

A large sailing barge with dark red sails is shown on the water. The barge is positioned on the left side of the frame, with its sails fully deployed. The water is dark and choppy. In the background, a distant shoreline with buildings is visible under a cloudy sky.

THAMES SAILING BARGE MATCH

Saturday, 18th July 2026

MATCH PROGRAMME

94th Thames Sailing Barge Match
DONATIONS WELCOME

ON BARGES GENERALLY

From *Sailing Barges* by Frank G G Carr, 1989 edition, first published 1931

It has ever been the character of man to appreciate least those things which are most familiar to him, and perhaps that is why for so many years the humble Thames barge, one of the commonest sights on the London River, plied her trade unhonoured and unsung. Indeed, to the average Londoner the word "barge" probably conjures up little more than a picture of an enlarged and somewhat ugly floating box found in docks and inland waterways; nor was the word "bargee" often used in terms of admiration. Yet actually the sailing barge is one of the most interesting, as well as wonderful, craft the skill of man has ever produced, and until the age of commercial sail came to an end with the advance of the age of power, the Thames barge, alone almost among sailing craft engaged in trade, continued to hold on to something of her own. If honour is to be given where honour is due, the Thames barge should have her share...

The race of men who manned her were among the finest real seamen left in the world, and in handling small craft the bargeman knew no superior. The better type of barge skipper was often a man of considerable education and taste, with a genuine love for his profession. The magnificent handling of the barges in the annual sailing matches, when speeds of over twelve knots were sometimes reached, was a thing to admire and to wonder at.

THAMES SAILING BARGE MATCH 2026

Entries

BARGE	BUILT	YEAR	REG TONS	START	MARK	FINISH
COASTING CLASS - Start 07.30 hrs						
Cambria	Greenhithe	1906	76			
Gladys	Harwich	1901	68			
Lady Daphne	Rochester	1923	85			
Pudge	Rochester	1922	70			
Thalatta	Harwich	1906	67			
CHAMPION STAYSAIL CLASS – Start 07.45 hrs						
Niagara	Wivenhoe	1898	79			
CHAMPION BOWSPRIT CLASS – Start 08.00 hrs						
Blue Mermaid	Polruan	2019	83			
Edith May	Harwich	1906	50			
Marjorie	Ipswich	1902	56			

THAMES SAILING BARGE MATCH 2026 PROGRAMME

This year's Match will be held on Saturday, 18th July 2026 and will be sailed from the Lower Hope to the North Oaze Buoy, returning to finish at Gravesend.

Friday, 17th July

Briefing for Masters and Mainsheetmen at 19.30 at
The Three Daws public house, Gravesend.

Please return all cups that were won in 2025 at the briefing.

Saturday, 18th July

The three classes will start at the following times, with a ten minute and five minute horn and flag before each start:

COASTING CLASS

START 07.30

CHAMPION STAYSAIL CLASS

START 07.45

CHAMPION BOWSPRIT CLASS

START 08.00

COURSE (Weather permitting)

The race starts in Lower Hope Reach (off Stanford-le-Hope in Essex, about four miles down river from Gravesend) and runs down river past Southend-on-Sea to the North Oaze Buoy before returning to finish at Gravesend – a total distance of 43 nautical miles.

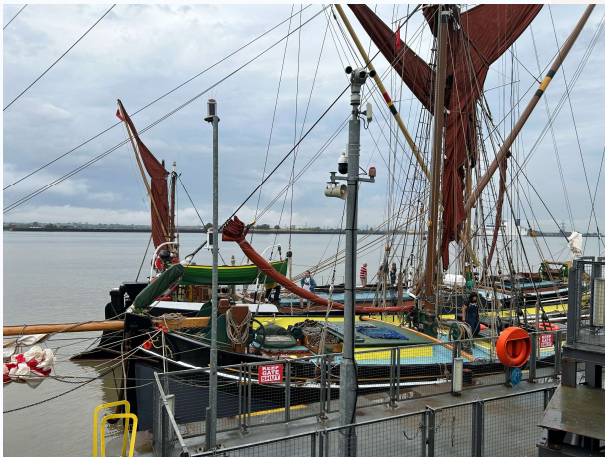
The finish line is from St Andrews Gardens, next to the Three Daws public house in Gravesend.

PRIZE GIVING AND SUPPER

The supper will be held in the Three Daws. Food will be served from 19.00.
The Prize Giving will commence at 20.00.

