

## *The Rebirth of the Worfolk's first boat* *The 'Baden Powell' (LN138)*



Walter Worfolk

When Walter Worfolk built his first boat, the *Baden Powell*, in 1900, I do not think he could have ever hoped or imagined that she would still be in use over 120 years later, restored and reborn into a new life on King's Lynn's River Great Ouse.

Walter can trace his English boat-building DNA back to 1613 when his ancestors came over from France and Germany to build barges for King Charles I. Walter originated from Stainforth near Doncaster and moved to King's Lynn in 1899 with the initial intention to work on his wife's uncle's cattle rearing farm. However, he soon got bored of this new life and reverted back to his ancestral trade of boat building.

He set up his new business by Lynn's South Gate and soon moved to a site near to where the River Nar flows into the Great Ouse. This was adjacent to where Lynn's whaling industry had its site for processing its catch until the mid-nineteenth century and known locally as Blubber Creek.

It was here in 1900 that Walter built his first commission, a 34-foot-long double ended cockling and shrimping boat for local fishermen William and Harry Cook. She was christened the *Baden Powell* after Britain's Boer War hero and later founder of the Scouting movement. The *Baden Powell* also acquired her lifelong port identity of LN138.

When the boat was delivered, Mr Cook liked it so much that he gave Walter an extra £5 on top of the agreed £50 and a cruet set for Walter's wife, Lily.

The life of a fisherman was tough, precarious and dangerous. The boat would be sailed down the river, in all weathers, tacking frantically if the wind was in the wrong direction, onto what was hoped would be a rich harvesting site out in the Wash. An anchor would be thrown overboard and the crew would wait as the tide receded, leaving her high and dry on a sandbank. The crew, sometimes just a man and a boy, would then harvest cockles using rakes and load the catch into sacks.

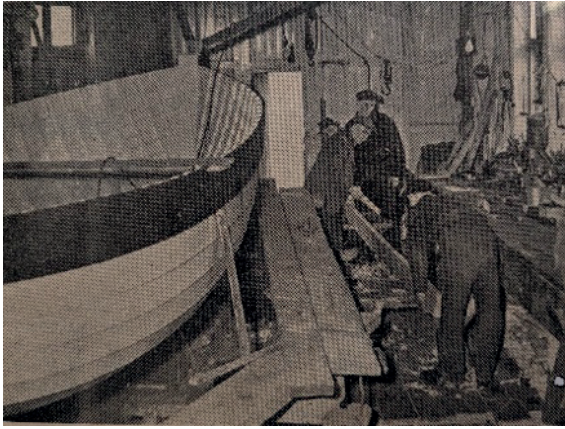
Keeping a constant eye on the rapidly incoming tide, the crew heaved the last sacks on to the deck and waited to be refloated and to make their way home. They had no modern safety or navigational aids like GPS or depth-sounding equipment. The fisherman of Lynn knew these waters like the backs of their rope, wind- and salt-weathered hands. The crew would negotiate the ever-shifting sands of the inlets back to the Fisher Fleet next to the docks using the landmark towers of Greyfriars Friary, St Margaret's Church and St Nicholas Chapel to find their way home. Greyfriars only survived the purge of



'Baden Powell' leaving the Fisher Fleet  
about 1950



Harvesting cockles in bare feet



Worfolk Boat Yard in the 1950s (Courtesy of the 'Eastern Daily Press')

Henry VIII's Dissolution in the 1530s as it was used as a landmark for ships returning to harbour. Unfortunately, not all fishermen made it safely home as the death registers and headstones in the local cemetery testify.

Many fishermen had second jobs. George Solly, one of *Baden Powell's* fishermen from the 1950s, was a builder. Others supplemented their incomes with second jobs as scaffolders, labourers or worked on farms or the huge local sugar beet factory to feed their families and make

ends meet. It was not all hard work though as fisher families also used their boats for trips out for picnics on the river or the Wash for a day in the sun.

It was commonplace that fishermen acquired evocative nicknames that stayed with them all their lives, such as 'Sweet Tea' Norris, 'Broken dish' Bone, 'Wacker' Bunn, 'Cock a doodle doo' Fisher and 'Piggy' Sampher, to name a few. The fishermen lived in a close-knit community known as the North End and the nicknames helped to identify one family member or generation from another.

The *Baden Powell* went on to have a long life plying the treacherous inland waters and inlets of the river and the Wash, harvesting shrimps and cockles. When she was launched, she was powered by sail. By the 1920s, propulsion technology had advanced so that a Swedish 2-cylinder Bolinder diesel engine was installed, driving a single propeller allowing her to be free of the vagaries of the wind and tide.

