

## XII

### NEWCASTLE'S LAST MAYORAL BARGE

*Adrian Osler*

Since today the word *barge* commonly brings to mind a workaday vessel of box-like proportions, it is necessary to indicate that to mariners of the late eighteenth century it primarily meant a vessel of quite different form and function, "... a vessel or boat of state, furnished with elegant apartments, canopies, and cushions; equipped with a band of rowers, and decorated with flags and streamers: they are generally used for processions on the water, by noblemen, officers of state, or magistrates of great cities. There are likewise other barges of smaller kind, for the use of admirals and captains of ships of war . . .".<sup>1</sup> It was to this former type, the processional barge, that the last Newcastle Mayor's barge (1834–1901) and its predecessors belonged, their chief function being to carry the Mayor, Assize Judge and River Jury on their formal, annual circuit of the river on Ascension Day to proclaim Newcastle's "traditional" rights over the navigation; a ceremony well described in various eighteenth century accounts and apparently dating from medieval times.

The date of construction of the first purpose-built Mayoral barge has not yet been traced, but it may have been in the mid-seventeenth century. An account of 1611 reputedly recorded, "£1-12s-6d. for wherry hire on behalf of Mr. Maior, Aldermen and others to Hedwyne Stremes to view and sett the town's bounders.", whilst Trinity House's river trip for Charles the First in 1633 also apparently involved hired craft, but by 1676 the Chief Justice's entertainment included a river trip specifically by "town barge".<sup>2</sup> In fact, although the Lord Mayor of London's annual water procession had been instituted as early as 1453, it was only in the seventeenth century that the City Livery Companies themselves commenced constructing permanent barges, these being used for instance in the waterborne extravaganza celebrating Charles the Second's marriage in 1662.<sup>3</sup> So, as in other maritime and social affairs, Newcastle may simply have begun emulating London, albeit on a lesser scale. The nature of Newcastle's early barges is open to conjecture but they may have been similar to smaller State barges such as the surviving *Queen Mary's Shallop*, 1689,<sup>4</sup> a view borne out by the rather indistinct representation in Buck's engraving, 1743, which shows a relatively small, perhaps six to eight-oared, barge with a pillar-supported canopy. However, as on the Thames, by the early nineteenth century Newcastle's Mayoral, River Jury and Trinity House barges had become larger, rowing ten to twelve oars and bearing solidly built cabins on wherry-type hulls. These are the craft portrayed by J. W. Carmichael (1799–1868) in his paintings: *The Mayor's Barge on the Tyne*, c. 1826–30;<sup>5</sup> *Ascension Day*, 1829;<sup>6</sup> and *Barge-Day Morning*, 1828.<sup>7</sup> Considering Carmichael's acknowledged nautical accuracy and the *Newcastle*

*Courant's* grudging admission that in this last, "... the barges are well drawn and painted ..." these seem likely to remain the best evidence as to the nature of the 1834 Mayoral barge's immediate predecessors.

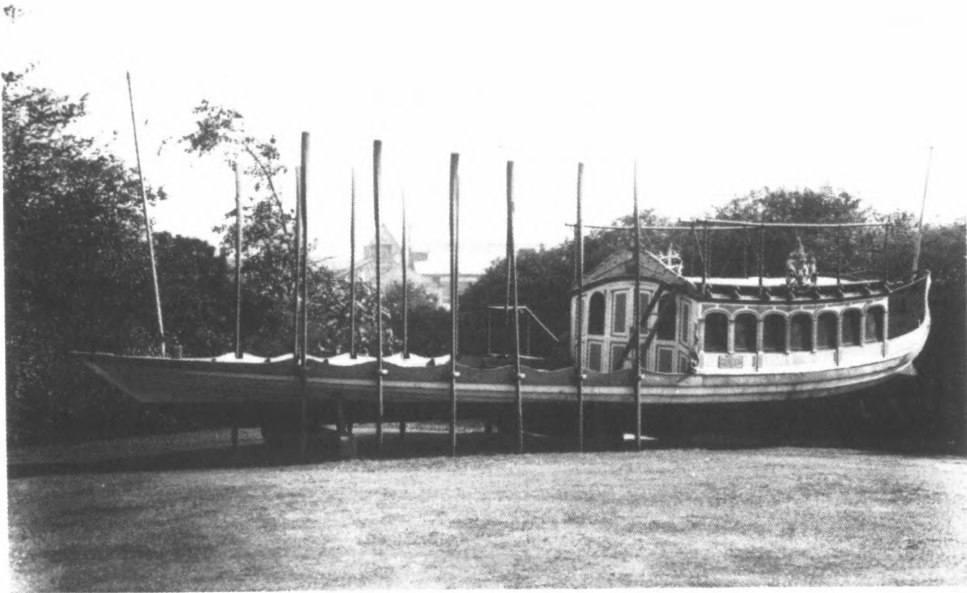
Indeed, comparison of Carmichael's pre-1834 Mayoral barge with F. Gerald Simpson's photograph of its 1834-built counterpart reveals strong continuity, their hull-shapes originally derived from the clinker-built, passenger wherries of the Thames—and Tyne—with their raking stems, hollow bow lines with much flare, and broad rounded sterns of full section. These features made for ease of rowing, dryness, good load-carrying and simplicity of access. Processional barges were essentially specialized developments of the type, though much lengthened to row an average of nine oars each side (six in the case of the relatively small Newcastle Barge, 1834), and having sufficient beam and flat "floors" astern to support a large cabin and its occupants. Right aft the planking swept fluently up to a high, slightly raked sternpost or tiny transom, beyond which the top strakes (planks) were continued to form a "lute" stern, usually bearing a coat of arms; it was this impressive stern-view which Carmichael favoured. Indeed, pictorial evidence suggests that the 1834 barge's immediate predecessor carried finer carved scroll work on its after sheer than its successor. In form the 1834 barge closely resembled London's last City Barge of 1807,<sup>8</sup> but was shorter at 51 ft. 6 ins. as against 80 ft., though proportionately broader with a beam to length ratio of 1:4.8 compared to 1:6 (fast pleasure barges averaged 1:7).<sup>9</sup> Though similar in oarpower the Newcastle barge had a cabin only half the length of its metropolitan counterpart's twenty-nine feet.

