

June 1901

# EAST with the SPRAY

the story of a journey  
from Norwich to  
Great Yarmouth  
on a trading wherry



## Introduction

Wherries were the traditional cargo boats used on the Broads. This is a story inspired by the life of the wherryman William Royall, with the journey seen through the eyes of a young person. The story is an expanded version of material used in displays at the North West Tower at Great Yarmouth, when it was a Broads information centre. Many thanks to Nigel Royall, Roger Scarff, and also to Ann Lamb and all those involved at the time.



How Spray's cabin could have looked... by Nigel Royall

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## East with the Spray

### Norwich – loading up the wherry

This is June in the year 1901 and for a special treat I am to be allowed to travel on my grandfather's wherry called 'Spray'. This is my school composition for the trip.

I live with my Grandfather Billy and Grandmother Polly in Rayner's Yard, off King Street in Norwich – down by the Norwich River.\* None of their sons has become a wherryman – they all tried when they were younger but none of them could stick it – as Grandfather Billy worked them too hard. There are about 100 wherries trading on the Norwich River. I've found out a lot from Billy and Polly and from people on the journey.

It took a long time for me to persuade Grandmother Polly to let me do the journey to Yarmouth. I've been about as far as Brundall with them a few times, but then Grandmother Polly and I have to get off and get the train back to Norwich. She said Grandfather Billy was a rough old boy when he was out alone on the wherry and once we got to Yarmouth, what would happen to me there if we met anyone from the North River?† I think maybe they think it's not safe, especially in the harbour, and don't like to say that to me, but I know it can be a very dangerous life for the watermen.

However, eventually I persuaded her that I could look after myself and as well as Billy looking after me, people along the way would be glad to make sure I was all right.

\*Norwich River – wherryman's name for the River Wensum

†North River – wherryman's name for the River Bure; they also called each other northerners or southerners

Usually the return journey between Norwich and Yarmouth takes him about one to one and a half days. His fastest time is four hours from Yarmouth Bridge to Trowse Eye! This time he says we can take a bit longer and perhaps stop at one of the broads and even go along the New Cut, which goes to Lowestoft. Billy says I'll be a help steering the wherry and making his tea and cocoa, but I'm not going to spend all day in the stuffy cabin making his meals! It's never too hot for Billy to have the stove lit, winter or summer.

Spray belongs to Billy. He started work on the Gleaner when he was only nine years old and became a master at 16. Some of the other wherryman own their wherries but many belong to the companies they work for. Spray is a fine high sternsheets wherry,\* built in about 1864 by Hall's of Reedham, and repaired by Allen's Boatyard at Coltishall on the North River. She's a large wherry, carrying 40 tons when fully loaded. Billy always works on the southern rivers – the northern rivers are smaller so the wherries are smaller there too.

The hull is black, and the hatches and cabin top are red. The mast-head is light blue with a deep red band. The wherries all have different masts and the wherryman can see who's coming just by the colours. Billy often sees Colman's wherries going to and from the Colman Works in Norwich where they make mustard – their wherries have blue mastheads with gold and blue bands.

The wherries carry all sorts of cargoes – wooden planks (known as deals), coal, farm crops, food, stone, even ice! Ice is used by the butchers and for keeping the fish brought into port at Lowestoft and Yarmouth. The ice is stored in an ice house and then taken out on board the trawling smacks\* to keep the catch fresh. Wherries also take specially made blocks of ice to the morgue. There's one wherry called the 'Cabbage Wherry' because it carries all kinds of vegetables!



Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council at [www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk)

Wherries on the River Wensum, Norwich, 19—?

\*high sternsheets wherry – on this design of trading wherry the wherryman stands on deck to steer, not in a steering well

\*smacks – fishing boats

Billy's main cargoes are stone from Norwich to Yarmouth and then deals on the return journey. The stone is brought from a quarry near Kett's Hill and loaded on to Spray at Bishop Bridge.

For loading the wherries they use two wheelbarrows without any legs so they can balance on a narrow plank, and the hatches can all be removed and stacked so the wherry-men can reach the hull.

It was very early, about 5 o'clock, when we walked up to Bishop Bridge. It was light, with a little mist rising from the river and we passed nine wherries moored in a long line. Already the quays were busy and the men from Edwards' Quarry were waiting for us with the stone loaded in carts. They had to make several journeys to get it all loaded, the horses and the men getting more and more tired. The stone is for building roads.



Wherries near Bishop Bridge, Norwich, about 1910-20

While Billy was working with them I went along to the cabin to stow away the things Polly had given us. The cabin is very tiny with just enough room for the bunks. It's a wherry-men's superstition that the skipper must sleep on the starboard side (right) and the mate on the port side (left) – so that's where I'm to sleep. Goodness knows what would happen otherwise! Probably a dreadful storm would brew up on Breydon Water and we'd be swept down the river and out to sea!

There are three cupboards either side of the bunks, one above the other with the stove in the middle. The chimney leads out through the front of the cabin. Under the bunks we store all sorts of things: coal, kindling, potatoes and vegetables. The bunks curve to the shape of the wherry and Billy has got a donkey's breakfast for mine – that's a rough mattress stuffed with straw. There's a little shelf above the stove where Billy keeps things like the oil lamps and a photograph of Polly and me.

We've got a good supply of food this time, but sometimes the wherry-men just live on bread, cheese, tea and ale, and kippers sometimes a month old that the Scottish girls give away to them at Yarmouth in the autumn herring season. I put the kettle on, ready to make some cocoa. Billy also drinks a lot of wherryman's tea. At the beginning of the week he puts a quarter pound of tea in the pot and as the level drops adds water and more tea until at the week's end a spoon can stand up in it.

Up on deck they've just about finished loading and Spray is ready to be off. It's very difficult manoeuvring a wherry on the narrow river in Norwich, with all the bridges to negotiate. Billy pushes Spray along with the long quant pole and keeps an eye on the steering as well – he trusts me now to get Spray safely under Foundry Bridge and Carrow Bridge and the railway bridge, but he likes to keep a look-out too!

