

Some Cambridgeshire Industries and Trades — Part 3

BOAT BUILDING

by ENID PORTER

F. W. Bullen's boatbuilding yard in Fisher's Lane by Magdalene Bridge. After the lane was demolished in 1931, he worked behind the house on the right.

The building of boats, of one kind or another, has been carried on in Cambridge for a very long time, and it is a continuing industry today.

But it was from the early years of the last century, following the formation of the college boat clubs and the growing use of the river for pleasure, that boat building came to be established on a larger scale, with racing and pleasure craft of all kinds being produced in increasing numbers.

Though trading barges were certainly made here up to the mid 19th century, the majority of the fenland barges and lighters came from such yards as Prentice's of Burwell, Jackson's of Peterborough, Dyson's of Burwell or Gooby's of Littleport.

Among the earliest of the 19th century Cambridge builders were John Cross and Charles King. Cross built barges and was also, according to Frederick Rutt who, himself, built boats in Chesterton Road from the 1870's, responsible for the Hero and the Stag. These were the first eight-oared craft in which St. John's College and Trinity College competed with one another in 1825 and so began the inter-college races we know as the Lents and the Mays. Other writers, however, say that both these boats were built on the Thames.

Charles King is credited with the building of the Queen Bess, a six-oared boat first recorded in 1833 as having been entered in the races by Etonians up at Trinity. Mrs. King is said to have named the boat by breaking a bottle of wine over the bows.

In the 1840s Samuel Logan established his boatyard on the site of the present Riverside Court flats in Chesterton Road. He was succeeded by his son who carried on the yard until 1900, when it was taken over by Askham & Son. The

new owners ran it until, in 1934, it was demolished for the building of the flats.

George Searle, followed later by his son, began building boats in Cambridge in the 1850s. His boat-house, near the present Victoria Bridge, proudly bore the announcement that he was "Boat Builder to Her Majesty the Queen and H.R.H. the Prince of Wales". Searle's business was acquired, in 1879 by George Winter who also chartered the ferry which operated until the Victoria Bridge was opened in 1890. In 1899 he sold the boat yard to his foreman, Frederick Pocock.

Few regular staff were employed in these early years or, indeed, at the beginning of this century. The yards relied for their main labour force on the journeymen boat builders, who travelled round Cambridge and the nearby riverside villages, obtaining work where and when their services were required, and being paid on a piece-rate basis.

Winter's successor, Pocock, specialised in the building of racing craft; indeed, the family name is well known in America today, for his nephew emigrated to the States and founded the firm which is one of the foremost in the production of racing boats.

Two well-known Cambridge names appeared on the boat building scene in the 1860s—those of Foster and Strange. James Foster's boat-house and yard, once George Cross's, were used, as were Winter's, Pocock's and others, by both college and town boat clubs. Foster also owned the horse-drawn party boat Victoria, used for taking excursionists to Clayhithe. A wooden figure-head from the Victoria is now in the Folk Museum, along with models of four racing craft made, in the 1870s, by one of Foster's employees, James Anthony. Foster's business was

merged in Pocock's in 1911.

Isaac Strange, landlord of the Fort St. George Inn on Midsummer Common, began building boats in 1865, his boatyard in Chesterton Road being carried on by his descendants. There are still many people who can remember hiring Strange's boats in Chesterton Road or from near Garrett Hostel Bridge.

Remembered, too, is F. W. Bullen's yard in Fisher's Lane below Magdalene Bridge, approached by the narrow passage beside his furniture shop (now Victoriana Antiques) at 31 Magdalene Street. Fisher's Lane, which fronted on to the river, was demolished in 1931, but Bullen continued in Magdalene Street until the 1950s.

Not far away, in Ekin's Yard, now Magdalene's Mallory Court, E. H. Mathie set up on his own, as a boat and launch builder, in 1914. Previously he had been a journeyman builder, working for other yards. When Magdalene College was built on the site of his premises in 1931, he moved to Water Street in Chesterton.

Familiar, also, is the name of Scudamore which is, indeed, still carried on by the Garden House Hotel Company which now own his Granta Place business. His boats could be hired both in Granta Place and on Quayside. F. Scudamore began boat building in 1906, in the early years of the craze for punts. These craft are said to have been introduced on the Cam by Thomas Prime, a Silver Street boat builder who worked at the Anchor yard owned, successively, by George Jarvis, F. Robson and, from 1898, by F. & S. Dolby who also made boats on Robinson Crusoe Island on Sheeps Green.

The name of Dant is, for the most part, thought of in connection with the ferry which, though its official

name was the Cutter Ferry, was usually called Dant's because it was operated by successive members of the family until the Cutter Ferry Bridge was built in 1927.

The first Dant to settle in Cambridge was David, senior, who, in the 1850s, transferred his barge business from St. Ives, running it first from the Plough Inn in Magdalene Street, then from the Anchor on Quayside. In 1868 he bought the Cutter Ferry Estate where he traded until his death in 1893.

The estate was then sold, with the proviso that David Dant's sons and their successors should continue to operate the ferry. It was sold in four lots which, in all, had a 600 feet of frontage on the river. It included David Dant's house, three cottages, of which one had once been the Cutter Inn, a boathouse occupied by the boat builder, Charles Waites, and David Dant's own boatwright's shop together with his furniture and all his stock-in-trade.

In the last-named were 15 lighters, each capable of carrying from four to 25 tons, an 8 h.p. steam tug, a horse-drawn boat and a large quantity of masts, barge spreads, sails, chains and oak, deal and elm boards. The Cutter Estate was later occupied by various college boat houses and by the boatyard of H. C. Banham, which firm is now owned by Pye Ltd.

