



s/b Thalatta and the East Coast Sail Trust - History

Thalatta is a seagoing vessel built with massive oak frames and planked now with iroko; a superb example of a fully rigged traditional spritsail barge. She was built at MacLearon's yard at Harwich in 1906.

The word Thalatta is Greek, meaning the Sea. Craft of this type developed to combine good sea-going qualities with an ability to navigate easily in the shallow rivers of the south east coast. For many years, in peace and war, Thalatta carried 150-ton cargoes under sail to British and Continental ports, surviving as one of the last few wooden coasters in trade, latterly under power. The barge's sailing rig is nowadays augmented with a powerful modern diesel engine; otherwise she remains in character and appearance almost unaltered since the days of sail. In trade Thalatta would have been crewed by a Skipper, Mate and Third Hand just as she is today.

A modern role, working with children

In 1967 the ship was entirely restored and re-rigged to take on a different role as a schoolship under the flag of Sail Trust, initially, and the East Coast Sail Trust from 1971. Since then thousands of young people have benefitted from the experiences of living and working as crew on Thalatta's five-day voyages.

Sailing Barge Evolution

The growth of London in the nineteenth century was closely linked with the development of the spritsail barge. Growing at a fearful rate, and the largest port in the world, London had an insatiable appetite for building materials, such as bricks cement and sand, coal for heating, hay and straw to feed and bed innumerable horses in the Metropolis, and it needed a means of removing the equine waste products.

There developed a requirement to unload the large ships in London's dockland, distributing their cargoes of grain, timber and many other imports to smaller ports in the Thames Estuary and along the east coast. These smaller ports such as Ipswich, Colchester or Woodbridge in the north, or Faversham and the ports of the Medway, often lie well inland up typically sluggish, muddy rivers of no great depth. The sea routes to and from these towns were through shallow channels, which threw up short, stopping seas unlike the long rolling swells of the Atlantic. In addition to the better known ports there were also quays and staithees up narrow creeks, used either for loading or discharging cargoes.

To service these varied tasks a vessel was required which could be cheaply built and maintained, and economically manned. It would need to be handy in narrow channels, draw little water and above all, carry the maximum cargo for its size. Additionally the vessel needed to be able to sail, whether loaded with cargo or not, without re-ballasting.

In those days, all sailing ships and indeed early steamers required either cargo or ballast (a minimum of one-fifth of the capacity of the hold) if they were to sail effectively and safely. A sailing vessel expressly designed for fast sailing usually paid for its superiority by having to take aboard ballast even before its cargo had been completely discharged. The necessity to load ballast in order to go to sea when a cargo was not available inevitably added to the running costs and delayed sailing.

The sloops and little coastal schooners of the time were unhandy craft, requiring a large crew to handle their great mainsails and their hatchways were kept as small as possible for sea-keeping safety, but this impeded loading/discharging bulk cargoes. They were expensive to run and awkward to handle in the congested waters in which they traded.

East Coast Sail Trust Ltd – Sailing Barge Thalatta

Their place was admirably filled by the newly evolved East Coast Sailing Barges.

There had been barges on the East Coast for many decades reaching back into the eighteenth century, but in the 1840's they developed and multiplied until they dominated the carrying trade everywhere along the coast between Yarmouth and Dover. A spritsail-rigged barge could be handled by two men and a boy instead of four/five required aboard the older sloops.

The only weakness of the sailing barge was its dependence on the weather and tide. The commercial world increasingly demanded speed of delivery so, in order to compete, auxiliary motors were fitted and sometimes the sailing gear was removed turning the hull into a motor barge only.

In 1914 there were over 2,000 Thames Barges trading across the North Sea and the English Channel and from the Humber to the Solent and even the West Coast and Bristol, but just after the Second World War the numbers had reduced to fewer than one thousand. With the demise of the cargo carrying trade in the 1960's the numbers reduced dramatically so that there remain only about 35 barges today in sailing order, of which only two provide educational cruises for youngsters.

