston at Rowhedge, the "**ALERT**" and "**BRISK**", probably small open boats or half decked craft, for their total cost was only £80. They also had a steam launch, the "**VIKING**", built by W.A. White and son, at a cost of £429. 10s. and which was sold in 1902 for £70, when she was replaced by a much grander steam launch, "**EDWARD VII**", built by Forrestt and Co, of Wivenhoe at a cost of £1,307, She was 41.feet in length, 10. feet beam, a moulded depth of 5. feet, and 3. feet six inches of draught, with double skin teak planking, and credited with a speed of 9. 1/4. miles an hour, an unusual variation to the customary knots. Her compound engine was supplied by A,G, Mumford of Colchester.

She had a lavatory and wash basin, which suggests that the men on duty were intended to live on board, for the early sailing boats had no cabin space, or possibly, these facilities were for the benefit of members of the Watch Committee and Fishery Board. The length of time the "**EDWARD VII**" was retained is not known, but all the memories are of the sailing fleet, which was the admiration of all yachtsmen, as well as the pride of the Police, for half a century. By this time, and on to 1914. they had grown in strength, to one Inspector, two Sergeants, and nine Constables.

The later craft were mostly built by Aldous's at Brightlingsea, and their quality may have owed something to Tom Poole's eye for a boat. Within living memory all the small cabins, just big enough to contain a small bogy stove, for which "smithy coal" (a grade of coal of small lumps the size of a walnut, also used in shipyards for rivet heating, and blacksmiths shops hence the name), was stored in a shed on Peewit Island, in Pyefleet Creek, close to the headquarters of the Oyster Fishery.

They were painted grey, including the decks, with teak brown coamings and cabin sides. They set high-peaked, loose-footed gaff mainsails, which were kept white and not dressed and in the earlier days (though not in later years) jacked topsails. They set only one headsail on a short bowsprit, "flying", that is, not hanked to a stay.

Sailed single-handed, they were immaculately kept and smartly handled with their crews maintaining a discipline which would not have disgraced a Brigade of Guards. There was always one boat (and in earlier years sometimes two) patrolling the estuary, day and night, making a "point" with the Sergeant every two hours, usually at Bateman's Tower, on the end of the Promenade. The duty changes were timed to a minute, in strong winds the boat would sail into Brightlingsea Creek, where the relieving officer rowed off to her, jumping aboard as the other Policeman stepped into his boat to come ashore.

In calms, when there was not enough wind to sail, the duty boat lay at anchor off East Mersea, her mainsail tacked up the mast, her gaff rucked down, with the halyard frapped round the sail.

The story behind the Brightlingsea River Police, probably started, or at least for those who have a love for old "Gaffers", and the like, on a draughtsmans drawing board, some time in the middle part of the 1800s, when the plans and designs were drawn up, for Aldous of Brightlingsea to build the Gaff rigged cutters that were to be the River Colne Police boats, that were known as "**THE PRINCE OF WALES**", "**THE ALEXANDRA**", "**THE COLNE**", "**THE VICTORIA**", and "**THE RAVEN**",

This was now the end of the year of 1800. and these small gaffers were to be the transportation and the work place of a contingent of men, heavily built with hairsuit appendage, (heavy moustache) uniformed in dark blue, and sea boots. The detachment was one of a number of maritime forces, of which was the best known. The Thames River Police, founded in 1798. by an Essex man, John Harriott of Stambridge, may claim to be the oldest Police in the country. Rochester also had a force on the Medway, and there may have been others.

The Thames River Police were established to counter the thieving and pillaging in the London Docks and Warehouses, the Colchester Force was set up to protect the Oyster Fishery, which paid three-quarters of the cost, leaving only the remaining quarter to the Borough ratepayers. This no doubt helped to pay for shore premises that were used, for some time they used Fieldgate's Dock for fitting out its boats, which while in commission had moorings off East Mersea stone. The 20 foot centreboard boat "**Raven**" was built in 1892. and three years later a 26 foot half-decker was provided at the cost of £91.2s.6d. While the name is not given this may, by a process of elimination have been the "**COLNE**". In 1897. the "**ALERT**" was declared not seaworthy, and the "**VICTORIA**" was commissioned. At the time of her construction she cost around £60. and in 1902, she was given a cabin.

The "**RAVEN**" was sold as unfit for service in 1901. and a new boat, probably the "**ALEXANDRA**", was built at a cost of £210. This completed the fleet, with the exception of "**THE PRINCE OF WALES**", which I think was built about three years later.

Their duty was to patrol the River Colne on a twenty four hour basis, from the Gas bouy at the mouth of the river to the approaches of Wivenhoe and down Pyefleet Creek to the Strood that carries the road to Mersea Island from Colchester, to guard against those who would attempt to steal the Oysters from the river or the foreshore, and to keep law and order afloat as would a Policeman on shore. Chiefly to watch over the dredging of oysters by the local smacks, and to be present each day as they were handed over to the foreman of the river at the packing sheds, in Pyefleet.

