

Boatyards & Boatbuilders I - Norfolk & Suffolk Broads

08 February 2009

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This information will evolve over time, as we continue to catalogue the various twentieth century wooden boats from the Broads that have ended up on Irish inland waters.

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Note: if you can add anything to this topic or can submit information on the boatyards and boatbuilders where our boats began, we would appreciate hearing from you.

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The Norfolk and Suffolk Broads

The Broads is an area in eastern England from Thorpe St Andrew, near Norwich, to the west, Beccles and Oulton Broad near Lowestoft to the south, Wroxham, Stalham and Sutton to the north, and Great Yarmouth on the east.

The area consists of inland, water-filled broads (shallow lakes), most of which it transpires are not natural but were dug out in mediaeval times for peat. They are connected by over 200 miles of navigable rivers, dykes and cuts (canals) where boats can cruise at 5 to 7 mph, lock-free. The landscape of fens, marshes and water-logged woods has many villages and some restored windmills.

This 30,000 hectares, was declared a National Park in 1988. The area has been consistently popular with holiday makers for the past two hundred years and time spent boating there is remembered by both young and old as a magical experience.

Some of the old boats have been restored and today they are sailed for fun. Because of the terrain, boats in the area up to the 1920s consisted mostly of rowing boats, sailing boats, steamers and working Wherries. Wherries, sailing barges, were originally built of wood with a small cabin, a hold and one sail. They were used to carry goods to and from the sea at Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth into Norfolk and North Suffolk.

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For a description of boating on the Broads in 1800s, see <http://www.archive.org/stream/handbooktorivers00davr/ch>

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Broads Wooden Cruisers

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Although it started just before WWI, the "Golden Era" of the Broads wooden cruisers was from the 1920s to the late 1940s except for the period from 1939 to 1945, when boatbuilding and holiday cruises ceased because of WWII. Many boatyards created their own unique style of boat, but they all had some things in common, constructed of wood, shallow draft and low clearance to get under the low bridges in the area.

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Unfortunately, it took some time to appreciate the quality and beauty of these boats and scores of them ended up in boat graveyards. But due to a few enthusiasts, some of them have survived and been refurbished by their owners. Today as well as in their native England, wooden Broads Cruisers can be found participating in vintage and heritage events in places like Canada, United States, France and Ireland. Their design makes them a "go-anywhere" ideal boat for many shallow inland waters and they are very suitable for the conditions in Ireland.

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Boatyards & Boat Builders

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The original boatyards where wooden boats were built were in the main, family run businesses. Boats were not just built and maintained but they were also hired out, as featured in the Blakes and Hoseasons catalogues. In some cases boats built for private clients, were also hired out as part of a "lease back" arrangement with the boatyard. In this way an owner's boat was maintained on a regular basis, the costs were underwritten and the owner still could have several weeks of

boating on their own boat in a year.

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The number of builders grew to over 100 in the 1960s, creating sailing, rowing and motorized wooden craft, in all 2000 boats during this era. There appears to have been a healthy competition between the boatyards which resulted in some beautifully crafted vessels. The builders included names like Banham, C.J. Broom, Graham Bunn, Chumley & Hawke, Darby, Harts (Hearts), Landamores, Loynes, Martham, Millers, Pegg Marine, Percivals, Porter & Haylett, Jack Powles, Richardsons, Ripplecraft, Jack & Leo Robinson, Royalls, Sandersons, A.G.Ward, Wilds and Herbert Woods.

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Both one-offs and series (usually 4 to 6 of a style) of boats for both the private boater and the boat hire businesses came from these boat yards. Boatyards adopted a prefix or addendum for their particular class of boat. This did not indicate they were all the same, just that they came from the same boatyard and design team. Examples are names beginning with Sea, Judith or Royal or ending with Light.

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In the 1970s, when boatbuilding methods had changed to incorporate the GRP revolution (another chapter in the history of boat building on the Broads), mergers and takeovers took place and most of the small boatyards disappeared.

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<http://nationalhistoricships.org.uk/index.cfm> the National Historic Ships register has listed some Broads Cruisers. Among them La Boheme a Broads cruiser built by C.J. Broom & Sons at Brundall, Norfolk in 1937, Prince of Light built in 1934 by Herbert Woods of Potter Heigham and Sea Prince built in 1946 by A.G. Ward of Thorne St. Andrew.

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Alfred G Ward

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Alfred G Ward, based in Thorpe St Andrew near Norwich, Norfolk on the Yare River established the business in 1929. The boatyard produced a series of cruisers with the prefix Sea between the years 1929 and 1951. Among them were Sea Hawk in 1929, Sea King in 1930, Sea Prince Y78 in 1946, Sea Queen in 1946, Sea Heron Y44 in 1950 and Sea Curlew Y538 in 1951, Sea Duke, Sea Earl, Sea Wolf and Sea Rover.

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L.A.Robinson

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Robinsons, based in Oulton Broad near Lowestoft, Suffolk was established prior to the 1930s. The yard produced the Riviera class of cruisers.

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