Billy pushed off with the quant pole and we were away, drifting with a gentle breeze. All along the riverside in Norwich people waved and called out to us and people were busy loading and unloading.

At Colman's, just after Carrow Bridge, we saw the Star of Hope and Hero being loaded. We saw one wherry completely filled with marsh hay for the horses in Norwich – it looked like a floating haystack.

The cocoa was soon ready. I poured Billy's into his china tea bowl cup and I made thick cheese sandwiches down in the cabin. Just after the railway bridge we joined the River Yare at Trowse Eye and once past there I knew we were out of the city and into the fresh air of the Broads, heading towards the sea.

Now came the moment to get the mast up and hoist the sail. Wherries have one big, black sail, which catches the wind on the slow, winding rivers and lets the wherry men sail 'close to the wind'.\* The sail is hoisted by winding the winch. The foot of the mast is counter-balanced with a huge block of lead weighing over a ton, which allows it to swing up and down. The mast is raised by a rope tackle. Billy cranked away on the winch and gradually the gaff\* rose into the air. When the sail is new, it's white. It has to be stretched for a month or two, then it is unbent, laid on the ground and brushed with a mixture of tar and herring oil – ugh! This dressing of the sail has to be done at least once a year on the South Denes at Yarmouth. When the sail was up, Billy gave a shove with the quant pole and we were away.

\*sail close to the wind – steer the boat as near as possible in the direction the wind is coming from

\*gaff – wooden pole holding the sail so that it can be attached to the mast

Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council at [www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk)



Whitlingham Reach from Postwick, 1883, by George Christopher Davies

## Thorpe St Andrew – smuggling

It wasn't long though before we had to lower the mast to pass under the railway bridges at Thorpe St Andrew without stopping. The wherry men call it 'shooting a bridge'. Usually Billy cuts it a bit fine but with me on board he's being careful! You can take the route along the New Cut, which was built in the 1840s when the railway was built between Norwich and Yarmouth, but this time we're going round past the staithe and village green at Thorpe. On the left we passed Thorpe Hall, which is about 300 years old. The original medieval building was the summer palace of the bishops of Norwich.

There were some children with their nurse walking on the green at Thorpe and Billy told me the story of his great-grandfather, Chris the Older. He sailed a keel, the cargo boats they had before wherries, and he was a bit of a rascal. One spring he had a bit of luck and arranged to collect two wagon loads of tobacco and cigars from Grubbs Haven at Caister by the sea. It was a dark night and he got it all safely loaded, and with his three sons on board headed up to Norwich as fast as he could. But unbeknownst to them there was a horseman riding hard from Acle (halfway to Norwich by road) bringing news of what they'd done. They moored by the church at Thorpe and tried to escape but the customs men caught up with them and arrested them. They were to be convicted of smuggling and sent to gaol in Norwich Castle for a whole year!

Usually smugglers had their boats taken as well so they lost their livelihood, but us Royalls were too smart for the customs men. They counted out all the contraband goods and then off they went to the pub. When they got back to the staithe they must have thought they'd had a bit too much to drink – the keel had disappeared! Some of the Royalls' friends knew what had happened, jumped aboard the keel and sailed it to Oulton Broad and sank it. When the Royalls came out of gaol they re-floated her, cleaned her up and were back in business. Lots of smuggling goes on in the Broads – sometimes mill sails are set in position to let the wherrymen know if the coast is clear or not.

## Bramerton – pleasure wherries

From Whitlingham Reach down to Bramerton Woods End Reach the marshes stretch out on either side. We passed two swans gliding up to Norwich and we met a whole flock of ducks and coots and moorhens.

We could see two large white sails ahead of us – pleasure wherries – they must be boating parties set out early from Norwich. I think it would be a fine way to spend a holiday – to sit on deck like one of the ladies in a white dress with a parasol and nothing to do but take tea and enjoy the passing scene, or sit back reading a book like the gentlemen,

while someone else does all the work. Billy says he can't see the point of it all – a wherry's for cargo and what do they want to sleep in cabins for when there are plenty of inns along the rivers and grand hotels like the Maid's Head at Norwich and the Royal Hotel at Yarmouth? I've peeped inside pleasure wherries and they look pretty grand too to me. Some even have a piano in the saloon.

In the distance, as we got near to Postwick Marsh, we saw a wherry moored up delivering coal to the inn. We'll just stop here, said Billy and see if Old Jack can spare us some coal for the stove. Wherrymen are allowed to take coal from the cargo for their own stove but they're not supposed to go giving it to everyone. When we got there Old Jack said all right but just a sackful, or he'd be short when he got to Thorpe. But Jack went in to see the landlord and Billy had filled the sack and a bit extra and stashed it all under the bunks and pushed us off again before he came out.



Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council at [www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk)

Leigh Literary Society members relaxing on Dragon, a hired pleasure wherry, in 1902

## Surlingham – dinner time

At Surlingham Billy says we'll stop for our dinner, juicy pickled herrings. We could see the staithe ahead by the Ferry House was busy. Normally, if the wind and tide serve, away Billy will go, without stopping much, and then it's mostly somewhere quiet where he can get in a bit of poaching.

There are brickyards and an ice house at Surlingham and we could see the grey and white mast of the Meteor. We managed to moor outside the inn and saw the ferryman taking two anglers on board the chain ferry – wanting to cross to a good stretch of fishing.

I got out the herrings, bread and the butter from the little cupboard on the aft deck where it was keeping cool. Then we made some tea and while Billy was in the pub I went for a walk down the lane, which leads to the village. Some of the cottages are lived in by wherryman's families and when I said I was out on Spray with Billy, one of the women hanging out her washing told me to come in and she'd give me one of her apple pies to have for my tea.

