

## The Thatched House by the Yare



John Fox was a wherryman. He and his father and his grandfather all worked with those stately boats which, for more than a hundred years, had been the main cargo craft of Norfolk's rivers and broads.

By John's time, the wherries were motorised and perhaps less stately, the black sails having long been discarded firstly to compete with the railways which had nevertheless already taken much of their business but also to manage the menial tasks to which they had been relegated, like the removal of dredging spoil.

John worked for the engineering firm, May Gurney, which still does dredging work on the Broads. His father and grandfather had each been foreman at the boat yard of James Hobrough & Sons on the River Yare before May Gurney took over that firm. But John spent much of his time on the river, working with wherries such as the Maud which, like many of the old wooden boats at the end of their days, was eventually sunk to form river bank reinforcement. The Maud, as it happens, was subsequently raised and after 18 years undergoing refurbishment was reintroduced to the Broads in 1999 in its former sail powered glory, making a total of seven wherries of various types now sailing those waterways..

John would have liked to have seen the rebirth of the Maud. He had spent many a long day with her, standing in the stern at the tiller without cover in all weathers, chugging slowly down the Yare to Yarmouth or going up the Bure or even threading up its tributaries into the broads of that northern system.

For John was a man of the river in every sense. He was born - and lived his life - in a cottage next to the boatyard at Thorpe St Andrew on the eastern edge of Norwich. The timber building began as a small thatched Victorian summer house built in 1861 by James Hobrough. It had just one ground floor room with a fine Victorian fireplace, a small rear hallway and a loft room reached by a ladder. When John's grandfather, William, became boatyard foreman, he moved into the summer house which then gained a sitting room at the rear. When John's father in turn became foreman and took over the house, another bedroom, a kitchen and a long verandah were added. John was born there in 1930.

It was a pleasant place to live, on the north bank of the Yare. It still is a secluded and leafy spot, essentially unchanged for a hundred years, some distance from the road and approached by a private track which serves May Gurney's yard. John's sister, Mrs Joyce Mace, lived there herself for over 20 years until she married.

'The old summer house was still thatched in those days and it was then the thatch deteriorated and was replaced by wood and coal went on, it flooded more often.'

Ah yes, the flooding. It had not been a factor in the early years, summer house where they did. But over time, a river's profile changed which ultimately drove John out. After Joyce left, he lived there years ago, he stayed on alone. But the flooding just got worse, says Joyce.

'It got to the stage where water would come right through the house two or three times each winter. When the north-west wind pushed the tide down the North Sea, it would come up into the rivers and the river water couldn't get away and



would just bank up and spread out. John would have to come and stay with us for two or three weeks at a time. We would watch the weather forecast and know when it was going to happen and I would speak to him on the phone and then get a bed ready for him. And then when the water had gone, he would have such a mess to go back to.'

In 1998, long retired, John gave up the struggle with the river and bought a mobile home nearby. But just six months later he died.

And then, as the house began to deteriorate, a decision was needed on its future. As one of the few remaining mid-Victorian summer houses, it had become something of a river landmark. The later extensions were of no particular merit but the summer house itself had gained a Grade II listing in 1991 as being of special architectural or historic interest which prevented its demolition despite its poor condition.

So the decision was made to move it to a slightly higher site 400 metres upstream. With planning permission from the Broads Authority, May Gurney embarked on a six month project to move it in sections and at the same time carry out an extensive refurbishment. Company craftsmen repaired the dilapidated wooden arched windows and the ornate Victorian fireplace and rebuilt the chimney using appropriate reclaimed materials. The timber walls were repainted in their original green and then, to cap it off, the roof was re-thatched in Norfolk reed, completing the return to its original condition. .

Now, it once again adorns the riverbank in full view of passing pleasure craft as it has for nearly 140 years, and although it still stands on May Gurney land with no public footpath or other public access, John's erstwhile colleagues will place a small commemorative plaque to him on the front of the building. There are no immediate plans for its use but the Broads Authority's navigation section which has a boat shed close by, hopes to use it as storage or for some other river-related purpose. But more importantly, it will now remain as a slice of local history and as a memorial to a man who is very much part of that history.

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