As a Sailing Barge, Thalatta encapsulates the characteristics typical of the breed:

- shallow, flat-bottomed hull, ideal for river estuaries and the need to penetrate far inland for cargoes
- ability to sail unballasted
- ability to 'dry out' at low water and be loaded directly from horse-drawn carts
- exceptionally efficient sail-plan and layout handled by a man and a boy (ie skipper and 1st mate) so that passages could be undertaken by sail power alone
- large capacity (eg 150 tons) and flexibility to carry a wide range of cargoes, such as grain, coal, stone, bricks, bulk materials, animal feeds, waste products, straw and reed, timber, etc

As a historical artifact, Thalatta represents a truly enormous heritage asset.

She is a sea-going vessel (Official No: 116179) 90 feet long with a breadth of 21.5 feet and drawing 5 feet aft, built of oak and iroko; a superb example of a fully rigged traditional spritsail barge. She was built in wood of heavy construction by MacLearnon of Harwich in 1906 for extensive sea work and was designed originally for a life of 25-30 years. She was bought by F W Horlock and was originally ketch-rigged as a 'boomie' instead of her later spritsail; she had a mainsail rigged with gaff and boom, which had to be hoisted by the crew in her early years when carrying cross-channel cargoes to France, Holland and Belgium. Although common on large coasting barges such as Thalatta, this rig required a large crew (4 or 5) to hoist the heavy rig and was therefore uneconomic for the coasting work she spent most of her time engaged in. Later in her life the boomed mainsail was replaced by the more usual sprit, although she retained the gaff-rigged mizzen. This hybrid rig was known as a 'mulie' by bargemen. She was sold to Wynfield Shipping Company of Grimsby in 1917, who fitted her first engine. This was removed when she was sold to Captain Body in 1923, although under the ownership of R & W Paul Ltd who acquired her in 1933, an auxiliary Ruston 80 was installed in 1948, since replaced by a Kelvin (and now replaced again by a modern diesel). In the final days of her working life, Thalatta operated as a motor barge.

During much of her working life she carried cargoes of grain to and from Ipswich but paid regular visits to many other East Anglian ports as well as the near continent (even sailing up the

East Coast Sail Trust Ltd – Sailing Barge Thalatta

Seine to Paris, under Wynfield Shipping's ownership), although she remained in the Thames Estuary between 1951 – 1966. In her trading role her crew comprised Master, Mate and Third Hand, just as today. Today, however, the Third Hand is especially concerned with caring for and feeding the young people aboard.

In 1967 the ship was re-rigged to take on the role of a schoolship, initially under the flag of Sail Trust until 1971 but since then under that of the East Coast Sail Trust, originated by the late John Kemp and Jane Benham MBE (daughter of Hervey Benham, author of Down Tops' I, Last Stronghold of Sail and Once upon a Tide). Today Thalatta is the only wooden barge providing educational cruises, aimed mainly at children.

As a living example of evolution of a craft, Thalatta has changed throughout her career. The photos show her as a 'Boomie' without a topmast, and as a motor barge with a derrick for loading/unloading, together with a sizeable wheelhouse.

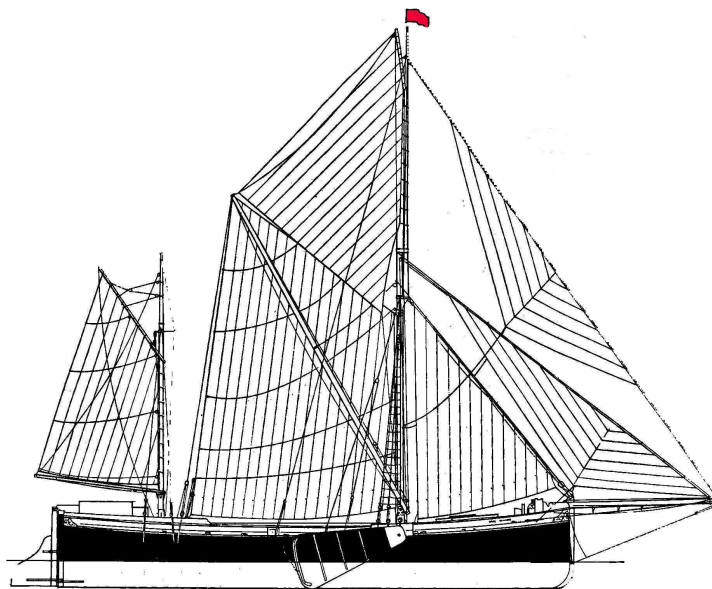


Thalatta 1920

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Thalatta 1964



Thalatta sail plan