## Brundall – the decoyman

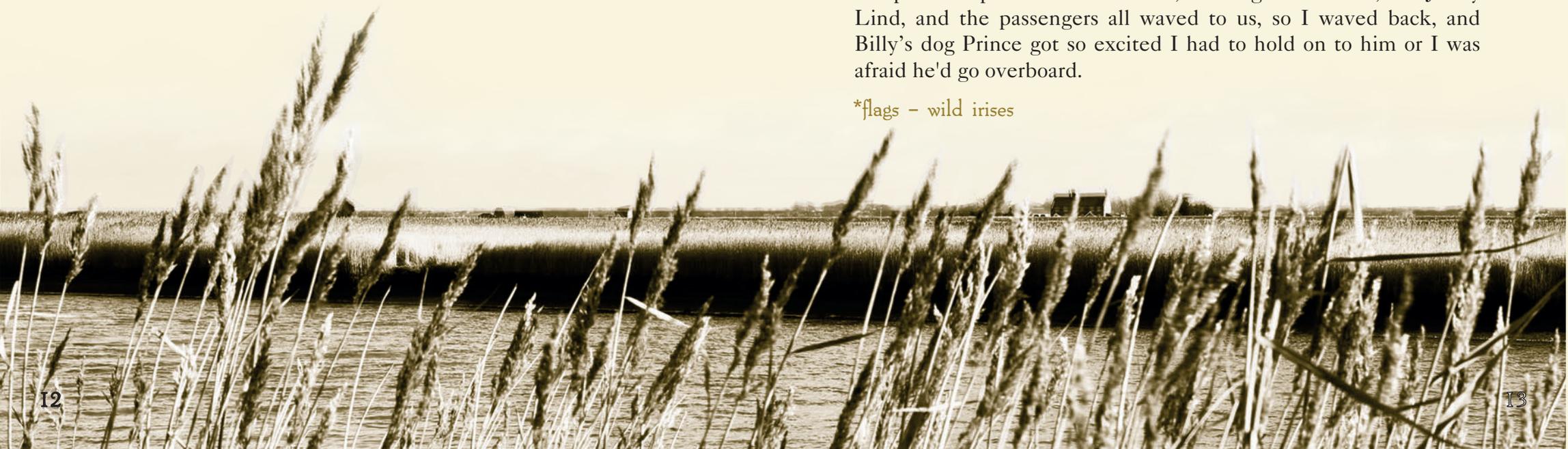
We set off from Surlingham and reached a stretch of river that winds through wet carr woodland. We saw alder and willow and silver birch trees. There were cool ferns amongst the trees and bright yellow flags.\*

We passed a man with his gun slung over his shoulder and we saw those two fishermen again. They'd got a good catch already – Surlingham Broad is one of the best places in the Broads for roach and bream. Billy loves eels and he's hoping to meet an eel-catcher who'll give us some. We passed the duck decoy (for trapping ducks to eat) and we saw the decoyman's dog, the piper. They use decoy ducks to lure real ducks into 'pipes' (waterways), but mainly in the winter.

The riverside in Brundall was busy – there are a great many dykes and boatbuilders' yards and we passed several yachts. It was difficult getting safely round them all and then going past Coldham Hall Billy shouted at two young men who didn't seem to know what they were doing and cut right across our bows when they should have given way to a trading wherry. I felt quite embarrassed and hid down in the cabin until we'd passed them!

We passed a pleasure steamer too, heading to Norwich, the Jenny Lind, and the passengers all waved to us, so I waved back, and Billy's dog Prince got so excited I had to hold on to him or I was afraid he'd go overboard.

\*flags – wild irises



## Rockland – Broads wildlife

We've now got beyond the farthest point I've ever been on the river. The wind has dropped a little and Billy says we must get a move on if we're going to get to Loddon for the night. We turned along the dyke that leads to Rockland Broad and when we came out on the edge of the broad I could hardly believe it – I'd never seen such a broad stretch of water. Wait till you see Breydon said Billy. There were yellow water lilies poking their heads up out of the water and a whole carpet of white lilies and across the other side was Old Scientific Fuller on his houseboat.

Polly says there are still people in the Broads who believe in the 'wise women' and 'wise men'. Once she was at Rockland and one of the villagers told her about the burial of a witch. As it got to the time for the burial a great storm blew up and the coffin bearers could hardly stand up, but once the coffin was lowered into the ground the storm subsided and all was peaceful again. It made me shiver to remember it. But sailing across the broad was fine, with whole flocks of water birds. When the Breydoners begin firing their punt guns (mainly in the colder months) in the early morning, the birds often take off for the safer waters of Rockland.

I saw a heron standing quite still at the edge of the water, until something startled it and it rose into the air, spreading out its huge wings. Just as we reached the dyke that leads up to the staithe I caught sight of a water vole diving into the water out of our way.

The water was quite low so we quanted along the dyke. With one end of the quant on the riverbed and the other against your shoulder, you have to lean forward and then walk slowly aft. It's hard work and the poles are very long, 22 foot, but Billy is used to it and it's not far up to the staithe. Most of the villages have a staithe for loading and unloading cargo.

We saw a pile of willow and reed stacked near the staithe. The reed must have been cut at the end of the season, in the early spring and no one's bought it yet. There was a wherry unloading wood for a new barn that's being built so we stopped to pass the time of day. Billy's going to take a few deals from his load on the way back for a new door he's making for the house in Norwich. Then we were away, heading back to the river and then off on our way to Loddon.

We passed the ferryman from Buckenham. He was mooring his boat, ready to walk up to the village of Claxton, where there used to be a medieval castle. Then we passed on to Langley where there are the ruins of a medieval abbey and also the Devil's Round House.



## Hardley – laden to the binns

The next village is Hardley. We passed another wherry, 'laden to the binns' (the deck edge), so fully laden that the water was lapping over the sides. They were taking down its sail ready to quant up the dyke.

It's not far now to the River Chet, but just before it we passed Hardley Cross, which marks the point where responsibility for the river passes from Norwich to Great Yarmouth. In the old days the mayors of Norwich and Yarmouth would set out in their state barges and meet at the cross. A proclamation was read out and then they would all proceed to Breydon Water for a regatta and all kinds of jollification and refreshments.