Thames Match Report 2025

The 93rd Thames Sailing Barge Match took place on Saturday, 19th July. Following a month of hot sunny weather, the Saturday morning dawned in heavy rain with a leaden sky and no wind. This year's entry for the Match was, like the Medway Match a month earlier, much reduced with only five barges coming to the start. An inconvenient tide time led to quite a late start this year with a long wait for the flood to help the barges home. By the time of the first start at 0930 the rain had eased off to occasional showers and a very light and variable breeze was just enough to give the barges steerage way. We were pleased to have the use of *X-Pilot* again this year as committee boat, skippered by Alan Harmer.



By 0930 with the light wind and the ebb now running quite strongly the committee was expecting to see some cautious starts in the Coasting class. To our surprise we saw *Gladys* and *Pudge* close racing for the line at what in these conditions amounted to full speed. *Gladys* crossed only 22 seconds after the gun with *Pudge* close astern, a creditable barge match performance under any conditions. As the only entrant for the Staysail class, *Niagara* did not have to take any chances and started five minutes after her gun, sailing full in the light breeze prevailing. For the Bowsprit class start at 1000 *Marjorie* came

sweeping down with everything pulling well, but misjudging the distance, crossed nearly three minutes early. Despite valiant efforts she was unable to get back against the tide and ended up starting with a time penalty. The engineless *Blue Mermaid* had remained at anchor well above the line until the five-minute gun went but then managed to get the anchor, set the sails and turn around to cross at only 1004.

All the barges had sensibly kept to the Kent shore to avoid being set toward the Thames Gateway berths and for a while found that they could fetch down the start of Sea Reach in a light northerly. *Gladys* had pulled further ahead of *Pudge* while *Niagara* was coming up fast and eventually passed both of them. However, after a while the wind became lighter and came more from the east so the barges had to turn their way downstream being mainly carried by the tide.



With the leaders off the Chapman at 1100 it was clear that the course would have to be substantially shortened if the barges were to get back at a sensible time. The Mid Swatch buoy was a convenient choice for the turning mark.

First to tack around the buoy was *Niagara* at 1152, followed by a little excitement as *Gladys* and *Blue Mermaid* approached the buoy simultaneously from different directions. At 1210 both barges were on the port tack with *Gladys* to windward being allowed room at the mark by *Blue Mermaid*. Although *Gladys* had the shorter path, *Blue Mermaid's* extra speed and smooth turn brought her out fractionally ahead for the return leg. *Pudge* rounded only three minutes later, having held up well, and *Marjorie* brought up the rear at 1226 with a graceful and smoothly executed tack close to the buoy.



A fair wind back up the river looked to make for an easy return leg but the remaining ebb tide slowed the fleet down. *Marjorie* with her big headsails overtook the two coasters while *Blue Mermaid* chased after *Niagara*. But then the fickle wind which had worked its way right round the compass swung to a westerly direction and the barges had to start tacking all over again. The wind remained against them for the rest of the match and although the tide eventually started to flood it was not until

1637 that *Niagara* was the first home to Gravesend. We waited with interest to see whether *Blue Mermaid* coming up behind her would finish within *Niagara's* fifteen minute head-start to be the fastest time around the course, but the wind was failing and she missed it by about half a minute over a race of nearly seven hours, leaving *Niagara* to take the pennant as Champion of the Thames.



Marjorie, who had done well to close the gap with *Blue Mermaid*, finished at 1700 at which point the race was halted with *Gladys* and *Pudge* still in the Lower Hope and almost no wind. *Gladys* was still ahead at that time to win the Coasting class although *Pudge* was hard on her heels despite having one less sail.



The prizegiving was held at the Three Daws with the prizes being presented by Sian Foster of the PLA, who had spent the day afloat with the Committee.



First place in the Bowsprit class winning the FT Everard Cup was *Blue Mermaid*, master Richard Titchener. Second place, the Allied Mills Cup to *Marjorie*, Simon Devonshire. Thames Champion and first in the Staysail Class winning the Shipowners Mutual Cup was *Niagara*, master "Noddy" Cardy. *Gladys*, master Gary Diddams, was first in the Coasting class winning the Greene King Cup with second place going to *Pudge*, master "Shiner" Wright.

Gladys, master Gary Diddams, was first in the Coasting class winning the Greene King Cup with second place going to *Pudge*, master "Shiner" Wright. Gary Diddams of *Gladys* had made the fastest start of the day, the seamanship prize went to Richard Titchener of *Blue Mermaid* while Simon Devonshire of *Marjorie* was judged to have made the best rounding of the turning mark.