Significantly perhaps the new barge was launched in the year before the passing of the Municipal Reform Act. Ironically, in view of its association with Newcastle's former hegemony over the Tyne, it was built in South Shields at the well-established boatyard of John Oliver and Son (Shadwell St.) for a basic cost of one hundred and ninety pounds.<sup>10</sup> Launched on Tuesday, 6th May, 1834 it was immediately taken upriver for that Thursday's Ascension Day event and, although described by the *Newcastle Courant* as, "an elegant new barge ... splendidly ornamented", it may have been something of a rush job since further payments were made in the following year to: "John Oliver and Son, for carving and gilding new barge, £5-0-0; Messrs. Taylor for painting Corporation arms on ditto, £5-2-0; M. Spence and Son, caps and trousers for bargemen, £16-19-8". Though incidental annual expenses in keeping the barge were low: rent for barge house, £0-10-6; poor rate and highway cess for barge house, £2-17-2d; man "to attend" barge, £2-0-0,<sup>11</sup> it is interesting to note that the expenses (chiefly for refreshments) associated with periodic River Jury Survey Dinners and the Ascension Day procession itself could reach over a hundred pounds each year. To put the new barge's capital cost in perspective it could be considered equivalent to one-tenth that of a new river dredger, one-third that of a well equipped deep-sea fishing boat, or eight complete fishing cibles of the period.

The barge's long active career, 1834–1901, in many ways reflected the changing relationship between the City and the river in the nineteenth century. Despite a short hiatus, following an Ascension Day altercation between the Mayor and Chief Justice,<sup>12</sup> the river processions of the early nineteenth century were popular public spectacles with, for example, that of 1827 an "especially fine show" although

accompanied by two fatalities caused by celebratory guns bursting. In the following year intimation was given that, "in consequent of the frequent accidents . . . the accustomed waste of gunpowder . . . (should) be considered as more honoured in the breach than the observance", but by the time of the new barge's first year, 1834, the, "roaring of cannon and ringing of bells" had returned and the barges were accompanied by, "several steam boats, a large number of small boats, and a keel handsomely fitted up for the occasion with twenty four oars . . .".<sup>13</sup> Even a decade later a London correspondent noted that in comparison with its London equivalent because of, "(the) smallness of the town, and the greater proportion of the inhabitants having some connection with naval affairs, the interest (in Barge Day) is more universal".<sup>14</sup>

Though this scene of 1844 was still visually dominated by Newcastle's three major barges it had also become a day on which to parade political and locality loyalties afloat. In fact, within five years, it was the successful pursuit of local interests by the riparian boroughs, culminating in the passing of the Tyne Improvement Act in 1850, which marked the beginning of the end for "Barge Day". From 1851 onwards it became only a quinquennial event and the Tyne Improvement Commissioners instituted a separate septennial survey on the anniversary of the Bill's royal assent, 15 July; this included their own proclamation of rights, powers and jurisdiction at the river mouth. The "perambulation" of 1878 seems to have marked the apogee of this celebration, being, "attended with much festive demonstration on both banks of the river . . . at no former survey was the processional spectacle so large or the enthusiasm of the public so great". A dozen tugs carried the parties of the riverside Mayors and members of their corporations together with other groups, whilst the two barges—now described as "the Commissioner's barges"—were also towed by tugs.<sup>15</sup> The Commissioner's annual "River Views" (above-bridges) were also carried out by barge until the early 1880s, but in later years steamboats, the harbour master's small boats and even the riverside railway were employed. Even for Newcastle's own, "survey of the water boundary" in 1886 the Mayor borrowed a Commissioner's tug, the *J. C. Stevenson* (1883), which could be fitted with a large deckhouse saloon for such occasions. Attitudes though were definitely changing. As early as 1877 a Commissioner had questioned their own obligations to the septennial survey, but it proceeded on the view that, "they neither gained or lost any rights (thereby)", and, "It is a good old conservative custom to visit your property once in seven years".<sup>16</sup> However, subsequent recommendations for the event contained the proviso that, "no public demonstration be made". Despite technological and organizational changes the barges continued to appear, as evidenced by Ralph Hedley's (1848–1913) definitive sketch and painting of the Mayor and corporation's embarkation on "Barge Day" 1891.<sup>17</sup> However, only two surveys later, in 1901 with John Beattie as Mayor, the 1834 barge fulfilled what proved to be its last Ascension Day function. By 1903 it was reported from the Commissioner's Howdon Yard that one barge was beyond repair, and the other, "might be repaired to last a few years at a cost of about £100", but the City's Finance Committee decided that they could not be repaired or replaced. Even their ownership—whether by the City or the Tyne Improvement Commission—was now in doubt, but since Wm. H. Stephenson was then both Mayor and Chairman of