There are regattas all over the Broads and there'll be one on at Breydon when we get there the day after tomorrow. I'll be able to buy toffee apples and maybe something to take home to Polly.

## Loddon – supper time

Then we turned right to join the River Chet to Loddon. The Chet is very narrow, with scarcely room for two wherries to pass. We wound our way through fields and marshes with some cows grazing. There's a mill at Loddon, not like the drainage mills we've seen but one for grinding corn, which belongs to Woods, Sadd, Moore, millers and coal merchants. They have their own wherries with blue mast-heads and red and white bands. The mill used to be a water mill but now it's been converted to steam, just as many of the drainage mills have been converted to steam.

As we travelled along we saw a whole group of wherry masts ahead and Billy hoped there'd be room for us to moor all right. When we arrived there was just about room for Spray, so we moored up at the staithe and a couple of wherry men came on board to help get the sail down and roll it all up so Spray was tucked up for the night.

There were wherries with all sorts of cargoes – corn and coal and others and the staithe was busy with people delivering and loading cargo on to carts. We decided to have a walk up to the village before getting our meal ready. Loddon is a big village with one long street and a big square by the church. We'd nearly run out of matches and Billy wanted some tobacco so we got those and then it was time for our supper.



Polly had given us a big jug of pea soup, which I put in the iron pot to heat up. The next thing is to make the stew. Polly had also got us half a pig's head from the butcher's. That'll keep Billy going for the rest of the week. I cut some pieces off the pig's head and put them in a big pot with some scraps of pork fat and water. We keep the water in two two-gallon stone beer jars. They're very heavy to lift and we have to fill them at a village pump or well. I found an old mangold under one of the bunks that Billy had picked up somewhere, so I cut that up too and put it in.

It was a pleasant evening, so we took our soup up on deck and sat on top of the hatches to eat it. In the summer when it's light the wherryman often go on working as late as nine o'clock. On winter evenings or in bad weather they have to stop earlier, so they need to make the most of good weather. If the river and dykes get frozen as they sometimes do, they can't work at all.

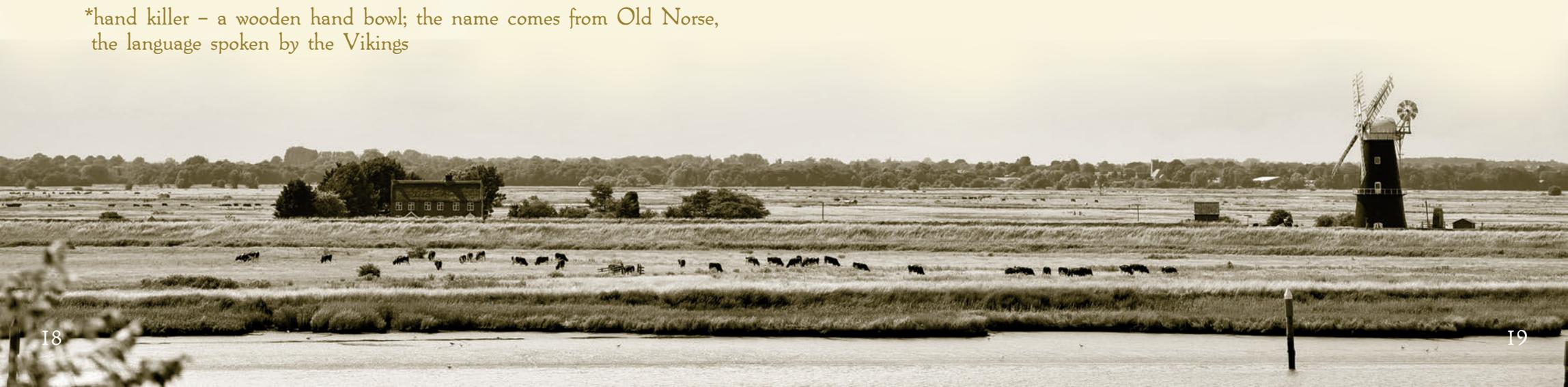
When I got back to the cabin the stew was coming on nicely, all I needed to do was add the onion dumplings that Polly had made – juicy onion in a suet casing. It was soon ready and we went back up on deck with our plates and tea. Then we shared out the pie the wherryman's wife gave me. After supper we washed up in the 'hand killer'\* – that's a wooden box painted red and we just use the river water – it's a bit cold!

\*hand killer – a wooden hand bowl; the name comes from Old Norse, the language spoken by the Vikings

When we'd finished we clambered on to the staithe and walked up to the Swan. Some of the other wherry families joined us and we all went out to the bowling green for a game. The women all wore blue and white aprons with a wrapper handkerchief over their heads to match. Some of the women sail the wherries as well as the men. The wherryman wear red handkerchiefs round their necks. Billy was on his best behaviour and we didn't stay too long as we had to be away soon after five in the morning.

Back on the wherry we took off our boots and our top clothes and wrapped ourselves in the blankets. It was cosy from the heat left from the stove, but I could feel the fresh air coming in through the sliding hatch over the entrance and I could hear the wind gently whistling in the reeds and the water lapping against Spray.

Next morning I woke to hear Billy up on deck and the sound of voices and people loading up. Billy had already made the cocoa so I took some on deck and found him getting the sail up, ready to be away. We pushed off with the quant pole and we waved good-bye to our companions of the night before. I fetched us some bread and more cocoa and off we went.



## Reedham – the wherry builders

Next stop is Reedham. There's a ferry just before you get into the village and it's another busy place with the railway and a brickyard, boatyards and the New Cut going to Lowestoft.