While these were hard days for the fishermen it was also hard graft for the boat builders. The *Baden Powell* was built entirely by hand without power tools using only saws and adze, brace and bit, augers, a caulking knife, a foot rule, sandpaper, elbow grease and what was known as 'an eye for the job'. Boys would start working and learning their trade at 12 or 13 years old straight from school and were paid 1/6d per week, half of which was given to their mums for a contribution towards the rent! Shipwrights, after completing their seven-year apprenticeship could take home 30 shillings a week. Good money and regular work in those days.

The Worfolks did not produce drawings or plans for their wooden boats. One of the first skills an apprentice mastered was how to produce a scale model of the boat which would be shown to the prospective customer. When the customer was satisfied with the design, the model would be scaled up to produce the full-sized boat. The models are now highly collectable.



Launching a boat, 1950s style (Courtesy of the 'Eastern Daily Press')



*The abandoned Norfolk Brothers Boat Yard, The Friars, King's Lynn*

Walter was joined by his sons Gerald and Bill as the company grew to employ 30 staff and moved to premises by the Alexandra Dock. They went on to produce over 620 craft of all types including building, repairing and adapting boats for the Royal Navy in both World Wars. Fortunately, a few of these wonderful boats still survive today, including the *Lady of the Lynn*, which was sailed across the Atlantic to Newfoundland, the whelking ship *Britannia* based in Exeter and *Victorious* run by the Norfolk Coastal Exploration Company, based in Wells-next-the-Sea. Bill lived to be a 100 years old and Gerald was 90 when he died in 1981.

The boat yard near Blubber Creek is now forgotten and nature has slowly started to reclaim what's hers. It is now overgrown, abandoned and a haven for birds, local night time drinkers and the occasional visit by an urban archaeologist. There is nothing to suggest that beautiful wooden boats were ever made here and above the song of blackbirds and a wren you can, if you listen hard enough, catch the faint sound of sawing and hammering.

The Worfolks were known for building high-quality boats and we look at them now as works of art, memories of a romantic bygone age and in need of protection and preservation. Being realistic though, we sadly have to accept that, for a fisherman, a boat was just part of his tool kit and they were, in effect, the 'white vans' of the day. After their useful life, hastened by the transition to metal hulled boats, many were left to rot in the boat graveyard that is the Fisher Fleet or on the banks and quays of the river.



*The wreck of a once-proud boat*



*'Am I next?!'*



'Baden Powell' in the Fisher Fleet

The skeletons of some of these wonderful boats can still be seen today slowly rotting and sinking into the silt.

This would have been the inevitable fate of the *Baden Powell* had it not been for the actions of the True's Yard Fisherfolk Museum, a must-visit centre for the study of Lynn's fishing and boat building heritage and North End communities. Details of opening times are on their website [www.truesyard.co.uk](http://www.truesyard.co.uk)

In the early 1990s, after her working life was over, she was in a sorry state having been left languishing in the Fisher Fleet and latterly on the quayside at the mercy of the wind, rain and wood boring beetles. She was rescued in 1990 by the museum and taken to their premises in Lynn's North Street.

She remained in the museum's back yard until 2007, when the *Baden Powell* was acquired by a group of dedicated local enthusiasts with the

vision of a full restoration and to see her once again under full sail. The group later formed the King's Lynn Norfolk Boat Trust, were registered as a charity and successfully applied for inclusion on the Historic Ships Register (number 2456) which allowed access to National Lottery Heritage grants and other donations. Little did they know what a monumental project they had taken on and that it would take 11 years to realize their dreams.

The *Baden Powell* was transported on a low loader to the farm of one of the trustees to begin the restoration. The team of volunteers was joined by Vic Pratt, master shipbuilder, who was an apprentice under the Norfolk Brothers, providing his expert guidance and advice. Vic had worked on the *Baden Powell* in the past and his dad actually owned her for six years!

One of the first tasks was a detailed survey of the boat to determine what work was required to assess the damage and to produce a plan and timeline to restore the boat back to her former glory. The team had the foresight to take hundreds of photographs of the boat and her features as many parts would need to be reproduced. These are proving invaluable even to this day.

The boat was moved to an old barn on the farm offering protection from the elements. The team worked hard acquiring new skills and blisters, and were on the constant look out for suitable timber. Oak and larch trees were sourced, including one from the royal estate at Sandringham. They were felled, transported, seasoned, steamed and bent to replace rotten planks and fittings.

Progress was very slow due to the lack of materials and funds.



