

RED SAILS

A REVIEW

In my early teens I used to go down to Ipswich Dock to look at the sailing barges. There were always some barge discharging at the mills, and others lying between freights outside the Custom House. I knew very little about these barges, but several people said 'You want to go and see them before they have all gone.'

In the early 1950s the commercial days of sailing barges were steadily and irrevocably, drawing to a close. To be honest I was lucky to see commercial sailing cargo barges in the United Kingdom when all other sailing cargo craft had long finished.

I, like many other people, could not bear to think that barges would fade away and that the waters of the Thames Estuary would become empty of the great brown sailed spritsail barges. Some people bought barges and kept them sailing. I couldn't afford to do that and looked for other ways to keep these unique craft. Finally it appeared that my role had become to write about the barges. In this way, through books and magazine articles, I might be able to stimulate people's interest in these barges.

I have always taken a keen interest in how barges are portrayed in books, magazines and on film, and over the years, have watched many films on TV and on the big screen. There is a pattern to these films, which have usually been created by men who are passionate about barges and have lovingly squeezed in too much detail.

The reason I enjoyed Michael Maloney's 'Red Sails' film is that it takes a wide view of the barge world, but still has wonderful shots of them under sail and some good historical background material.

The link that holds the film together is the four-year rebuild of the sailing barge *Cambria*. This barge was one of the finest wooden barges built and the last one to carry a cargo under sail. The story in of this rebuild is skilfully told in this film, with flash backs of barge history. The story in 'Red Sails' is helped along with some of the best black and white footage of the old time barge races. There is also a reminder that barges paid a key part in the Dunkirk Evacuation. Then there is the barge skipper Jim Lawrence telling tales of his early days and also singing barge shanties, as only he can. The whole thing is wrapped together cleverly to tell the colourful story of working sailing barges and the wonderful achievement of rebuilding the *Cambria* at Faversham and how she is sailing once again. This is the best film I have seen about barges because it draws the whole barge era together so well.

Robert Simper

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