One of the boatyards, Hall's, has built more wherries than anyone else. They built the Fawn in 1875, said to be the fastest wherry ever. It takes about a year to build a wherry, though of course they'd be doing repairs and other building work at the same time. The annual repairs for a wherry might cost as much as £20. For building, all the wood must be bought in one load so it's properly weathered. Wherries have a shallow draught and are clinker-built – with the planks overlapping. The hull is made of oak in three sections – the forepeak (front), the hold (where the cargo goes) and the cabin. The mast is usually made of pitch-pine, about 40 foot high and 12-14 inches across.

The ironwork is all done by a blacksmith and the mast, gaff, blocks,\* sail and quants are all made at Yarmouth. On top of the mast is the vane, which shows the direction of the wind. Sometimes they have a figure cut out of tin. They are called Jenny Morgans after the Welsh girl in the song. Morgan's Brewery in Norwich uses this same figure for all its wherries. Spray has two vanes, one with an 'S' on it and one with a star.

\*blocks – pulley wheels for the sail ropes to run through

The railway crosses the river at Reedham on a swing bridge. We were almost upon it when the signalman rushed out with his red warning flag. Billy was not pleased, he had to 'spill wind'\* to slow down while the bridge was swung and a train went past.

Just out of Reedham the river comes to a fork. We aimed to continue straight ahead along the New Cut, but the wind was getting up, a 'Roger' as the wherryman call these summer storms, and the tide was just on the turn and I was afraid we'd be swept straight up to Berney Arms. But it was all right and we set off along the Cut, a canal opened in 1833 to make a direct link between Norwich and Lowestoft without having to go round by Yarmouth, so making Norwich itself a port.

On either side were fens with reed and sedge growing. We passed some sedge cutters and we could see the bright green of the new reed growth. It's just about time to see swallowtails – huge black and yellow butterflies with red and blue patches on the wing tips.

We had our food as we went along the Beccles River\* past St Olaves and through the open marshland. Across the river is Haddiscoe Island, surrounded by water.

\*spill wind – let out the sail so it fills with wind and the boat slows down

\*Beccles River – wherryman's name for the River Waveney



## Burgh Castle – the Roman fort

Just before Breydon Water is Burgh Castle, the old Roman fort. In Roman times Yarmouth didn't exist, there was just a great estuary coming as far as the fort – built for coastal defence.

Below the fort are the buildings of the Burgh Castle Brick and Cement Company. Two clays are dug at Burgh Castle, to produce white and red bricks. They are taken across to the quay at Yarmouth for building work in the town. Cement is also made, from mud dredged from Breydon Water mixed with chalk brought by wherry from Whitlingham, just outside Norwich. It's fired in kilns. The clinker, for grinding for cement, used to be taken by wherry and ground at Berney Arms Mill just across the marshes on the Norwich River. There used to be another cement works at Berney Arms but that's closed now, so there's just the mill and the pub.

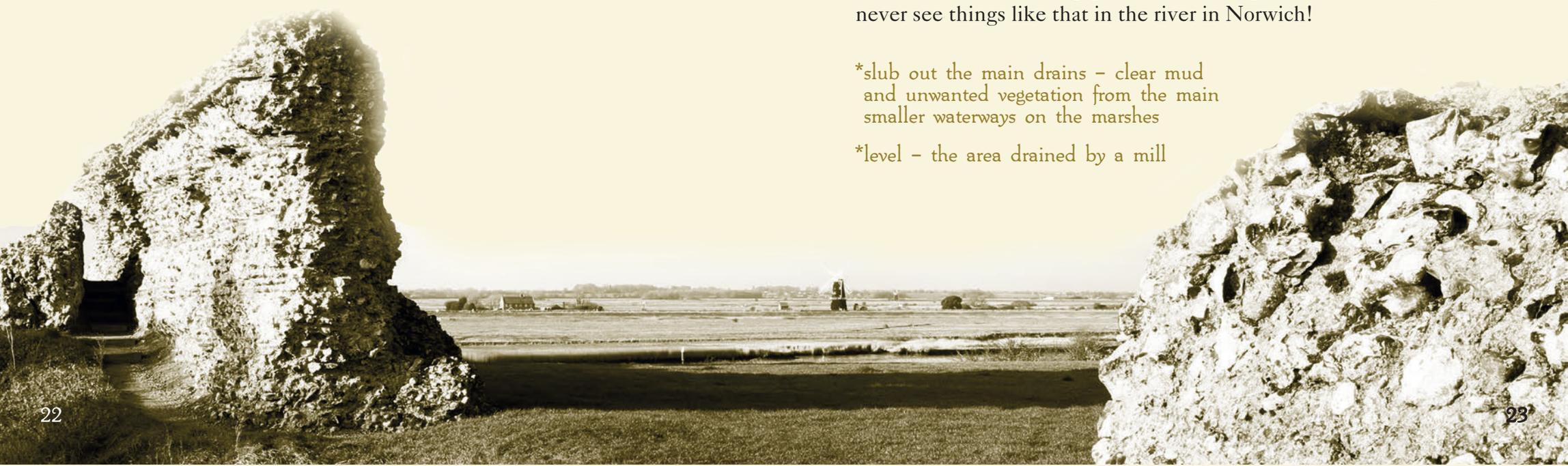
## Berney Arms – drainage mills

We're going round to spend tonight at Berney Arms, where the mill is used for draining the marshes. We got Spray moored up and then went along to the mill – it's one of the tallest in the country, just over 70 foot high with seven storeys. Some of the marshmen who look after the mills live inside them with their families. They have to do lots of different kinds of work as well as looking after the mills. They slub out the main drains,\* adjust the sluices and look after the cattle on the level.\* They don't earn very much so usually they do other things like wildfowling and fishing too.

I'm not sure I'd like to live right out here in the middle of the marshes. It's fun now in the sunshine, but in cold and misty weather I think it might be a bit scary, especially with the lantern-men or will-o'-the-wisps flying about. Some of the old wherryman shoot at them to drive them away, but Billy says it's a lot of nonsense. Strolling across the marshes I could see marshmen scything hay and mills dotted all around. On clear days you can see across to Stracey Arms. There were dragonflies and damselflies flitting about over the dykes. If you look into the dykes there are all kinds of curious beasties, like the whirligig beetles whizzing round in circles – you'd never see things like that in the river in Norwich!