'Baden Powell' left high and dry on the quayside

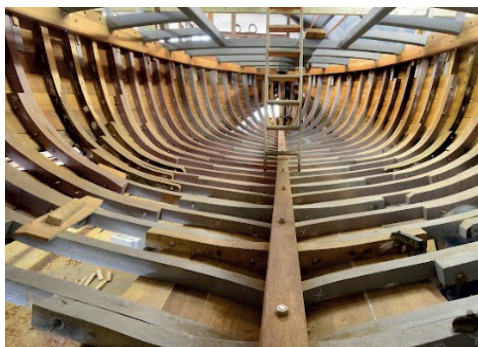


*'We'll get this done in a year!'*

This was a team of volunteers who could only work in their spare time one day a week at the 'Wednesday Workshop'. There were 40 planks to replace and at the initial rate of progress it would take nearly two years to replace the planking alone. Much to their regret, the realization dawned that the team needed the intervention of professional shipwrights. In April 2015 the *Baden Powell* was taken by low loader to the Brian Kennel Boat Builders at Layer Bretons in Essex to complete the work on the hull. Sadly, many of the timbers in the boat were unsalvageable and a more extensive restoration was required. The original pitch pine planking was replaced with iroko.



*'The deck and bow of 'Baden Powell' before restoration*



*Restoration and replacement of timbers and planks*



*Not another coat of paint!*



*Making lead ballast using a house brick*

Now seems a good time to raise the age-old conundrum: is the result of an extensive restoration the same boat or is it a new boat? When restoring the *Baden Powell*, as many of the original parts were kept if at all possible.



*Vic Pratt and some trustees and volunteers*

Timbers were replaced one at a time during the restoration and so the *Baden Powell* still has the original shape, design and concept as when Walter Worfolk built her in 1900. Although much of the original boat has been replaced, her spirit still lives on.

In November 2016 she returned to Lynn for final fitting out of mast and rigging and new sails made by Steve Hall of Maldon in Essex. She has a reconditioned Thorneycroft engine that once saw life in a lorry, and she eventually had three tons of ballast installed, made from lead ingots smelted by hand using the frog of a London Brick Company house brick as the mould.

The total cost of restoration was more than £200,000 plus thousands of hours of volunteer blood, sweat and tears. The project could only have been achieved by a massive fundraising effort and we are grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund, True's Yard, Adrian Flux Insurance, Associated British Ports, Teamac Paints, the King's Lynn Council, hundreds of small donations from the local community and more recently, the King's Lynn Town Guides and the Ranworth Trust for their help in keeping the *Baden Powell* afloat.



*'Baden Powell' in all her glory*



*Enjoying the experience*



*Beached on a cockling trip, for which she was designed*

In 2018 the amazing transformation of the *Baden Powell* from the wreck of an old unwanted fishing boat destined to rot on the quayside, into a once again proud river going craft was complete. She is unique: the last surviving double-ended cockling boat in existence.

Soon after her relaunch, the *Baden Powell* appeared in the film “The Personal History of David Copperfield” and some of the crew dressed in period costume for their 15 minutes of fame. An unexpected but most welcome income stream.

Since her restoration, the *Baden Powell* has slipped seamlessly into her new life and has taken over 1,000 guests on trips up the river and into The Wash. Sailings can be booked through [www.floatourboat.co.uk](http://www.floatourboat.co.uk) and we can organise private trips for families, friends, team building and special events.

We are also fulfilling our aims of educating our guests about Lynn’s fishing and boat building heritage and giving unparalleled views of Lynn’s historic quayside, birds, seals and wildlife. Two

of our key aims are to provide sail training for local youth organizations and an historic learning aid for schools.

One ambition of the original trustees was realised and the success of the project sealed, when we replicated a cockling trip and beached the boat out in the Wash and harvested cockles in the same way the *Baden Powell’s* first owners would have done more than a century earlier. Cockle chowder never tasted so good.

It is difficult to find words to describe what an historic and monumental achievement this has been to rescue the *Baden Powell* and to see her once again fully restored and in full and active use. The original team of trustees along with the volunteers, sponsors, family members, skippers and crew should be immensely proud of what has been achieved. She is now fit to last at least another 100 years for future generations to enjoy.

But you know, there would not be anyone that could be as proud as old Walter Worfolk. You can see the smile on his face as he watches his first boat ploughing through the waves in full sail, under her own power as he would surely have done when she left the safety of his boat yard on the River Nar over 120 years ago.

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of Worfolk Boat Trust.

**Kim D. Leonard**  
**Treasurer and Trustee, King’s Lynn Worfolk Boat Trust**