They also watched the comings and goings of the sailing barges, took charge of any dead bodies found below high water mark, collected light dues for the Knoll buoy, and co-operated with the customs in the detection of smuggling, sometimes sharing in the rewards paid for seizures.

Patrolling under sail, they had to take life as it came, rain or shine or gale force winds there were no wheelhouses for shelter, just a tiller in

an open cockpit and not to much in the way of accommodation as much of the space was taken up by a large centre plate box, life for these gallant Policemen of the sea carried on with some normality till the outbreak of the second world war, then some time in 1940. all operations for the force as history has recorded it, was disbanded, never to recommence after the war under sail.

When life at sea and in the river, started to return to normal, after hostilities came to an end, these small cutters that had served law and order for so many years were alas sold, the "**PRINCE OF WALES**", that my Grandfather served on was sold too, and was owned by for some time, to the famous author Mr. Harvey Benham, having been re-named "**PRINCE**", in 1947. and sold again around, 1953.

In the late 1930s, she was thought to be the only survivor, (although this proved to be untrue), along with a badly designed motor launch named "**STELLA**" she had been fitted with an auxiliary engine and her rig had been reduced, and was converted to cutter rig which seemed to those who used her a lot handier, than the sloops gear the Police had to contend with, also an enlarged cabin, Although her centreboard had been removed, she proved a fast and handy boat, winning the Wivenhoe Regatta cruiser race within a month or two of her conversion, The Old River Police never forgave them for altering her rig.

A Police Regatta was an annual event in the early years, with the Town Councillors and Fishery Board members present in force aboard the Fisheries steam paddle dredger, "**PYEFLEET**", to indulge in much wineing and dining which was fashionable of that time of day. The event in August 1896. included rowing and sculling races, with men from the Town Police Force unsuccessfully challenging their maritime colleagues, and water frolics included an obstacle race and a Water Derby, in which the Policemen mounted barrels fitted with horses heads and tails, and paddled to a prize or a ducking.

In the Police boat's race, the course was twice round Rat Island, and the winner was the scratched boat "**COLNE**", allowing five minutes to "**ALERT**", and ten minutes to "**RAVEN**", which finished second and third.

THE REPORT ON THE POLICE REGATTA IS BASED FROM THE

COLCHESTER GAZETTE 19, AUGUST 1896.

Sergeant Poole was promoted to Inspector in 1898. and after twenty six years in the river section he took his well earned retirement and at this time Tom Poole bought the "**VICTORIA**" for a yacht. He was a considerable character on the Brightlingsea water front, and won many a prize with his boat "**VALIANT**", which he sailed in local races for thirty three years, wearing his stiff winged collar afloat just as he did ashore. He was always referred to as the former Superintendent of the River Police, though I can hardly imagine he ever attained this rank. He also became Water Bailiff, a somewhat indeterminate office that may have been to some extent his own invention. He had interests in the Scallop Fishery, and owned the smack "**YELDA**", which was lost on her maiden voyage in January 1924. when she was wrecked on the Shingles Sands. Her skipper Captain Pittock, and six hands were picked up safely by a passing steamer.

He was succeeded by Sergeant Percy Small, who was followed by Elijah Ward, (who joined the force in 1912.) and then Sidney Cranfield, however Cranfield was a member of the famous Rowhedge yachting family, and grandson of the skipper of the "**VALKYRIES**" but it was not usual to recruit local men for the force, for fear of collusion - a tradition inherited from the Customs Waterguard in its war on smuggling. Lowestoft men were preferred for this reason. Elijah Wards's account of how he disguised himself with a false beard to catch the Wivenhoe oyster pilferers by drifting down the river from Wivenhoe in a punt, till he was right amongst them, to make his arrest, my Grandfather told the story many times, but those days of stealth have slipped away.

To the end of this era, and being no other similar employment, some of the men came ashore and took on more mundane duties in Colchester. It was once said P.C. Greengrass on point duty at Headgate, in the days before traffic lights, people on bicycles could be sure of a cheery sailorman's greeting as they were waved round the corner-"Luff her up", "bear away there", or usually "Keep her full boy" now in the late 1990s,

"Where are they now". The last possible sighting of "**ALEXANDRA**", a yacht at Ipswich, the "**COLNE**" was said to have stayed local till 1970. and the "**RAVEN**", for a time was at Wivenhoe.

