

"Maud" Bulletin No. I Nov. 1984

It is now over three years since the wherry "Maud" was rescued from abandonment in Ranworth Broad and taken to Upton for restoration. The work of restoring her is progressing steadily, if a little slowly.

Apart from the rescue, lift-out and conservation phases there was little time for actual restoration work in 1981. Some measuring and investigation took place during the winter of 1981/82, but repair work began in earnest at Easter 1982. It became evident after a while that the original five-year work schedule, prepared before work started, was over-optimistic. On cleaning up the interior of the hull, most of the frames were found to be badly eroded, particularly between the high and low water marks where she had lain sunk. In addition many of the "floors" in the hold area were seen to be cracked through, presumably where she had settled, fully laden, on a hard mud bank during her last working days.

As time went by, and the hull dried out, very wide splits or "shakes" opened in some of the planks. This occurred entirely in planks known to have been renewed in 1952, and only in planks below the waterline. The probable explanation is that insufficient seasoned planking was available at that time, and the shortfall was made up with freshly-felled wood, which was installed below the waterline where it would not dry out once the boat was afloat. Now that these planks have dried and shrunk it is considered unlikely that they will swell fully again, so that they will have to be replaced.

The first job to be tackled was the renewal of the stern apron, to which most of the upper planking is fastened. The original was in elm, and had deteriorated badly, so oak was selected for the new one. A 3ft length of 12" x 6" dry oak was cut to the complex shape of the planking at this point, and fastened in after much chiselling to achieve a good fit.

The next task was the renewal of the frames in the after end of the vessel. The frames are made from 4" thick oak which has to be cut from a log that has grown to a shape approximating to that of the frame. No two frames are exactly alike, and vary from V-shaped to S-shaped or J-shaped, depending on their position in the hull structure. If they were to be cut from straight-grained timber, they would be cross-grained and likely to snap.

Curved oak logs are known as "crooks" or "bends", and although they still "grow on trees" few timber yards keep them. When a tree is felled, the straight trunk is sold to a timber merchant, but the crooks are usually cut into short lengths for firewood on the spot. We contacted the English Timber Merchants Association, who provided a list of likely suppliers. We wrote to more than twelve firms, but none could offer what we required, and several didn't even bother to reply. One firm in Hull, which specialises in boat-building timber, claimed to be able to supply us, but on visiting the yard no useful timber was found.

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However, our own investigations were yielding some results. While no single timberyard could supply our needs, we regularly visited small yards in the Norwich area, and when we saw any suitable logs we had them cut into 4" slices. This has resulted in a fairly steady trickle of usable timber which has kept the work going so far.

When the framing had progressed as far as the forward end of the aft cabin, it was decided to renew the after transverse beam at this point. The original was still in place, but very rotten, and the ends were almost non-existent. The beam is 7" x 7" and has a shallow curve, and suitable timber for this, and the main beam, were obtained without too much difficulty. The beam was cut to shape using a chainsaw and planed to a smooth finish. Although fairly heavy, it was possible for three of us to manhandle it into position where it was bolted to the adjacent frames. Eventually it will be connected to several frames each side by wooden brackets called "knees". Suitable timber for these knees has yet to be found.

By this time the replacement of the frames had become fairly well organised, and the method, developed by experience, is still used. The shape of the planking surfaces is reproduced by laying a special gauge in place, made of pieces of slotted aluminium sheet linked with bolts and wing-nuts. This shape is carefully transferred to hardboard, and a full size two-dimensional pattern made, which is trimmed as necessary to a snug fit. At this stage the old frame is removed by cutting through the spike fastenings using a specially-made "bridge" hacksaw. This can be very difficult if the frame is a tight fit against the planking, when steel wedges have to be driven in to ease open the gap. With the old frame out of the way, the hardboard pattern is propped in its place, and the varying bevels of the plank surfaces are taken off with a sliding bevel gauge and noted on a scrap piece of hardboard, together with the plank-edge angles.

Having gathered this information, it is possible to start the new frame, and the hardboard pattern is laid on the timber and adjusted to avoid any flaws that may be evident. After drawing round, the frame is cut out using a chainsaw and hand-held circular saw incorporating the bevels etc. It is finished with an adze, chisel and plane to a reasonable surface, but inevitably some adjustment is needed before it can be spiked home in the wherry.

Even the spikes - or "rose nails" - have proved difficult to obtain, and recently some very rusty ones which had obviously been in stock for years had to be cleaned and galvanised to keep the work going.

Having progressed with new frames about 6ft beyond the after beam, it was decided to make a start in the bows, as the available timber dictated this. A quantity of 4" oak crooks had accumulated at a timber yard near Norwich, and early in 1984 we hired a lorry to transport it back to Essex. In addition a cast-iron mast balance weight had been made available to us by May, Gurney & Co, and had to be collected from their premises in Thorpe and taken to Upton. These operations were completed in a day, and on the following day the timber was unloaded from the lorry and built up into a large pile in our back garden - not many gardens in our road can boast such an asset - possibly the ultimate status symbol!

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The pile has now diminished to a fraction of its former size, despite additions since, which illustrates quicker progress than before. The reframing of the bows is now almost complete to a point just behind the main beam. The original main beam had decayed almost to nothing, and what remained was removed before the wherry was lifted from the water. A large tie-rod had been installed beneath to prevent spreading, which showed the condition of the beam had given cause for concern during the latter working days.

The new main beam was fashioned from a curved trunk using a chainsaw, and planed to a smooth finish. It is 10" x 9" in section, and very heavy. Tim Whelpton and the boatyard staff lifted it into position for us, using the yard crane, and a "first-time" fit was achieved. Like the after beam, it will be fastened to several adjacent frames by wooden "knees" when other work is finished.

Certain sizes and shapes of frames in the hold appear to be unobtainable, judging from timber received so far, and the only solution seems to be to laminate them. Strips of oak will be bent round a jig and glued with synthetic resin glue to provide the raw material for these frames. At present we are corresponding with manufacturers to find the best adhesive.

The main work foreseen in 1985 is to replace frames in the hold area. Most of the originals are in a poor state, and it is intended to replace alternate pairs of frames as a first step. Difficulty has been experienced in driving the large nails upwards when working on the bottom, so through-bolts will be used in the new work with the nuts recessed below the surface of the frames in the hold. A large quantity of galvanised bolts have been given to us free of charge by the Bolt & Nut Co. of Tipton, Staffs, in response to an appeal.

Although the wherry restoration is still in its early stages, considerable interest has been shown by members of the public. We do not advertise what is being done, but visitors often look in and marvel at the size and shape of the hull - and the enormity of the task ahead! A couple of years ago we made some exhibition boards of photographs and drawings to interpret the project. This year we lent them to Peter Bower so that he could incorporate them into his travelling wherry exhibition aboard the wherry-yacht "Olive". We will overhaul our boards for the 1985 season and incorporate new material to bring them up to date.

We do not work at Upton every weekend, so if you want to visit please telephone Ingatestone 352264 to make sure we will be there.

Vincent and Linda Pargeter.