H. C. Banham served his apprenticeship with a boat builder, J. H. Clasper, whose yard was on the south side of the river near the end of Abbey Road. In 1906, Banham established his own business on the north side, on the site, formerly an osier bed, from which the firm which still bears his name has only recently had to move, upstream, owing to the building of the Elizabeth Bridge.

He began by building sailing boats, punts, skiffs and canoes and was soon operating his own hire fleet and a daily passenger steam-boat service in the Water Witch. In 1908, he acquired the Enterprise, fitted with a 3-cylinder petrol engine, which could carry 50 passengers, and by 1914 had increased his fleet to four passenger boats and a number of self-drive petrol launches. The fleet included the Viscountess Bury, built on the Thames in 1910 and used, it is said, by the royal family. She still operates between Cambridge and Ely in the summer months.

In the first World War, Banham

built motor boats for the Russian navy, seaplane floats for the British navy as well as aeroplane floats for the Royal Flying Corps. After the war, in 1919, he purchased Frederick Pocock's yards near Victoria Bridge, where racing craft were built. It was here, in 1950, that the firm built the first of the twelve boats they were to make for the University Boat Club; in eight of these Cambridge defeated Oxford.

In the 1920s, Banham purchased a boat yard at Horning on the Broads, and began to build up a large hire fleet with boats made in his Cambridge yards. In these years, too, he purchased the old Eastern Counties Navigation Company and, in 1928, put on the river a large steel motor lighter, Nancy II. This was named after the well-known Nancy, the Navigation Company's steam cargo carrier, which for many years had plied between Cambridge and Wisbech. Nancy II, however, proved too large for easy passage through locks, and so in 1929 she went to Cardiff, travelling by sea.

The skill of Banham and his employees in working with timber to precise measurements was called upon, in the 1930s, to produce part of the wooden apparatus used by the Russian scientist, Dr Kapitsa, who worked under Professor Rutherford in the experiments which led to the successful splitting of the atom.

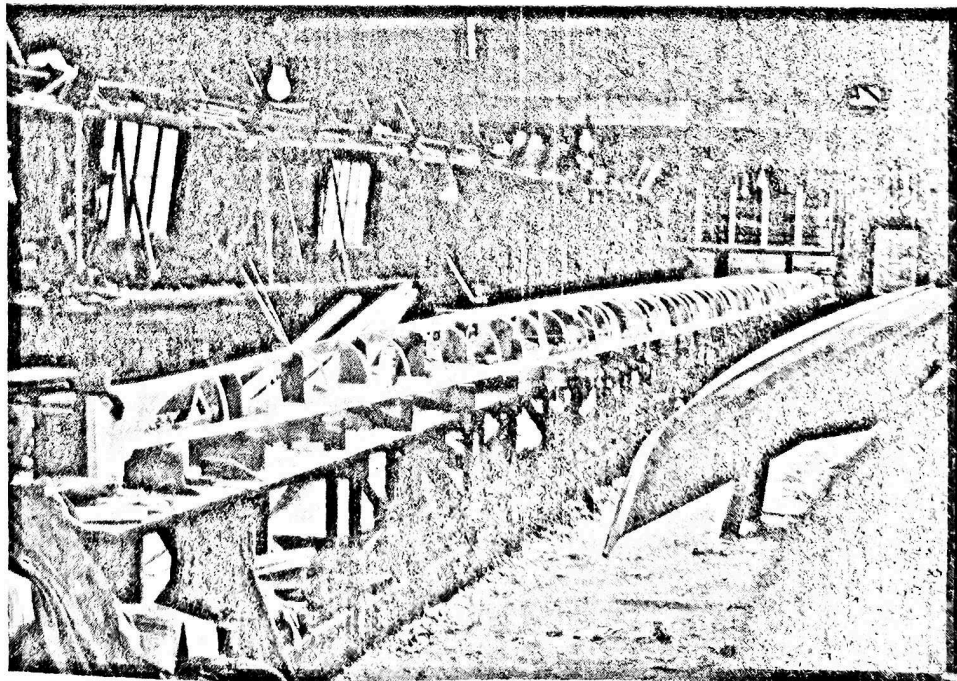
The second world war saw Banham's, by then trading as a limited company, building whalers and high-speed motor boats for the Navy and

prototype structures for radar, for Pye Radio Ltd. Normal boat building was resumed after the end of the war. Today, the firm, still trading under its founder's name, specialises in the building of fibre glass sailing boats and Discovery type motor boats.

From the early days of Cambridge boat building, when barges as well as other craft were being made, the skills of such ancillary workers as sail makers, rope makers, and others were needed. Apprenticeship indentures and other records show, for example, that a number of sail makers lived and worked in the town, chiefly in the Bridge Street and Castle Street area, conveniently near the river.

A "rushrope maker" of St. Peter's parish was taking apprentices in the 18th century, while in the following century there were four rope and twine makers in Cambridge whose products, which included sacks, were used both in the boat and agricultural trades.

Tarpaulins, too, for sheeting over goods on the barges, were needed, and early 19th century directories list the names of three "tarpaulin manufacturers"—Charles Wayman in Castle Street, Philip Williams in Newmarket Road and the well-known rope makers Robert and Joseph Bowd of New Street. The last-named were succeeded, in the 1880s, by Alfred Simper, founder of the firm which still continues to manufacture ropes in New Street today.



The University eight for the 1951 boat race under construction at Banham's yard.