The Mainsheetman trophy was given to Tony de Winton of *Pudge* for his support for a newly qualified skipper. The Crew award went to Richard Atherton of *Blue Mermaid* for his bowsprit and foredeck work. Freddie Diddams of *Gladys* took the Gill Yule trophy for promising young bargeman. The Gold Belt trophy for achievement was given to *Pudge* in recognition of her competitive performance in unhelpful conditions.

Thanks were expressed to Sian Foster for presenting the prizes, to Jamie Gilbert of the PLA for his assistance in facilitating the Match and to Alan and Martin Harmer for the use of *X-Pilot* as our committee boat.

I would also like to add my thanks to Bridget my wife for acting as timekeeper this year and for her unfailing help and support with the running of the Match.

Next year's Match is due to be sailed on Saturday 18 July 2026. We hope to see you (and your barges) there.

Julian Cass, Officer of the Day 2025



THAMES SAILING BARGE MATCH 2025 RESULTS

COASTING CLASS

1. Gladys
2. Pudge

CHAMPION STAYSAIL CLASS

1. Niagara

CHAMPION BOWSPRIT CLASS

1. Blue Mermaid
2. Marjorie

TROPHIES AWARDED CHAMPION BOWSPRIT

First Barge Home: BLUE MERMAID FT Everard Cup

Second Place: MARJORIE Allied Mills Cup

First to outer mark (Master): BLUE MERMAID Fishmongers' Cup

Master of Winning Barge: Richard Titchener, BLUE MERMAID
Hervey Benham Trophy

CHAMPION STAYSAIL

First Barge Home: NIAGARA Shipowners' Mutual Cup

First to outer mark (Master): 'Noddy' Cardy, NIAGARA

Watermen's Company Shield

Master of Winning Barge: 'Noddy' Cardy, NIAGARA John Kemp Cup

COASTING CLASS

First Barge Home: GLADYS Greene King Cup

Second Place: PUDGE Blue Circle Cup

First to outer mark (Master): Gary Diddams, GLADYS PLA Cup

Master of Winning Barge: Gary Diddams, GLADYS Jim Uglow Cup 1956

OTHER PRIZES

Master – fastest start of Day – Gary Diddams, GLADYS

Master – fastest to Mark – 'Noddy' Cardy, NIAGARA

Master – fastest overall – 'Noddy' Cardy, NIAGARA

Master – first barge home – 'Noddy' Cardy, NIAGARA

Master exhibiting best seamanship – Richard Titchener, BLUE MERMAID

Master – best seamanship at Mark – Simon Devonshire, MARJORIE

Mainsheetman – A de Winton, PUDGE

Most Valued Crew member – R Atherton, BLUE MERMAID

Young Crewmember – F Diddams, GLADYS

Achievement – PUDGE



THAMES SAILING BARGE MATCHES IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Henry Dodds, a prominent contractor with the nickname the 'Golden Dustman', initiated the Thames Sailing Barge Match in 1863, as Roger Newlyn wrote in our 2024 Programme. As well as the sport and the spectacle, his ideas for the race included the objective of improving the way barges were designed, built and equipped, so they became craft that were beautiful as well as useful and efficient at carrying cargoes, and faster without reducing their capacity. He also wanted to improve the recognition and status of the master mariners and mates – a status they were eminently entitled to but which they had not been receiving. He was very successful in achieving his objectives.

The first race was won by Henry Dodd's swim-headed stumpie W.H.D., and it was so successful that it was repeated in 1864, with forty barges competing. The race was so greatly appreciated that the report in *Hunt's Yachting Magazine* read:

"One of your races this year, I may fairly say, has not been surpassed upon the Thames for years... It was certainly a most beautiful sight, and I hope that next year we shall be again favoured with a repetition of it, if possible with increased success."

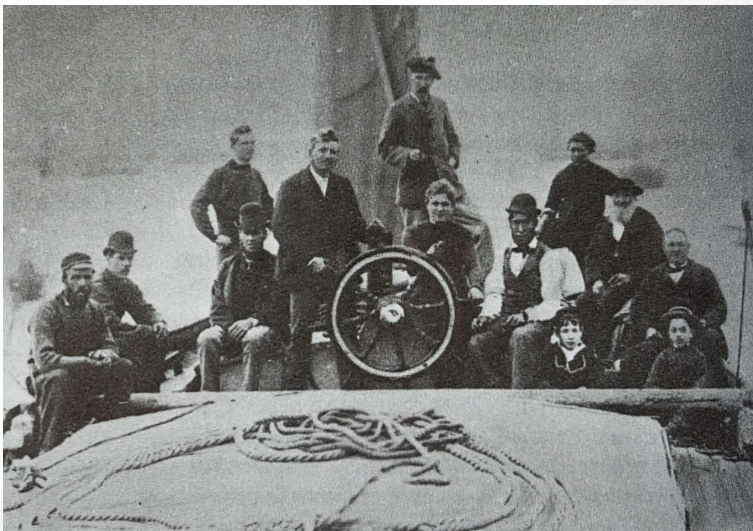


1865 Thames Match, rounding the Nore lightship, Illustrated London News

The Race Committee and barges fulfilled the reporter's wishes. *Hunt's Yachting Magazine* gave a very full account of the 1866 race, which was sailed in a light westerly wind.