\*slub out the main drains – clear mud and unwanted vegetation from the main smaller waterways on the marshes

\*level – the area drained by a mill



We walked along to the edge of Breydon Water, looking for an eel-catcher who might give us some eels for supper (though of course Billy does often catch them himself). Eel-catchers can be slippery creatures, but we soon came up to a little houseboat. Billy gave some coal in exchange for two fine-looking eels. We took them back to Spray and cooked up Billy's favourite meal – fried eel and onions. Then after a drink at the Berney Arms we tucked ourselves up for the night.

## Breydon Water – the regatta

Next morning we set out along the river and Breydon Water, passing cormorants and oystercatchers on the way. The marshes around Breydon have been drained considerably so the area is no longer flooded when there are high tides, but there are still many people who make their living there – catching eels, smelts and flounders, or butts as they call them. The little houseboats they live in are like Noah's arks.

Eels are caught in different ways depending on the time of year – in setts (nets stretched across the river), by spearing them with a pick, by babbing with a kind of fishing rod and by trapping them in big, bottle-shaped baskets. Eel-catchers do a lot of their work at night. There are all sorts of strange beliefs and stories about eels. There are even tales of giant eel-monsters such as the Ludham Serpent,

supposed to have a long snout and two horns, but I don't believe a word of it! Butts are caught with a different kind of spear called a dart.

As I mentioned, the Breydoners go wildfowling too – creeping up behind a flock of ducks and geese, lying flat in their gun punt with the huge gun sometimes over nine foot long. Many of the waterway men and their families live around the entrance to Breydon and you often see the women mending the nets. Sometimes they go round selling the fish and game birds that the men have caught. The Breydoners eat all sorts of curious things like herring gull and even heron, cooked overnight in salt water. For Christmas dinner they might even have a roast swan, stuffed with onions and sausages.

When we got out on to Breydon it was quite choppy, almost how I imagine the sea. There were yachts and wherries and pleasure wherries, many decorated with flags and streamers and all going in different directions. Billy used to race his old wherry, Leveret, at many regattas, but he says he's getting past it now. There was one wherry serving as a bandstand and other wherries providing ale and food and other drinks – cold meats, pickled onions, red cabbage, cheese, sweetmeats, toffee apples, fruit, lemonade and pop. We ate far too much but I remembered to get some sweetmeats for Polly. There was a competition to climb the greasy pole and they used the mast of one of the wherries. Some of them couldn't get up it at all and one of them fell from just near the top right into Breydon and had to be rescued in a rowing boat. Everyone had a high old time but I was excited to be almost at Yarmouth too.



## Great Yarmouth – the North West Tower

We carried on across Breydon. There were a lot of other wherries from all over the Broads as well as little boats and a dredger. As we came down the Yarmouth River\* we could see tall masts ahead and ships that make the wherries seem quite small. Some of them are foreign ships from Scandinavia and the Low Countries and even further afield. It's all hustle and bustle, a real port and makes the riverside in Norwich seem tiny in comparison, though it's not as busy as the autumn herring season when there would be a real forest of masts. We moored up at the North Quay and then it was the long job of unloading the cargo and, very important, sorting out Billy's earnings for the freight, about £2.

Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council at [www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk)



Wherries and ships in Great Yarmouth harbour, 1890s, by Poulton

\*Yarmouth River – wherryman's name for the River Yare

Once the wherries are unloaded they have to go up on to the North River out of the way and moor up by the North West Tower – one of the old towers that were part of the medieval town walls. When it's busy there are wherries moored three abreast but we're not too late today so there's plenty of room.

Billy says we deserve a good break now, so we'll go off and see the town and the sea, which I've never seen before. The Town Hall and the Customs House on Hall Quay and South Quay are very grand, and you can smell the sea and hear foreign talk from some of the sailors as you walk along.

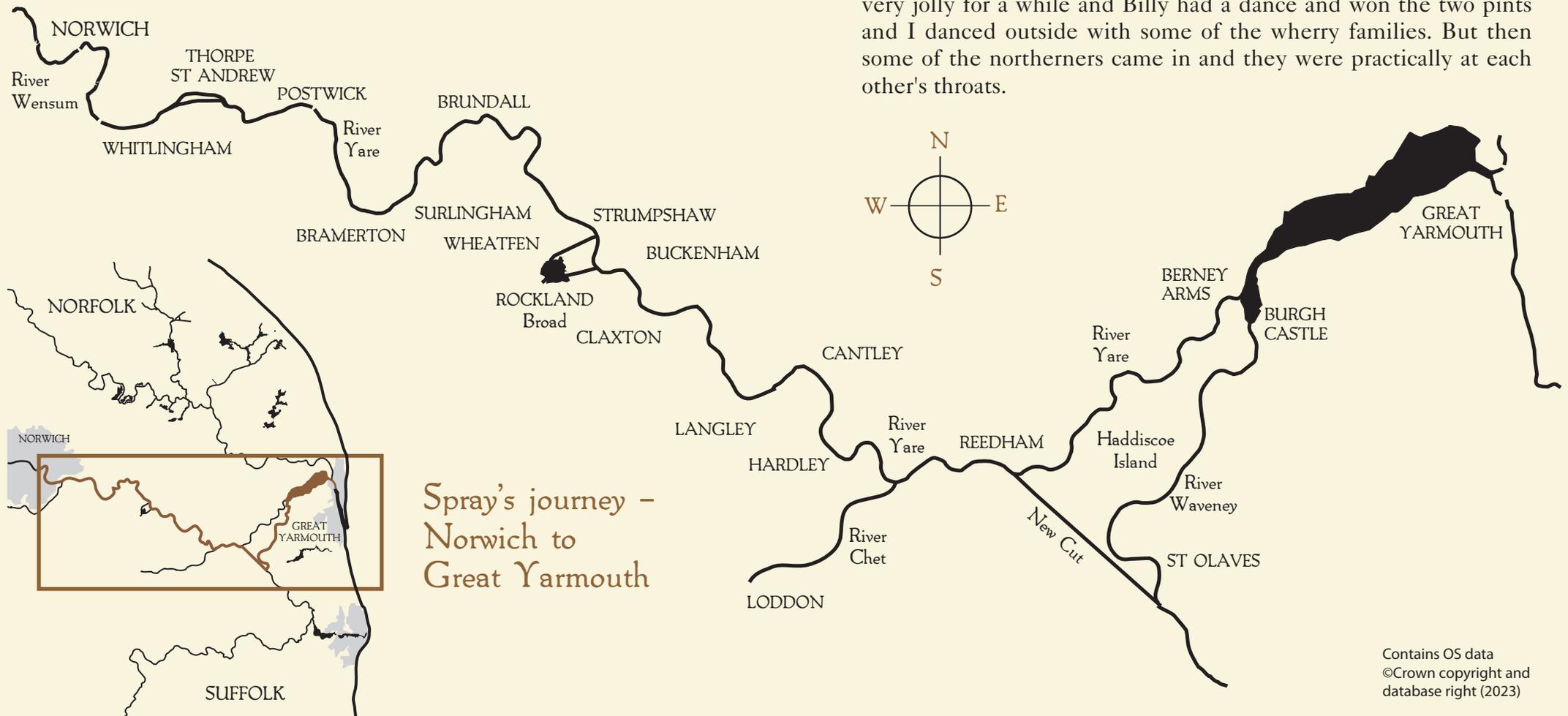
Image courtesy of Norfolk County Council at [www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.picture.norfolk.gov.uk)



