

Do you fancy a job?

My introduction to the possibility of working on a **Thames motor barge**, came courtesy of a question from my Skipper, the late Chris Jameson, towards the end of our seasonal yacht delivery jobs. Home base, West Mersea.

“Do you fancy a job with London Rochester, on the barges?”

I said “Yes”, but had little idea of what I’d said, “Yes” to.

My name is **Peter Wilder**. The year was 1969. I was 20 years old and had been struggling to find regular employment for some time.

From my last yacht delivery job in Mousehole, Cornwall, I caught eventually, the train back home. I sat about 3 hours on a platform near Mousehole, with trains rattling through, before a local told me the station had closed about 3 months before.

I packed a bag for a few days away and on a bright, warm day, set off for Rochford – yet another spot I’d never heard of. I finally arrived in Rochford, dressed for cool weather on a boat, but unfortunately in a minor heat wave.

The major problem was, I had no idea where I was supposed

to be, so I just walked with my bag, in the general direction of the river.

I asked in a barber’s shop for guidance. They sent me down a lane to a field gate and said, “Walk on the track beside the field to the Maltings”. This wasn’t too helpful, as I didn’t really know what ‘Maltings’ were.

I asked a bloke in a trilby hat, who approached from the field, where the Maltings were. He pointed to a huge building across a couple of fields.

The Maltings, at the head of the River Roach, was the destination of a lot of grain – mostly wheat, for bread products.

There, I saw what was to be my second home, the Thames motor barge, the *Scone*.

My face must have been a picture of: lost, amazement, worry and disbelief, as to what I had let myself in for, because it was an **88’ 3” x 21’/27m x 6.4m, 65 ton, wooden boat, that when built in 1919, was one of the larger Thames Sailing Barges.**

She (boats are always ‘she’), had a 3-cylinder petrol-start diesel engine, installed in 1934 and over time, had most of her sailing gear removed, now having a short mast with only 1 small sail wrapped on.

Apart from the engine, every thing else was what they called *Armstrong Patent* – you supplied the power to raise

and lower the mast/barge boat-dingy/anchor, wash the deck and sort the lights.

The ‘heads’ (toilet) was in a thunderbox, in a steel shelter on deck. Basically, you pee’d over the side, once you’d sorted out where the wind was coming from and everything else went into a bucket of seawater and was then thrown overboard – a seriously ‘sort out where the wind was coming from’!

Starting the engine by the winding handle, was an education for another day as, from no where, a New Zealander asked if I was the new Mate.

He had been working in the Pacific, sailing copra (coconut husks) from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand for processing.

The cargo had such a low value, that they still used sailing boats, as engines would be too uneconomic. He’d come to Blighty to ‘see the World’ and ended up working in a grain mill in the heart of Essex.

He pointed out where to put my kit. I was stood at the entrance to the engine room, but I was to occupy the fore-cabin or fo’c’stle at the front of the barge.

I walked forward, dumped my bag on deck and met, again, the man in the trilby who turned out to be my Skipper, Fred Pettitt, a Colchester man.