The Newcastle Barge at Elswick House.  
*Photograph: F. Gerald Simpson, 1905.*

the Commission this posed little problem, especially when it was further recommended that the Mayoral Barge be presented, “to the Mayor as a memento of what had been”<sup>18, 19</sup>

Except for a massive longitudinal backbone of keel and keelson such barges were extremely lightly-built, with an average lifespan of some thirty years, so this barge’s survival was already quite unusual. But a photograph of it lifted out at Newcastle Quay reveals marked “hogging” (sagging fore and aft) of the keel, suggesting considerable structural problems. In April of 1903, having been towed upriver, it was transferred to the grounds of Wm. H. Stephenson’s residence, Elswick House.

Here, F. Gerald Simpson’s photograph, *c.* 1905, gives a fine impression of its form and layout with its fifteen-foot, spoon-bladed oars clamped in “tossed” position alongside. Noticeable features, forward to aft are: the towing bitt in the bow; wherry-type rowlocks cut in the sheerstrake; the carved and gilded cabin pediment representing the mace, sword and crown with the city’s helm above (the city arms displayed above the cabin sides may have been transferred from its stern and, or, the River Jury Barge); the railed viewing platform on the cabin top (*cf.* Hedley’s painting); a pair of fine dolphin “hancing pieces” at the cabin’s forward corners; the up-raised “lute” stern with broad, shallow-water rudder and cranked iron tiller for the steersman. Unfortunately the cabin side’s decorative, painted detail had already been overpainted, as had the gold listing (stripe) on the red sheerstrake, but the cabin front’s red, white and blue panelling appears unaltered. Sadly, the barge’s condition deteriorated rapidly during the First World War and soon afterwards, when Elswick House became a National Children’s Home, it was broken up on grounds of

safety.<sup>20, 21</sup> Today the only known surviving fragments are the two flagstaffs now in the collections of Tyne and Wear Museum Service, whilst the provenance of a recently re-discovered naive carving, reputedly from a Mayoral Barge, continues to be investigated.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Falconer, W., *An Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (1789).

<sup>2</sup> *Tyne Improvement Commission Centenary 1850–1950* (1950), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Norton, P., *State Barges* (1972), 2–5.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., 13–14.

<sup>5</sup> Tyne and Wear Museums Service, Laing Art Gallery collections, TWCMS:B6661.

<sup>6</sup> The Bowes Museum, on loan.

<sup>7</sup> Private Collection, Exh: Newcastle Academy 1828 (30), Laing Art Gallery 1984 (5).

<sup>8</sup> Norton, P., op. cit., 23.

<sup>9</sup> of Chapman, F., *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria* (1768), pl. XLVI, (2), pl. XLVII (3–7), pl. XLIX (2).

<sup>10</sup> *An abstract of the Chamberlain's Accounts of Newcastle upon Tyne* (1833–34), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. (1834–35), 18 et. seq.

<sup>12</sup> Sykes, J., *Local Records*, Vol. 1 (1833), 146.

<sup>13</sup> *Newcastle Courant*: 17 May, 1828, 10 May, 1834.

<sup>14</sup> *The Illustrated London News* (1844), 341.

<sup>15</sup> *Proceedings of the Tyne Improvement Commission* (1877–78), 128.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., 117.

<sup>17</sup> Tyne and Wear Museums Service, Laing Art Gallery collections, TWCMS C10612, Museum of Science and Engineering collections 2014.

<sup>18</sup> *Proceedings of the Newcastle Council* (1903), 155–6.

<sup>19</sup> *Tyne Improvement Commissioners Annual Report* (1902–3), 257.

<sup>20</sup> Selman, B. J., in *Civic News* (May 1969), 4.

<sup>21</sup> *The Lord Mayor's Barge 1834–1901* (1903), [note—issued from office of the Lord Mayor's secretary].

<sup>22</sup> Tyne and Wear Museums Service, Museum of Science and Engineering collections, TWCMS J5024.

*The writing of this article was prompted by the donation to the Society by Dr. Grace Simpson F.S.A. of two photographs of the Mayoral Barge taken by her father, our former Vice-President, in 1905.*