North West Tower, Great Yarmouth, 18-?

The sea and the sand are really splendid, better than I ever imagined and we stayed as long as we could. Then it was back to the tower for our supper. It was strange being back in a town after the wilds of the Broads.

The White Swan pub is right by the moorings. The wherryman and Breydoners also go to the Bowling Green pub just along by the staithe where the wherries unload. There's a Wherryman's Church too, St Andrew's, but somehow I doubt if Billy ever goes there.



One of the wherryman said the Bowling Green was full of northerners tonight, so Billy, mindful of his responsibilities, said we'd stay at the Swan. There's a bit of friendly rivalry between the north and south over trade, but if anyone needs assistance, wherryman will always help each other out.

It was a warm evening and families were sitting out beside the river. There was quite a concert going with a concertina and two fiddles and soon two of the wherryman were step-dancing. Each of them buys a pint of ale, then they dance away on a table top until one is so exhausted he can't go on and the other drinks both pints. It was all very jolly for a while and Billy had a dance and won the two pints and I danced outside with some of the wherry families. But then some of the northerners came in and they were practically at each other's throats.

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Things calmed down a bit but then a northerner and a southerner decided to dance. After a few minutes the northerner tripped and people said someone had been at the table legs on his side and caused him to fall. Well, there was a rare old fight after that, especially as they'd all had a fair bit to drink. Billy was no better than the others and the landlord only got rid of them by saying the police were coming!

By the time we got back to Spray I was quite exhausted and slept very soundly. Next morning we were up early and Billy pushed us off, ready to get the cargo of deals loaded, while I was still making our breakfast.

It's been three days of adventures for me, but best of all is to see the open skies and the wide horizons of the Broads.

## The End



Steering Spray while Billy raises the sail, by Nigel Royall

William, or Uncle Billy as he is known in the family, was born in September 1853. He continued working on Spray until November 1927 when he was 74. He then ran his ferry from the former Ferry Boat Inn on King Street in Norwich until February 1936, when he died in his 83rd year.

The young girl is a fictional character to fit the period of the story, though Billy did take Polly and their daughter and granddaughter sailing on wherries as far as Brundall.

Billy's family are still involved in the boating industry as Royall and Son Ltd. His distant nephew, Nigel Royall, does all the maintenance work for Solace, one of the three remaining pleasure wherries.



Image courtesy of Michael Seago

William Royall on Spray, 1933

Sepia landscape photos:  
Pages 12, 20, 22, 24 Julian Claxton  
Page 14 Tom Mackie  
Page 16 James Bass  
Page 18 Visit the Broads



Image of Albion by Mike Page

## Some wherry history

In the 19th century there were hundreds of trading wherries on the Broads. But other methods of transport, rail and road, eventually took over from wherries, particularly after the 1914-18 war. Allen's of Coltishall built the last trading wherry, *Ella*, in 1912. By 1929 Jimmy Cox on the wherry *Cornucopia* was earning less than in 1919, about £112 for the year instead of £157.

Lorries had been developed in France for the war and were then sold abroad. Wherries were left to do the rougher jobs such as dredging and carrying reed, and some wherries were motorised.

The last sailing trading wherries were *Cornucopia* and *Hilda*, both continuing until 1940. The last trading wherry to use a combination of sail and engine was the *Dispatch*, which stopped working in 1942. May Gurney motorised several wherries in the 1950s, including *Maud* (see page 34). Later they also owned the motor wherry *Lord Roberts*, although the mast was retained. Wherries were taking sugar beet to Cantley factory until the early 1960s. Apart from *Albion* (see left and page 34), *Lord Roberts* was the last of the old wherries in work, finishing in April 1969. Some modern work boats in the Broads are still known as wherries.

However, wherries had a new lease of life as pleasure craft. In the late 1800s and during the Edwardian period some were converted for use as pleasure craft in the summer, and some were built as a 'speculation', like *Solace*, built by Hall's of Reedham, with a view to use either for trade or pleasure. People were also building pleasure wherries, purpose-built for holidays. The final development was the wherry yacht, combining the size of a pleasure wherry with the deck space of a yacht.

