Around The Hythe Today

Activities on the Hythe Quay have changed from those of a trading port to leisure pursuits, many buildings have stayed the same. Follow the map to take you on a short guided trail.

1. At the bottom of North Street, Maldon Chantry, is held to be the location of the Starline Shipyard which built the 'Jersey' in 1654. From about 1879 it was John Howard's yard. He was a qualified naval architect and designed his yachts on the drawing board, which was unusual for barge builders. He was a perfectionist trying to improve on each vessel built. His barges were well regarded for speed and beauty, in fact the barge 'Bolter' (Faris as Queen) was a celebrated at sea song.

2. Until recently the sail loft was used for sailmaking under the name of Arthur Taylor. Taylor bought the business in 1914 from his employer Joseph Sadler, who had established it some twenty years before. Taylor kept detailed records of all the vessels he fitted so that a new set of sails could be made without taking a measurement from the barge. The distinctive colour of the barge sails is traditional and due to a dressing of red and yellow ochre, coal oil (for waterproofing), and sea water. Sails are still spread on the quay for dressing with long handled brushes. The sail loft is now used for businesses associated with the river.

3. The Queen's Head is a quayside public house that is still a focal point for sailing enthusiasts.

4. St Mary's Church, sometimes called the town or fishermen's church, or the Mariners' Beason, has foundations going back some 1300 years to Saxon times and has been a welcoming sight for seafarers for many centuries.

5. The Jolly Sailor has offered a welcome for centuries. The building dates from the 14th Century and contains a number of maritime artefacts.

6. This building is the meeting place of the Maldon Little Ship Club (established in 1927) as a local group associated with London Little Ship Club.

The Club used to meet monthly at the Rose and Crown in the High Street for half-crown dinners (twelve and a half pence).

7. This general area was the location of Watling's boatyard. Watling, then in partnership with Woodward, took over the yard from William Bateman in the late 1890s. During both World Wars valued contracts were placed by the Admiralty for shore boats for use on warships. The yard was destroyed by fire in 1915, but after a brief stay in temporary premises up the river at Fulbridge, work resumed to this site. Boat building and repair work is still carried out here today.

8. At the rear of Cook's boathouse is a oyster depuration plant operated by the Essex Oyster and Sea Fishing Company Limited. Oysters from Goldclerge Creek and other local oysters are sometimes sold here during the summer months.

A number of barges can still be seen using the Hythe Quay moorings. Those regularly used are 'Xylonite' (1902), 'Thalatta' (1908), 'Remind' (1908), 'Hydrogen' (1908), 'Centaur' (1909), and 'Pudge' (1902). The last two mentioned barges are of the Thames Barge Sailing Club, who maintain them for the enjoyment of its members and the public. "Pudge" is a veteran of the Dunkirk rescue during the Second World War. The barges are open to the public from time to time and are available for charter.

On the annual barge match day (usually in early June) about twenty barges can be seen lining the length and breadth of the Quay. At the end of the race the barges gather in Maldon where the prizes are given, stories swapped and refreshments consumed. Barge racing developed from competition for cargoes and has gone on for well over a hundred years. Unlike sailing for trade with only two abord, the crew of a racing barge often consisted of six barge masters.

A frequent visitor around the Hythe Quay is the "Maldon Knot Man". He demonstrates the sailor's art with rope and cord, recounting stories of how certain knots, perhaps centuries old, developed and tells of the lives of the bargemen.

Further Information

Other information and trail leaflets are available from the Maldon Tourist Information Centre, Coach Lane, Maldon.

Open all year:
Monday - Saturday 10.00 am - 4.00 pm
(Saturdays in Winter 10.00 am - 1.30 pm)
Tel: 01621 858553 (24 hr answerphone)

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This guide has been produced to interest visitors and increase their appreciation of the Hythe Quay. Contents include a brief history of the area, a description of life on the barges, parts of a sailing barge and a short guided trail on the quayside.

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A Brief History

In the early part of the 10th Century when Maldon was growing as an important Anglo-Saxon town, the Hythe was a separate hamlet serving Maldon as a port. In fact ‘hythe’ means landing place in Anglo-Saxon. From that period onwards, the quayside dominated the livelihood of Maldon until the last century. Maldon was granted, by the Seal of Admiralty, the right to form a Court of Admiralty in 1526; this allowed cases of trespass and disputes involving fishing rights and shipwreck to be heard in Maldon. It is thought that the town exercised these powers long before the seal was granted as a privilege of the Royal Charter in 1171. The seal of Admiralty can be seen in the Moot Hall, situated at the top of the High Street. The terms of the Charter also demanded that Maldon provided a ship for the king “which when necessary that I should personally have”. One such ship built in Maldon was the man-of-war ‘Jersy’ completed in 1654. This ship once had the distill Samuel Pepys as its captain, but the position was purely honorary in order to elevate him to a sufficiently high rank to sit on a court martial. Samuel Pepys greeted the news “which do give me occasion of much mirth, and may be of some use to me, at least I shall get a little money for it”.

Barges, Business and Life

On the Hythe today are moored the sailing barges which were the premier cargo vessels for over a century and a half. At their trading peak in 1860 there were over 5,000 barges working on the east coast. The commercial barge earning a passage in freight lasted until the early 1960s.

