

THE CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH!

Pageantry on the River Thames

On 8th January 1806 the River Thames witnessed one of the most amazing spectacles in its long and fascinating history – the funeral river procession of Admiral Lord Nelson. The boat that carried his body had originally been built for Charles II in an age when river pageants were very much the fashion. It is now exhibited at the National Museum of the Royal Navy at Portsmouth and, in spite of being the oldest royal barge to survive, it is in excellent condition. The barge, or more correctly shallop, is 35 ft. long with a 6ft 1 in. beam. For Nelson's funeral its bright red and green paintwork and gilded carvings at bow and stern were draped with black velvet and the coffin was covered by a large and ornate canopy with black ostrich plumes tremulous at each corner. The crew was suitably clothed in mourning and in a strong south westerly they rowed their precious charge from Greenwich to Whitehall. The procession was probably the largest ever to take place on the Thames, with 17 barges and 55 boats in the official procession, including the barges of the Lord Mayor of London and eight City Livery Companies. The Drapers' barge led the other seven Livery Company barges since Nelson had been an honorary freeman of the Drapers' Company. The Company records state that the crew were, "dressed in mourning scarfs, with the Company's staffs covered with Black Crape and each of the Watermen had a black armband."

William Watson at St Katherine's Dock, wrote that "thousands of boats covered the water" filled with yet more spectators". The rest of the throng were "clinging like Bees upon the rigging" of nearby ships and every window was crammed with people eager to get a view.

A little over two hundred years later, on 3rd June 2012, another spectacle took place on the River Thames, this time to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of HM The Queen. Once again, there were a thousand boats on the river and the 1.5 million spectators who turned out in spite of the dismal weather were just as eager to get a view of the procession of boats as their ancestors two hundred years earlier.

Leading the Pageant was the magnificent Queen's Rowbarge *Gloriana*, built especially for the occasion. She led the flotilla of over 260 manpowered boats and together they stole the show, even creating 'the Canaletto moment', which echoed his wonderful picture, *The Thames on Lord Mayor's Day Looking Towards the City and St Paul's Cathedral*, now on loan from the Lobkowicz Collection, Czech Republic to the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich as part of its *Royal River: Pageantry & the Thames* exhibition.

The Queen's Rowbarge was constructed by Mark Edwards of Richmond, one of the few remaining traditional boat builders in the UK, who led a team of young and enthusiastic craftsmen from around Britain. The 92 ft. long vessel is furnished using traditional British woods and is rowed by 18 oarsmen. It flies Royal and City Standards at the appropriate times, and carries 16 crests representing the Realms of the Commonwealth. Turn to 'Aqua Triumphalis' for an insight into the history of state barges on the Thames and the lasting legacy of the Queen's Rowbarge.

However, QRB *Gloriana* was not built for the Pageant alone. She is the lasting legacy of the Diamond Jubilee. She forms a tangible link between Britain's status as a seafaring nation and maritime London. The River Thames, the rowbarge's home water, played a defining role in world trade which remains the essence of a city which is still the hub for the world's leading maritime organisations.

Given the very poor coverage of the event by the BBC, this legacy bears an additional responsibility, because *Gloriana* reminds us that the river and the sea are a fundamental part of our story, present and future. Sadly the BBC's coverage revealed the ignorance of the 'middle generation' and highlighted clearly how the education system has failed to furnish people with the basics of British maritime history. The lack of knowledge demonstrated over the heroism of the Dunkirk Little Ships was a vivid example, as was the comment that Lord Nelson was at the Battle of Waterloo! Furthermore, there were no cameras covering the Parade of Sail. Nothing was shown of *Amazon*, the remarkable screw schooner which attended the Spithead Review celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, or indeed any of the other stunning large vessels lining the river, such as *Kathleen & May*, the last surviving sailing topsail schooner from the thousands which once traded the UK coasts, the Thames barge *Edith May*, which is National Historic Ships UK Flagship for 2012; the superb French 3-masted ship *Belem*, or the stunning replica medieval ship *Matthew*. The idea that Britain is essentially still a maritime nation would appear to have been lost. It would seem that it is no longer part of the common psyche.

The 1805 Club may not be a ship or boat, but in the words of our President, Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, we are 'part of the naval heritage family'. Therefore, the link with the River Thames, Nelson and the conservation of graves and memorials of the Georgian sailing era ties us closely to this regrettable phenomenon. As we celebrate this Diamond Jubilee year we recognize the scale of the task ahead of us, and the importance of our Wooden Walls educational programme featured in the last issue of the *Kedge Anchor* is brought into even sharper focus. The challenge is huge and we hope that other organizations will join us and rally to this essential cause.

With all good wishes,

Peter Warwick