The barges and their crews had clearly made a great effort to appear at their very best:

“The improved appearance of the vessels since they have been inaugurated speaks trumpet tongued of the beneficial effects exercised upon the crews; in fact, the Thames bargees, always a peculiar race in themselves, are now positively becoming nautical swells, and most fastidious in the rig, gear, sails and general smartness of their flat-bottomed fleet. No greater evidence of this could be seen than the appearance of the fleet on the 10th (of July); not a patch disfigured the canvas, nor was there that dingy worn look of the hulls that the earlier matches witnessed: the sails were in as good condition as yachts, and shone forth in the sun – a picturesque compound of snow white, dark brown, Indian red and brilliant yellow; the vessels painted with the most correct ‘bargee’ taste, their bottoms scrupulously black-leaded, and the blocks, rudder-heads, tillers, windlasses, tabernacles, and stem heads, displaying that gorgeous profusion of brush that bargemen delight to flourish in vivid greens, lightning chromes, poppy scarlets, virgin whites, and the brightest of varnish, all of which look so cheerful and homely on the water. Nor were the crews themselves behind hand, all looking smart and clean, and many clad in the waterman’s traditional coat.”



The owners and crews were clearly taking the newly established Thames Match very seriously, expending time and money to present themselves and their barges to the best possible advantage, not the ‘dingy, worn look’ of their workaday lives.

The owner, Mr John Stone, with his friends and bargemen on board the *Anglo-Norman* in 1882, while following the Thames Match that year. Owned by Douglas Stone.

Forty barges took part in the 1866 Match – it must have been a truly impressive sight even in those days, when there was so much traffic on the river. There were many following boats too, loaded with passengers, including the *Princess Alice* saloon steamer, chartered by the barge owners’ society, the *Oread* steamer on which Henry Dodd entertained a large party, and many other steamers and barges, smacks, rowing boats and yachts. It must have been a spectacular event. The course had to be shortened due to lack of wind – something that we are very familiar with on the return up the Thames! There were a few collisions too, but it is reported that *“good temper and kindly feeling prevailed”*.

In the fifth race, sailed in 1867, there were 36 barges, of which 19 were topsail barges and seventeen were stumpies. *The Times* reported that there were nearly 8,000 barges on the Thames and Medway at that time, and praised the fine seamanship of the bargemen: *“It has ever been found that from this hardy stock the British Navy has found its best recruits.”*

As the race became more established, and certainly more popular, it became more regularised, with a committee meeting regularly, and prizes of cups and money for master and crew. The classes of barges were also becoming standardised. By 1870 the race was divided into three classes, becoming more like our own three classes. Although bowsprits were not part of the specification, the painting reproduced here clearly illustrates bowsprit barges, and tillers as the method of steering. The three classes were tops'ls not exceeding 50 tons register, spritsails not exceeding 54 tons and second-class spritsails carrying only three working sails.



The fifth Thames Barge Match, 1867, with *Renown* leading *Monarch* and *Blackfriars*, from a print by Josiah Taylor. The pleasure steamer is *Princess Alice*. *National Maritime Museum*

The Thames Match Committee was established from 1866, when Mr J A Farnfield, the solicitor in the Bargeowners' Protection Society, became honorary secretary. They continued to be held regularly in the same room at his offices, in Lower Thames Street, until 1899, after which the race was temporarily abandoned.

