

March 3rd 1934 Grays and Tilbury Gazette

A real son of old Grays is Mr William Bannister. He may not be a celebrity to the same extent as many of the folk who have graced this column, but his is a name which has been prominently associated with the town for generations. He has lived all his 86 years in Grays and, being blessed with a good memory, he is able to speak of many things which are beyond the recollection of most residents. It happens that he was born in the Old Dutch House, about which so generally recognised as a link with the past.

He is able to talk about the old town of Grays as it was seventy or eighty years ago, about the activities of the waterfront and about some of the early barge sailings. In his sitting room in Exmouth Road, he showed me a number of mementoes, each of which has its story to tell. There is the painting of the *Gazelle*, the barge with the lines of a yacht, on which he sailed to victory in more than one race. A framed engraving depicts two barges sailing almost neck and neck, an exciting incident in the well remembered race of 1865.

His skipper's cap, hung from a peg, constitutes a silent reminder of his sailing days, whilst one wall is ornamented by a handsome oak frame containing clock, thermometer and barometer in one setting – a gift from Messrs E J and W Goldsmith when he retired from their employment after 52 years service. A silver cup, left him by his father, was inscribed with a reference to the third annual Thames Barge Race of 1865, and since then Mr Bannister has acquired other trophies, which he was not able to show me. In one corner is a portrait of his father, a man with a jolly, weather-beaten face which bears evidence of his calling, even if the peaked cap and reefer jacket were not there to prove it. The bearded countenance of the son likewise reveals traces of many battles with the elements.

The veteran began his story by speaking of his grandfather and, as he did so, one caught glimpses in imagination of the Grays of over one hundred years ago. For his grandfather, whose name was West, was the carrier who used to travel between Grays and London, transporting passengers and goods. Picture a sort of covered wagon, drawn by a single horse, and fitted with seats on which people rode uncomfortably over the marsh roads and through the villages bordering the river. The terminal point in London was a hostelry called the Saracen's Head in Legatee, where a depot was established. The carrier used to make two journeys a day, so that persons having business in London could go up by the early morning service and return at night on the second trip. Mr Bannister sometimes travelled with his grandfather, and recalls that there was “country” almost to Legatee.

In addition to passengers, the carrier transported goods for the shopkeepers, of whom there were then only a few, mostly clustered about the lower end of the Old High Street. He remembered the names of some – Mrs Steel, baker and grocer, Mr Sponger, pork butcher, Mr Gladden, beef butcher, and Lotto Wood, grocer, who also had a boat and used to take people across to Gravesend when they so required.

Going up the Old High Street, on the left hand side there was an open space between the White Hart and the Bull public houses, then the so-called “doctor's shop”, where lived the only medical man in Grays, Dr Ford ; a draper's, another butchers, the Rising Sun public house (host Mr Crib) and a chemist's shop. On the other side, opposite the White Hart, was an alley flanked by houses in which bargemen lived. The premises now occupied by Mr Miller's off-licence were then a grocer's shop and post office, owned by a man named Flowers.

A little farther up was the police “lock up”, a cage like affair, which gave passers by a full view of prisoners. A few more shops and cottages brought one to the town barn and other farm buildings, which stood near the entrance to what is now New Road. From there to the “Green Man” (predecessor of the Queen's Hotel) with its adjacent pond, the road was a mere country lane, flanked by one or two houses in which the Messrs Goldsmith and other influential people lived. Opposite the “Green Man” was another barn in which cows were kept. Mr Bannister's father also kept cows in a field near the Rookery, Little Thurrock, and as a boy it was often young William's duty to go across the fields and bring them into Grays.

Though Grays was so undeveloped compared with its present state, it was nevertheless a

comparatively busy little town, particularly on the waterfront. Steamers and other craft called at the wharves to load or discharge merchandise, and there was a daily passenger service to London. In addition to the big barge owners such as Goldsmiths, Lanfields and Meesons (predecessors of the Grays Chalk Quarries Company), many other local residents, including farmers, had barges which they used for business and pleasure. Most of these people lived in houses in the Old High Street. Near the Town Wharf was a “free dock” belonging to the parish, which could be used without payment.

West of the High Street, the river wall was not fenced and there was no Globe Terrace. A path ran along the top of the wall, and people were able to go down on the saltings, where cricket was often played. That was before the time of Brooks Cement Factory and even of the Pottery and Rag Factory, which previously occupied the site.

William Bannister first saw the light of day in a room at the top of the Old Dutch House in the Old High Street, but does not remember how long he lived there. It was probably not long. He knows that his grandparents moved into another house nearby, opposite the White Hart Inn. At that time, his grandparents kept a shop where they sold milk, but later on they took over the management of the Green Man, and after that they managed the Bull.

He attended Palmer's School, which had not been long established at the premises at the entrance to Orsett Road. His father was a Palmer's boy before him, and used to go to the school when it was held in the tiny building by the Parish Church. In those days, the boys wore some kind of regulation clothing, but this practice had been discontinued before young William went to Palmers. The first master he remembers was a Mr Charles Prince who, according to the book written by the late Mr H E Brooks, served from 1852 to 1857. Others who followed were Rev J Bennington, Mr Nicholas Torre and Mr Wilson. The last named he recalls as a “very tall man” who was a games enthusiast, and Mr Bannister believes it was he who first introduced football into Grays. Though Palmers was a “Free School”, his parents had to pay for him when he first attended, and it was not until afterwards that the trustees, who then included Messrs Meeson, Peter Jackson and Asplin, granted him a free place.

“We only learnt the three R's”, said Mr Bannister reminiscently. He seems to have done very well at his lessons, for he was top of the school when he left at the age of thirteen. His instruction served him in good stead afterwards, for barge captains of those days had to do their own clerical work.

On leaving school, he joined his father, who was skipper of one of Lanfield's barges, and sailed with him for several years as a member of the crew. The Grandfather West had a barge specially built for him, and it was on this vessel, the “*Surprise*” that young William sampled the delights of barge racing.

The annual Thames Barge Race had been initiated only a short while before, in 1863, by one Henry Dodd of London, and had rapidly come to be recognised as an event of prime importance on the river. Barges from all parts of the waterway from London down to Rochester took part, and were divided into two classes, “topsail” and “stump”, in each of which three prizes were given. The course was a little different from now, being from Erith to the Nore and back. The race was always made the occasion of a general holiday up and down the river.