In 1992 the "**PRINCE OF WALES**" was reported owned by a Mr R.A.Cusins. The "**COLNE**", her last recorded owner was a Mr. D. Pamplin. and was said to have been sighted in 1983. on the Essex coast, but no trace of the others, till a forgotten conversation with an old acquaintance some years previous, who said he thought he saw what was an old cutter similar to the old police boats, moored up in the South Channel at Brightlingsea, so after a chat, to freshen his recollections of that day, he remembered the person on board saying he had sailed round from Pin Mill, so after a few days, we found ourselves on the shores of the River Orwell looking at boats once again, and not to forget a good look at the bar of the "**BUTT and OYSTER**", a quaint little pub on the front at Pin Mill, after talking to a few boafy local persons in a boat yard, the "**VICTORIA**" was discovered safe and sound on her mooring, her owner, Mr Ben Powell was not at home when I called to see him on the house boat were he lives, after fighting off a pack of Jack Russel terriers who were hell bent on tearing me to pieces, a young lady answered the door and saved me from being eaten alive. After looking at some photographs of the stages of restoration of the "**VICTORIA**", I left with an arrangement to contact him by phone that evening, after speaking to him, he was only to pleased to talk "**OLD GAFFERS**", and arranged to meet him later in the week. The "**VICTORIA**". No. 1181. (old gaffers No) was built and designed by Aldous at Brightlingsea, around 1900. to the dimentions of 21. feet in length over all, 19. feet at the water line, 7 feet beam, and a draught of 2 feet 9 inches, and now must be a veteran of well over some 35,000. tides.

These are some of the traditions inherited by the present day River Section, of the Essex County Police, based at Bradwell, with their speed "**ALERT**" recalling a name of one of the pioneers of the 1800s.

In addition to the mention of the Rochester Police, there was more to the stories of the section at West Mersea, of which nothing seems to be recorded, it was under a Sergeant Brown, but wether a comparable arrangement between the County Police and the Tollesbury and Mersea Oyster Company is not known. A report said that before the building of "**JOURNEYS END**" (now West Mersea Yacht Club), the Police had a house there at the corner of Firs Chase and Coast Road, with a corrugated iron roof, some time before 1910. local boys would throw stones onto

this roof to make the Police rush out and chase them.

According to some accounts the Police had only a small lugsail dingy, other stories suggested that a smack called "**OUR BOYS**", was fitted with an engine (the first among the Mersea smacks) for use by the Police. This was at a time when in addition to Police protection the Tollesbury and Mersea Oyster Company kept four boats, one "**THE FROLIC**", off the Metes below the Kings Hard, another on the South shore, another in Thirslet Creek and another in Mersea quarters, and it was possible the Police presence continued into the later 1930s.

Early records show that the Colne Fishery Company, was in operation as early as 1915. with local names at that time of, Frank Ward,

Bates, H. Barber, E. Martin, A. Woolvett, Drake, M. French, A. Jefferies, J. Ellis, with Ward, as chairman. Meetings in those days sre held at a number of venues , ie, The Duke Wellington, in Victoria Place, one of the local public houses of the past, after it closed as a public house it became an (Ironmongers, then second hand book shop, political party adverts, Brightlingsea in bloom, and countless other things.)

The beginning of the war in 1939, the names of Francis, Bertie Woolvett, Mark French, Fred Bragg, and John Ellis, had joined the list a after the war in 1946. A. Bragg was chairman. ith Mark French as vice chairman, Hedgethorne, E. Salmon, J. Angier, with .G. Francis as clerk to the Company.

THE BRIGHTLINGSEA RIVER POLICEMEN.

F Brand. W. Beales. F. Simmonds. - Bailey. J. Reynolds. F. Rumsey.
.W H. Fisher. T Poole. P. Small. R Midgley. J. Dye. E. French. H. Bailey.
Comelius Simmons. Charles Absalom. -Greengrass. T. Ward. Elijah Ward.

Elijah Ward, who after over twenty years in the river service, retired in September 1938, lived in Station Road in Brightlingsea, untill his death sometime in the late 1950s, brought to an end one of few remaining members of the detachment.

Sergeant W.H. Fisher, formaly of Prospect Place, in the main Street, at Burnham on Crouch, Essex. He moved to Brightlingsea some time in the late 1800s, to lodge in Wellington Street and to finally live at 4, York Road, Brightlingsea, where he was often visited by Elijah Ward who only lived just round the corner, old friends and shipmates, to sit and talk of the old days when they were Policemen together on the river, but sadly that came to an end with the death of Sergeant Fisher on April 12th. 1954. aged 81 years. He was laid to rest in the All Saints Churchyard, Brightlingsea. The service was conducted by the vicar Reverent C.R. Heard. Also paying their respects were

Ex Inspector Drane, (Colchester Borough Police) Mr P. Small. Mr W. Beales, and Mr Reynolds. (Ex Brightlingsea River Policemen).

Extracts from the book "Water Guard" by Peter M Fisher