

Children on wherries

Nigel Royall of Royall's boatyard in Wroxham interviewed many old people who had worked on wherries. These are some of his stories relating to children on wherries.

Did the children of wherry men and women live on the boats?

Many of the people interviewed were children at the time when their fathers and family worked on the rivers. One old man remembered back to the late 1880's. None mentioned the family living aboard permanently although of course there were exceptions.

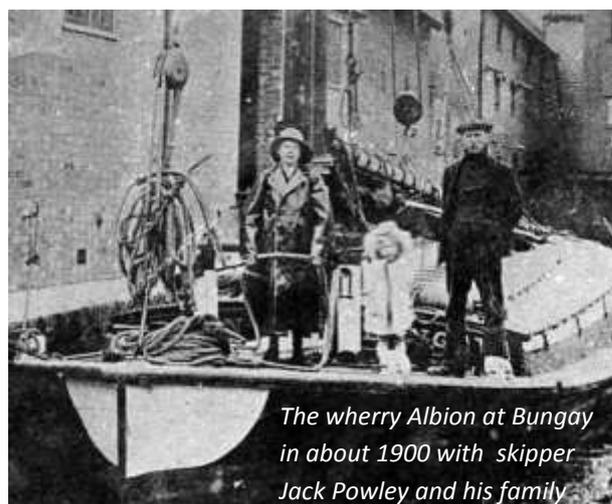
While the father was away during the week in most cases the family lived in a small cottage not far from the river. From there the children could attend the local school. Perhaps it had been generally accepted that the previous generation or the one before that did indeed squeeze the family aboard on a permanent basis - certainly the children went afloat at any opportunity that arose, especially during the school holidays. Indeed some people said that having to maintain some kind of shoreside home as well as run a wherry (even if it belonged to someone else) was a great financial strain when a family was living on a share of the profit.

Boys working

The boys were useful as mates on the wherries where their father was skipper, providing much needed extra muscle. This seems to have been particularly so on the rivers in the north of the Broads, especially during the 1920's and 30's. The boys did attend school but left to go afloat full time much earlier than they do now. Many of the previous generation to them did not receive any schooling whatsoever and although the family still lived ashore, they, sometimes at a very young age, were taken afloat. Indeed many including Nigel's great grandfather could not write or even sign their name until late in life when he came ashore.

Women and girls

Some wherries had women as full time workers. On others they cleaned the boat and fed the men. On Saturday lunchtime if the skipper had timed it correctly and his wherry lay at the village staithe his wife and daughters might visit to scrub and clean out the cabin and might cook tasty food to be taken aboard on Monday morning in a frail basket to keep the crew going for the week's journey.



The wherry Albion at Bungay in about 1900 with skipper Jack Powley and his family

Fun in the summer

There was great excitement at the start of the summer holidays when the whole family loaded their sparse belongings into the tiny cabin cupboards and under the bunks to spend several weeks afloat.

On some boats the children slept down in the fore peak, but this dark, dingy and

dangerous place was avoided by most - and the mother and children all huddled on the cabin bunk while the skipper used the other. If the weather was fine the skipper might sleep up on the hatches or if it was raining or cold - maybe down in the hold. People had good memories of their time as children in the wherries even if for the boys this meant jolly hard work helping their fathers earn an extremely precarious living.

Tragic incidents and accidents

- **Mysterious death of Joe Royall** (younger brother of Nigel Royall 's great grandfather) was mate on the Royall brothers' wherry FORGET ME NOT, built from an elder brother's profits from his successful emigration to Canada. Poor Joe had some kind of accident whilst the wherry navigated through Reedham, fell overboard and was never seen again.
- **Tragic drowning of toddler** The Ipswich Journal of 14 January 1804 has a report of a waterman's son in King Street, Norwich, who was carrying a child of about two years old from one keel to another; his foot slipped on the plank and the child fell from his arms into the water. The boy jumped in and grabbed the child, but the current was so strong that to save himself he had to let go of the child, who was drowned.
- **One family: many drownings** The Lowestoft Journal of 21 August 1886 has the story of a wherryman named Robert Frosdick who had worked his vessel to within half a mile of Coldham Hall (near Surlingham) when he had to lay-to owing to the wind and tide being against him. Frosdick had been hard at work pushing the heavy boat along (using the long pole known as a quant), and now, having had dinner and being tired, he went to sleep. Also on board there was a woman named Amelia Tuck, who had lived with Frosdick for the past 22 years, and also their three children. Amelia Tuck sat sewing and nursing her youngest child in the cabin, while Frosdick slept, and the other two boys, John and George, were left on deck fishing. At the end of two hours Frosdick woke up and went on deck, and immediately saw his sons were gone. The bodies were later recovered from the river by their father.

At the inquest Frosdick said he was a wherryman, working between Yarmouth and Norwich for John Rouse. On that day he was bringing up coal from Yarmouth to Norwich for the Gas Company. Amelia Tuck, the mother of the two dead boys, living with the Robert Frosdick as his wife, said, "I have lived with Robert Frosdick 22 years. We have had nine children, five died in their infancy, and one was drowned out of a mussel boat at Yarmouth." Frosdick had earlier been legally married, but his wife had drowned in Yarmouth Harbour.



*A mother and baby – safe on the deck.
Drawing on tracing paper from Wherries
and Waterways by Robert Malster p66*

Sources - Nigel Royall and Robert Malster