

THE "VISCOUNTESS BURY"

The large and elegant passenger launch, the "Viscountess Bury", owned and operated by Banham Marina, must be a familiar sight on the River Cam. She has, from several aspects, a most interesting history.

To begin with, she is much older than is generally realised, having been built by W.S. Sargent & Co of Chiswick, as long ago as 1888. She was constructed to unusually high standards: the hull is triple-skinned, the two inner skins being diagonally planked teak, and the outer of narrow, horizontal planks of mahogany. The keel is a single piece of American rock-elm.

The "Viscountess Bury" was built for the Moritz-Immisch Electric Launch Co., of Platt's Eyot. Hampton. This brings us to her most unusual feature: at a time when most vessels were steam-driven, the Viscountess was driven by twin electric motors driving twin propellers, the electricity being provided by 200 storage batteries hidden under the stern deck. These motors and batteries were manufactured by the Immisch Electric Launch Co. who also operated a fleet of such boats. The Viscountess, with her 65½ ft of length was the largest of them all; in fact, she was advertised as "the largest electric launch in the World".

To charge the batteries of their fleet, the Immisch Company owned their own charging stations, as at that time, no public electric supply was available. The charging plant consisted of a 25 h.p. steam engine, built by John Fowler & Co., of Leeds, driving a dynamo by Crompton. All this was housed on a large river barge, 70 ft long and 14 ft beam. There was also accommodation for the engineer and his assistants. Charging was, of course, done mostly at night. On one charge, the "Viscountess Bury" could run her two 7½ h.p. motors for 10 hours at full speed, which was 6 m.p.h. The Immisch Company owned three charging stations, moored at suitable places on the Thames.

For the first four seasons after her completion the "Viscountess Bury" was stationed at Windsor, and was on charter to the then Prince of Wales, afterwards King Edward VII. During this time her appearance was somewhat different from now: the cabin was shorter, with a lantern roof, and the steering and control of the boat was from the small deck, right at the bow. The cabin was decorated in white and gold, with upholstery in "figured red velvet".

By 1895, Royalty had finished with her, and the "Viscountess Bury" became a public passenger launch. To enable her to carry more passengers, the cabin was lengthened, and in place of the lantern roof a strong deck, with passenger seats, was constructed. Stairs at either end gave access to this upper deck. The steering was now moved from the bow to the forward end of this upper deck, as we see it today. But the original electric drive remained until well into the present century.

Exactly when this electric drive was removed and a petrol motor substituted I have been unable to discover. Nor do I know how, why or when the Immisch Electric Launch Co., faded out. But by the year 1910, when the late Mr H.C. Banham of Cambridge, acquired the boat, the original twin screws had given place to one, and the petrol engine, of 20 h.p. had taken over.

The "Viscountess" was brought from the Thames by sea to King's Lynn. The journey was done in stages, each stage with a local pilot in charge. They did not travel after dark more than they could help but put in to various ports, and kept within sight of land on the way. The voyage was not without hazards, but the weather was kind, at any rate until they left Yarmouth, and were on the longest leg of their journey. Then the old "Viscountess" showed that she was no sea-boat. She rolled horribly, being "all top and no bottom". As the weather worsened, she began to ship water over the bow, and they were thankful to reach the harbour of Wells, on the north Norfolk coast. She remained there for quite a while, waiting for

better weather before they set off for King's Lynn. Even then, their troubles were not over: there are many bridges across the tidal part of the Great Ouse between Lynn and Denver Sluice, to say nothing of mud-banks. The steering wheel of the "Viscountess" is about 12 feet above the water. So they had to wait in Lynn Docks until the tide was running up to Denver just right, and in daylight. Otherwise, they would have been either scraping the bridges, or sticking on the mud. However, thanks to good luck and a good engine they made it. I am glad they did. The Cambridge river would not be the same without her. Besides, as a child, in 1911, I made the trip to Clayhithe aboard her. It cost me sixpence. She was then all bright varnish, and polished brass-work. No white paint, as now.

It is of interest to know how she came to have the name "Viscountess Bury", together with the carved figure-head, complete in Victorian dress and coronet, which, presumably represents Her Ladyship. The story is as follows: the then Viscount Bury, while in Canada during the 1870's, met the American inventor, Edison. The two men became friends, and together discussed the possibility of electric vehicles driven by the type of storage battery that Edison had devised. On his return to England, Viscount Bury founded the Westminster Electric Traction Co. to build such electric vehicles, and took into association a Mr Moritz Immisch, who was similarly interested. The Westminster Electric Traction Co. was not a success, being before its time, and the company went into voluntary liquidation. A few years later in 1880, Immisch formed his Electric Launch Company, and his old friend, Viscount Bury was associated with the new company. This venture was a success, as we have seen, and when they produced their largest and finest boat, they named it after the Viscountess.

Viscount Bury was a close friend of the Royal family, and this, probably, accounts for the use of the boat by the Prince of Wales.

The "Viscountess Bury", in spite of her considerable age, evidently has a long life still before her. Her owners, Banham Marina, last year gave her a £2,000 re-fit, and very fine she looks. During her sixty-two years on the Cam, she has "got through" a number of engines, and her latest is a 50 h.p. diesel. It seems likely that she will reach her century - only fifteen years to go - a great tribute to her Victorian builders of 1838, and to the many men, who, through the years, have helped to keep her up to Board of Trade standards.

Finally, I must acknowledge the great help I have received from many people in compiling the above. I should particularly mention the late Mr H.C. Banham, Mr George Watkins, of Bath University, Mr Brian Hillsdon, of the Steam Boat Association, and the Earl of Albemarle.

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