RIVER COLNE SHIPBUILDERS

A Portrait of Shipbuilding 1786-1988

John Collins and James Dodd (Jardine Press, Wivenhoe, 2009) 314pp including index and glossary;( 28 pounds)

In his foreward to this encyclopedic and absorbing history of the rise, fortunes and decline of shipyards along the River Colne in North East Essex, Captain Richard Woodman, Elder Brother of Trinity House, notes that there “only a few decades ago, several commercial yards built a variety of craft from modest commercial fishing smacks intended for local use, to luxury yachts-both sail and steam-designed for world cruising, and for owners whose requirements varied from demontable prefabrication in order that their vessel could be conveyed inland, high into the Andes and assembled on Lake Titicaca, to an auxiliary steam schooner fitted with a mission school and ordered for the use of the Bishop of Melanesia.”

The authors, John Collins, archivist with the Nottage Insitute at Wivenhoe and purchaser of my only boat I ever owned (three years later being wrecked by a Colchester bound coaster) and James Dodd, a serving shipwright and accomplished artist, have put together an evocative history encompassing the former shipyards along the River Colne. Running down from Colchester to Rowhedge on the west bank opposite to Wivenhoe to Brightlingsea near the merging with the River Blackwater and the coastal North Sea the authors trace with lavish maps, photos of long gone vessels and young and old workers, shipyard records and the words and memories of those who built, managed and saw the boom and bust that goes with the shipping industry.

Each shipyard is covered from Stuttles at the Hythe to Aldous at Brightlingsea, from the speedy racing yachts and cutters and schooners to the iron and steel vessels of the Rowhedge Ironworks and the last working yard at Brightlingsea which closed in 1989.

5000 ships were built along the river in this 200 year period. Colne shipbuilders pioneered new designs to produce racing yachts for the rich to iron plated dredgers for the Sudan and motor torpedo boats for the Royal Navy in World War 2.

Philip Sainty in Colchester built fast fishing smacks some of which were used for local smuggling.To square the account Sainty also built cutters for HM Customs. Sainty was in prison for smuggling himself when the Marquis of Anglesea ,Wellington’s second in command, bought him out of Chelmsford Goal in order for Sainty to build the ‘Emerald ‘ in 1819 so the Marquis could join the new sport of yachting.

Rowhedge relied on building fishing smacks from the early 19th century as did all the Cone shipyards, including those used for oyster dredging (one ,“The Pioneer”, was relaunched in 2003).In 1904 the Rowhedge Ironworks was formed and up to the 1950’s was building paddle steamers for the Sudanese government which were shipped out in numbered pieces for assembly on the Nile. In 1943 the Rowhedge Ironworks bought the Wivenhoe shipyards (then derelict) to build minesweepers and fishing vessels. Post war the Rowhedge yard built tankers, barges and tugs ranging down to dingys and passenger vessels. The Rowhedge yard closed in 1965.

Wivenhoe (under Forrest & Sons management from 1888 to 1903) had the only dry dock between Lowestoft and London.The yard as a speciality built vessels for export; some paddle steamers and barges were sent in sacks and crates as numbered pieces for assembly overseas supervised by Wivenhoe employees. After the Depression the yard was reopened in November 1939 by government decree as a subsidiary of Rowhedge Ironworks.The main output was small fishing boats and wooden minesweepers to deal with magnetic mines. After a large barge was built in 1986 by the Cook company small dingys and yachts were produced by the Colne Marine and Yacht Co which ended shipbuilding at Wivenhoe in 1999.

Brightlingsea is a limb of the Cinque Port of Sandwich and had a dry dock existing in the 1560’s. The arrival of rail in 1866 gave the local fishermen access to the London markets and expanded the fishing fleet for oysters and fish (particularly sprats) which at its peak numbered around 200 vessels. By 1864 the Aldous yard was the largest shipbuilder in the town. In 1941 660 workers were employed building landing craft, motor torpedo boats, harbour launches, refuellers and airborne lifeboats for the RAF. From 1945 small tugs and ferries were built mainly for West and East Africa, India and Ceylon. The yard as James and Stone closed in 1989.

The era of large scale shipbuilders on the Colne is at an end.Traditional boat building classes are given at the Nottage Institute in Wivenhoe and recreational boat builders remain at Brightlingsea and Colchester Hythe.

“River Colne Shipbuilders” is a model of what a local maritime history should be. The illustrations are both prolific and evocative, the recorded memories of former workers relive the labour and methods of past shipbuilding. The authors have held up a mirror to the past which reflects their own dedication.

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Reference

Maritime Times of Tasmania 2010 Autumn(31) 16,17.