



"Red Sails in the Sunset"

One could say that the Thames sailing barge is epitomised by its red sails. Whether you're in Maldon, Essex, Pin Mill, Suffolk or at St. Katherine, London you'll have no problem picking out the barges from the other vessels. That distinctive colour is due to the treatment the sails receive to make them durable and weatherproof at sea.



But the Thames barge doesn't always sail 'under these colours'. New sails are used for one year before they are dressed and then they are dressed every year thereafter.

As the sails grow older so they increase in weight due to the succession of dressings they receive. The sail dressing dries very slowly and in fact it never seems to dry out.

The 'magic formula' for the sail-dressing recipe goes something like this: -

- 7 galls Cod Oil
- 14 galls Clean Salt Water
- 100 lbs. Red Ochre
- 20 lbs. Horse Fat

This picture of a barge with new sails is from a photo gravure by Robert Spurgeon Wood. You can visit his website here: - <http://uk.geocities.com/rswoodart/index.html>

Nigel Royall, in the book "Voices from the Waterways" by Jean Stone explains about the tradition in Norfolk. "Sailcloth, years ago, that was cotton, quite a heavy cotton. On a pleasure wherry, because they were not sailing in the wintertime, it was untreated and left white. Now on a trading wherry, they leave it white the first year while she's stretching and then after that they would treat it with things like herring oil, paraffin and a drop of coal dust, all mixed up. The oil to preserve it and the coal dust to keep the mixture thick. Yeah, it would have been bloody dreadful, I bet, with your



hands all covered with it. They would lay it on the grass and then slap that on one side and next year they would do the other side. The reason for doing it one side at a time was to prevent the sail getting too heavy with the weight of the oil and that on there. The weight would slow it up".

Nowadays the sails are likely to stay white throughout their lifetime. The introduction of synthetic materials means they do not suffer the disadvantages of natural fabrics and don't need the protective dressing their predecessors required.