The Seal of Admiralty

The Thames Sailing Barge

It is difficult to say with any certainty how the sailing barge evolved as the majority of barges, though intended for quite specific purposes, were built without plans. A variety of hull shapes and sizes, masts, rigging and sail arrangements developed. A number of descriptive names are used to identify the various types of barges such as: Spritile (spiritail rigged), Swimminie (barge with square overhanging bow), Stumpie (no topmast), and Stackie (barge used for the transportation of straw or hay). Stackies were designed with broad and flat hulls so that a stack could be built, perhaps reaching halfway up the mast and were the most common barges using the Hythe.

Barges have been constructed from a number of materials but the traditional types are oak, pitched pine or steel. The wooden barges were built using very simple tools, mainly a saw, an adze (curved axe) and an auger (hand drill). The first stage in building was the construction of the ribbing or skeleton of the hull, starting with the keelson (the timber forming the central spine) and working towards the deck. The depth of the hull ranged from five to eight feet. The planks forming the outer skin were curved to the shape of the hull using steam boxes. These were long boxes through which steam was passed over the timbers, making them pliable under pressure. Each plank was jointed to get a tight fit when slotted in place. The whole of the outer hull was then plugged wherever necessary and painted with a mixture of tar and hair (which added fibre to the mixture and gave it extra strength).

The barge was built for capacity of freight, stability, speed and ease of handling in coastal waterways of often narrow, shallow and tidal rivers. The flat broad bottom of the hull rested equally well in sea, shallow water or river bed when the tide receded. As the hull displaced little water the barge had a tendency to drift, so leafoards were added to prevent this. The main mast was pivoted and set in a case, usually made of iron, so that the mast could be lowered when the barge went under bridges. Straddling the deck are the fore and main stantion buggys.

The work of a bargee was varied. Apart from actual sailing know-how, the bargee had to be a cook, carpenter, seamstress and general labourer. A bargee laid up for repair meant a loss in trade and income so both skipper and crew had to be able to make running repairs. Usually bargee owners and skippers were very proud of their vessels and, despite such cargoes as manure, coal and peat, kept the timbers and paintwork clean and bright. A story is told of a young barge hand who, alarmed at the amount of water taken on during rough weather, started to bail it out. The skipper stopped him and told him it was a waste as he could swab the deck with it. One of the most strenuous jobs was shooting bridges. This meant lowering the main mast and, with few or no sails, rowing the barge with huge oars called sweeps. Often shooting a bridge was too much work for a skipper and mate, so a third hand or ‘hullfer’ would be hired.

Many shore jobs developed from barge trading. Labour was needed to load and unload vessels. Without the use of cranes this could be back-breaking work. To load a cargo of mud for the brickworks was around seven hours work for four men, each showell weighing about twenty-eight pounds.

Fishing and Trade

Before the trading importance of the Hythe developed it would have been the centre of fishing, providing a major source of food for the nearest inhabitants of Maldon in Palaeolithic times.

The Blackwater estuary has long been fished for shellfish and oysters. The method for catching oysters was to dredge the oyster beds colonising the muddy creeks. Great care was taken to maintain the oyster beds to ensure a continuous stock. Conservation of fishing stocks is by no means a modern practice. The Court of Admiralty had laws to control the areas fished and the method of fishing. For example, it was not permitted to trawl any fish with a net having a mesh smaller than two-and-a-half inches.

The crafts used for fishing and for general purpose work such as salvaging varied in size from open flat-bottomed brigs to vessels of sixty feet. However, in general, the boats using the Blackwater were cutter or lugger rigged. The luglass brig was a simple vessel with a single mast and a four-sided sail. Often the mast, especially in smaller vessels, was not secured by stays. The rig sometimes had a boom to secure the bottom of the sail, as did the windleister.

The earliest form of the windleister, alternatively called the bumbkin, had no centre-boards and was steered with an oar placed in the stern sculling notch. The craft varied in size but usually averaged about fourteen feet and could handle cargoes up to one ton. They were very versatile. In addition to fishing, they were general cargo vessels and during the winter months some were converted to gun punts and used for shooting wildfowl in the estuary.

These days the wildfowl are protected, as the Blackwater Estuary is now a ‘Site of Special Scientific Interest’ and, in part, a National Nature Reserve.

Maldon’s growth went hand in hand with its importance as a trading port. Local markets were supplied with meat, fish and dairy products. A map dating from 1516 identifies “The Towns Coleheape and Chalkeheape” which is evidence of trade in other commodities. The trade in coal became extremely important in the following centuries for many south-east ports. Chalk was brought into Maldon for the lime kilns. The lime would be used for cement or spread on the fields. The connection between the port and agriculture grew in importance, the main cargoes being straw and hay to London and “London mixture” (manure) back to the port. The thousands of horses in the capital required bedding and food and, in return, provided the land with fertiliser, in effect a self perpetuating cycle of supply and demand.

During the winter of 1778, the Blackwater Estuary froze over, trapping many vessels in the port and blocking out any incoming cargo. The effect on the town caused extreme hardship. People who depended upon the river for a livelihood from fishermen to market traders suffered. At the height of the big freeze two thirds of the town’s workforce were without work and pay.