

Thames Match Report 2015

After a break in 2014, the 84th Thames Sailing Barge Match was held on Saturday 22 August 2015, later in the year than usual in order to have a suitable time of tide. A fine clear morning began with a light air from the north just giving steerage way for the barges assembled in the Lower Hope for the start.

The Coasting class was first away at 0730 with a difficult down-tide start as the ebb gathered strength. With no chance of being able to re-cross the line *Lady Daphne* made a brave attempt at a fast start but was over about a minute early and took a time penalty. The other barges were more cautious and kept to the Kent shore in order to avoid being set into Mucking Bight. The first valid start was made by *Lady of the Lea* four minutes after the gun followed by *Centaur* with the engineless *Cambria* crossing much later having struggled to get down from Denton in the light wind. The Champion Staysail class at 0745 was led by *Reminder* followed by *Edith May*, *Niagara* and *Repertor*. There were only two entries in the Champion Bowsprit class: *Adieu* made the fastest start of the day 3 minutes after the gun with *Marjorie* completing the fleet.

By 0900 the northerly air had given way to a light but sufficient breeze from the east and the barges turned slowly and steadily down Sea Reach past the Thames Gateway container port and Canvey Island. It was clear that the course would have to be shortened and Sea Reach 3 North buoy (the former South East Leigh) was chosen.

Reminder was first around the mark at 1050 after three hours sailing. She rounded smartly and set a large yacht spinnaker for the downwind leg, first crossing to the Kent shore to avoid the last of the ebb. *Edith May* followed 7 minutes later and then a tense moment as *Niagara* cut inside *Lady Daphne* which was leading the Coasters around the mark approaching from the opposite tack. *Niagara* also set a large running sail although of a more traditional cut than *Reminder's* and chased after *Reminder* toward Kent. *Lady of the Lea* rounded at 1105 sailing nicely and with *Lady Daphne* chose to keep to the Essex side. At this point the deep-draught vessel *Ortviken* passed up the channel through the Sea Reach 3 gateway judging her speed carefully to minimise disturbance to the barge fleet. *Repertor* and *Adieu* ducked under her stern and were followed round the mark by *Marjorie* and *Cambria* with *Centaur* rounding last just as the ebb had finished.

Running back up the river the barges set every stitch of canvas they could muster with *Edith May* making particularly effective use of an additional staysail set off the end of the sprit outside the mainsail. Their measured progress was interrupted by a sudden shift of the wind into the south gybing the whole fleet, increasing to about force 4 and giving some problems with stowing the large light weather headsails. The barges surged ahead on perhaps their fastest point of sailing with the sheets eased in a good breeze. The committee vessel *X-Pilot* struggled to keep up and when the barges proved able to fetch up through the Lower Hope without tacking it was clear that we would not catch the leaders in time for the Gravesend finish. Fortunately the Chairman's party on a faster vessel did make it and witnessed one of the closest finishes ever seen in the history of the Match with *Niagara* catching *Reminder* in Gravesend Reach and racing side by side for the line,

with *Niagara* crossing about a boathook-length ahead to win the Champion Staysail class in a time of 6hr 5min 42sec for the thirty mile course. *Adieu* was close astern of these two but having started fifteen minutes behind them with the bowsprit class, recorded the fastest time of the day of 5hr 50min 48sec and winning the pennant as Thames Champion 2015. *Lady Daphne* was the first of the Coasters to finish having sailed a fast race, but carrying a time penalty for her false start conceded first place to *Lady of the Lea*. *Cambria* came third having caught up some time on her slow start and *Centaur* brought up the rear at 1524 after nearly eight hours sailing.

After supper at the Three Daws the prizes were presented by David Phillips the PLA Chief Harbourmaster whose team had been instrumental in supporting the event. His judgement of the best rounding of the outer mark awarded the Majestic Rose Bowl to Robert Deards of *Niagara*, while the LRTC cup for seamanship throughout the match went to Geoff Grandsen of *Edith May*. The Mainsheetman trophy was awarded to Ray Payne of *Reminder*, the Tony Ellis Trophy for outstanding crew contribution to Steve Burgess of *Marjorie* and the Gill Yule Trophy for aspiring youngsters to Peter and Jack Devonshire also of *Marjorie*. The Gold Belt Trophy for achievement was awarded to the crew of *Reminder* for an exceptionally competitive performance in the match.

So ended a thoroughly enjoyable day for both crews and spectators. The success of the match is only possible because of the generosity of those who financially support and those who give their time to the organisation of the match. Many are themselves barge owners and crews. We owe them a debt of gratitude for the continuance of this historic event.

Julian Cass
Officer of the Day, 2015