## Wherries still sailing today

**Albion** (built 1898) – a trading wherry based at Ludham. Owned by the Norfolk Wherry Trust, Albion carried cargoes for the trust in the 1950s. Now Albion offers public scheduled day trips and viewings, and can be chartered for a day or half-day. Albion also offers activities for schools and youth organisations. [wherryalbion.com](http://wherryalbion.com)

**Maud** (1899) – a trading wherry based at Ludham. Members of the Wherry Maud Trust can sail on day trips and Maud is open to the public for viewing at many events. [wherrymaudtrust.org](http://wherrymaudtrust.org)

**Solace** (1903) – a privately owned pleasure wherry, which you may see moored on Wroxham Broad in the summer months. [nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/666/solace](http://nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/666/solace)

**Hathor** (1905), **Olive** (1909), **Norada** (1912), **White Moth** (1915) and **Ardea** (1927) – the first and last are pleasure wherries, the other three are wherry yachts. They are based at Wroxham, offer public scheduled day and half-day trips, and can be chartered for a day, a weekend or longer. When not sailing, Hathor is moored at How Hill from May to September and is open to the public for viewing. Wherry Yacht Charter is also involved in education, working with the How Hill Trust. [wherryyachtcharter.org](http://wherryyachtcharter.org)

The three wherry trusts all welcome new members.

Image of Maud by Bill Smith

## More about wherries

[broads-authority.gov.uk/about-the-broads/heritage-and-culture](http://broads-authority.gov.uk/about-the-broads/heritage-and-culture)

Listen to David Cleveland's recordings of two wherrymen and a boatbuilder who repaired wherries (1966, 1971, 1980)

### **Black-Sailed Traders**

by Roy Clark (reprint, Peacock Press, 2019)

### **Wherries and Waterways**

by Robert Malster (revised edition, Terence Dalton, 1986)

WISEArchive project

**Water, Mills & Marshes: Life and Work on the Broads 1920-2020** (available on their website or as a book)

[wisearchive.co.uk/projects](http://wisearchive.co.uk/projects)

If you would like to pass on any details about wherries, please contact us at [broads-authority.gov.uk](http://broads-authority.gov.uk)



## Places to visit in the Broads National Park

You can visit many places on *Spray's* journey in the southern Broads, along or close to, the rivers Wensum, Yare and Waveney – here are some to get you started. They will reveal more about the history of the route and its wildlife. The Wherryman's Way long-distance path follows the route of the journey from Norwich to Great Yarmouth and there are also circular walks linked to the route. Another great way to explore is by train on the Wherry Lines, going from Norwich to Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. There are lots of opportunities for combining walks and train travel.

[norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/norfolk-trails](http://norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/norfolk-trails)  
[wherrylines.com](http://wherrylines.com)

### Norwich and Great Yarmouth

Norwich Riverside Walk – Walk 1 in the Bittern Line Railway Rambles takes in part of the route

[norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/norfolk-trails](http://norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/norfolk-trails)  
[bitternline.com](http://bitternline.com)



Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell, Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Time and Tide Museum of Great Yarmouth Life [museums.norfolk.gov.uk](http://museums.norfolk.gov.uk)

**Whitlingham Country Park** [whitlinghamcountrypark.com](http://whitlinghamcountrypark.com)

**Surlingham Church Marsh, Rockland Marshes, Strumpshaw Fen, Buckenham Marshes, and Berney Marshes and Breydon Water** nature reserves [rspb.org.uk](http://rspb.org.uk)

**Wheatfen Nature Reserve** [wheatfen.org](http://wheatfen.org)

**Hardley Mill** [hardleywindmilluk.org](http://hardleywindmilluk.org)  
[youtube.com/watch?v=dbW0\\_A1Jpow](https://youtube.com/watch?v=dbW0_A1Jpow)

**Reedham** There's been a river crossing at Reedham since the early 17th century and there are mills to see at Reedham Marshes [reedhamferry.co.uk](http://reedhamferry.co.uk)  
[norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/windmills](http://norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/windmills)

**St Olaves** [norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/windmills](http://norfolk.gov.uk/out-and-about-in-norfolk/windmills)  
[english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/st-olaves-priory](http://english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/st-olaves-priory)

**Burgh Castle** [norfarchtrust.org.uk](http://norfarchtrust.org.uk)

**Berney Arms**  
[english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/berney-arms-windmill](http://english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/berney-arms-windmill)  
[watermillsandmarshes.org.uk/trails/halvergate-mills-walk](http://watermillsandmarshes.org.uk/trails/halvergate-mills-walk)

**For more information about visiting all these places and many others, go to** [VisitTheBroads.co.uk](http://VisitTheBroads.co.uk)

Image by James Bass



Image of Olive by Bill Smith

## **Broads Authority yacht stations and information centres**

**Norwich Yacht Station**, Riverside Road, NR1 1SQ  
01603 612980 / 07747 065378  
[norwichyachtstation@broads-authority.gov.uk](mailto:norwichyachtstation@broads-authority.gov.uk)

**Reedham Quay**, NR13 3TE  
01493 701867 / 07733 102566  
[reedhamquay@broads-authority.gov.uk](mailto:reedhamquay@broads-authority.gov.uk)

**Great Yarmouth Yacht Station**,  
Tar Works Road, NR30 1PU  
01493 842794 / 07766 398238  
[yarmouthyachtstation@broads-authority.gov.uk](mailto:yarmouthyachtstation@broads-authority.gov.uk)

**Hoveton Broads Information Centre**,  
Station Road, NR12 8UR  
01603 782281 / 01603 756097  
[hovetontic@broads-authority.gov.uk](mailto:hovetontic@broads-authority.gov.uk)

**Ranworth Broads Information Centre**,  
The Staithe, NR13 6HY  
01603 756094  
[ranworthtic@broads-authority.gov.uk](mailto:ranworthtic@broads-authority.gov.uk)

**Toad Hole Cottage**, How Hill,  
Ludham, NR29 5PG  
01692 678763 / 01603 756096  
[toadholetic@broads-authority.gov.uk](mailto:toadholetic@broads-authority.gov.uk)

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