Sue Akhurst

Source: Sailing Barges by Frank G G Carr, published by Terence Dalton Limited, 1989

Next Page: Barges rounding the mark boat at the Nore, eighth annual Thames match in 1870, from a lithograph by Josiah Taylor. From Frank G G Carr's collection







Race Committee

Honorary Chair: F M Everard CBE
Honorary Match Secretary: Sue Akhurst
Capt J Cass
M Mainelli
R Newlyn
S Akhurst

Bridge Committee

Commodore: Capt J Cass

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Mr Michael Everard
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Mr John Hargreaves
Ms Christine Lawrence
Mr & Mrs Michael & Elisabeth Mainelli
Mr Roger Newlyn
Ms Heather Rooke
Mr David Rye
Mr & Mrs Richard & Mary Walsh
Mrs Elizabeth Wood
Mrs Anne Wignall

Thanks also to

Rod Bingham, Voyager – Committee Boat
The Three Daws Public House
Jamie Gilbert and The Port of London Authority

Contact

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**Date of Next Year's Match
To be advised**

THAMES SAILING BARGE MATCH

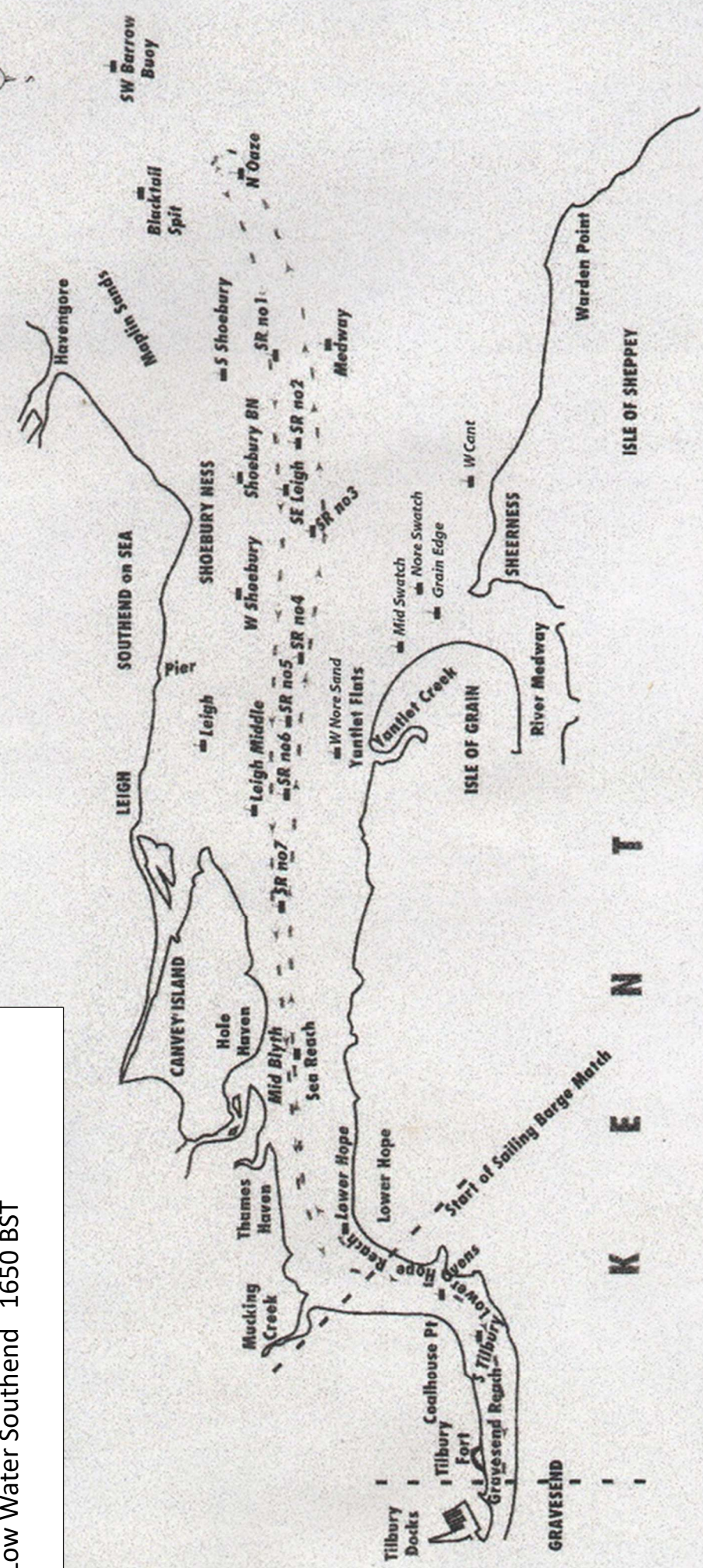
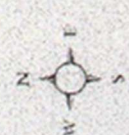
18TH July 2026

Start from Mucking No. 3 buoy, Lower Hope Reach, River Thames to North Ooze Buoy (weather permitting), returning to the finish off Gravesend.

High Water Tilbury 0437 BST

Low Water Southend 1650 BST

E S S E X



K E N T

GRAVESEND