Sailing The River Great Ouse On The Baden Powell

Eight members of the GVCG took a look at King's Lynn from a different perspective on Wednesday afternoon, September 25th. They rode down the River Great Ouse on the historic cockling vessel, the Baden Powell, getting a look at the town's built and wild heritage.

The first boat built by Walter Worfolk on a site near the Whitefriars School on the River Nar in 1900, the 34 foot 6 inch wooden boat has recently come home after being extensively restored and rebuilt.

The Baden Powell is a double-ended fishing smack, the only one of her type in existence. Her first owners, the Cook family, paid £50 for her. She was constructed so she could sit on the sand while her crew dug and bagged up cockles to bring home to sell.

Sailing along on the vessel today, you could easily cast your mind back to those early days when the crew of one man and a boy, would go out on the tide to find a sandbank where cockles lived, then wait until there was enough incoming tide for the homeward journey. For the first 30 years, the vessel was sail-powered, then a diesel engine was installed.

Once we were equipped with life jackets, we were seated cosily in the hold (the boat can take a maximum of 8 passengers) and the boat slipped away from the pontoons opposite Marriotts Warehouse on the South Quay. We were able to see all the familiar landmarks from the King's Lynn and West Lynn waterfronts including the Minster, the Custom House, the Pilot Office and the Docks complex, and West Lynn's St Peter's Church. A rare chance to see how the town was developed around the river.
As we got further down the river, more wildlife began to claim ownership of the banks and the muddy edges. A Kestrel hovered, dropping down several times, hoping to snatch its next meal. Several Little Egrets were seen and, on the return trip, some Grey Herons.

Captain Brian Smith and his three-man crew took us to the mouth of the River Great Ouse, where a large group of seals was enjoying some relaxation on the mudflats. After a while, several of them slipped into the water and every now and again, a grey head would pop up and look in our direction.

A good number of Cormorants was resting in this area, along with various gull species.

We also heard the evocative call of a Curlew, a bird which is sadly declining massively. Other birds spotted included Greylag Geese, Redshank and Starlings.

The three red sails were raised as we turned for home, and, for the first part of the return journey, we used the wind to power the vessel, making a creditable six-and-a-half knots.

It's wonderful to think that this boat, which was built nearly 120 years ago, is back on the waterways in Norfolk. It's thanks to a lot of dedication and hard work. The original plan was to restore the boat, but after it was discovered the wood was very rotten, rebuilding was the only answer. The Heritage Lottery Fund contributed £76,300 in 2014 and with support from local people, the Baden Powell was taken to Brian Kennell's boatyard in Essex for professional replacement of the hull structure and decking. Volunteers with the King's Lynn Worfolk Boat Trust also gave many hours of their time to make
the boat ship-shape. She is now part of the National Register of Historic Vessels, based at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

The Baden Powell was relaunched in Lynn Docks and ready to take her first passengers in autumn 2017.

She was named after Lieutenant General Robert Baden Powell, who, as a British Army Officer, had successfully defended the town in the Siege of Mafeking during the Second Boer War in South Africa in 1899. Six years later, he founded the Scout movement.

It had seemed, earlier in the week that our trip might be cancelled because of unsettled weather, but after a heavy shower shortly before we were due to set sail, it seemed the sky had run out of water, at least for the duration of our two-hour voyage of discovery. Thanks must go to the volunteer crew and to the GVCG's John Hayes, for organising the expedition.

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