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## The Story of the Thames Barge

by Sue Hitchcock

Nowadays the Thames barge is a rare collector's item, with our passion for investing in antiques, but in its heyday, it was as common as carts were in the countryside. This was until the end of the nineteenth century when the Industrial revolution made the skill and ingenuity of woodworkers redundant, displaced by metalworking, essential for the use of fossil fuels for power.

Flat-bottomed boats were used everywhere that sloping shorelines were available, all around the East coast, and in Holland, where the Dutch barge closely resembles the Thames barge. Their use, like the ubiquitous cart, was for transporting large quantities of material without the need of docks or dockers, which the ocean-going Clipper ships needed.

Their work was hum-drum, ferrying sand, bricks and suchlike up the Thames to where building was going on. The return journey might bring refuse to where it could be dumped down the estuary or horse manure to fertilize farmland.

River barges needed no sailing equipment, being towed, but sailing barges needed masts and steering, which nevertheless did not block the holds. Besides that, in order to navigate under bridges, the mast had to be lowered, so a distinctive form evolved, with the boatbuilder's ingenuity.

The swansong of the Thames barge's usefulness was during the war, when they were used by the Navy to supply the fleet. Their number has gradually diminished, some wrecked, some succumbing to the dreaded teredo worms and the survivors converted to residential use or making tourist boat trips.

It could hardly be imagined such vessels would be built again, with the skill being lost, but also, unfortunately, the timber required now no longer available.