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John Constable drawing water once more

Converting a mud-covered rotting hulk into the world's only electric-powered passenger lighter has been an interesting learning curve for the River Stour Trust. Cathy Shelbourne tracks the progress.

From Easter 2014, the lighter that lay under a century of mud in Ballingdon Cut and was restored through the £120,000 lottery-funded Managing a Masterpiece project, will be providing a full passenger service.

"It has been a huge learning curve," acknowledges Andrew Richardson, chairman of the River Stour Trust, whose volunteers now run the *John Constable* barge, after its restoration by the Pioneer Sailing Trust, and overall management by the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project.

One horse towed the original vessel; today however it's equipped with 10hp electric outboard engines with batteries with just enough power in reserve to safely meet all conditions.

"The lighter is hugely stable and immensely strong but the handling was not what our crews were used to, and we had to go very softly, softly.

"It had been planned to put the engines into a well, but this would have intruded into the design, so they were mounted astern – which made them vulnerable, despite deflectors and circuits designed to break in the event of damage.

"The project has tested our resolve in terms of problem solving and operating a new boat – but we have overcome these challenges, the initial crew has passed on their skills to a new team and we are now looking forward to the new season," explained Andrew.

Lighters are barges, which were built at Flatford to carry goods up and down the river Stour. Even in the early 1700s they were carrying coal from Manningtree as far upriver as Sudbury, and corn and bricks were moved in the other direction. Lighters on this stretch of the navigation travelled in pairs, shackled bow to stern, with the following lighter acting as a rudder.

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Andrew Richardson
Chairman of the
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The second boat had a single hold with a small cabin at the stern.

They were towed by a single horse, which was trained to leap on and off the foredeck as the towpath changed sides, and over obstacles. (This action was famously recorded in John Constable's *The Leaping Horse* painting of 1824-5.) Lighters continued to work until World War 1, when they were scuttled in Ballingdon Cut, so that they couldn't be used if the Germans invaded. The last two lighters worked on the lower part of the river until about 1938.

The *John Constable* is part of the National Historic Fleet: www.nationalhistoricalships.org.uk >>

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The *John Constable* passing under the bridge at Sudbury.

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River Stour Trust volunteers Brian Cornell (left) and Mike Finch with a caulking pot similar to the one in Constable's painting of the dry dock at Flatford, and a 'knee' from an original lighter.

A sepia print of a lighter with boy and horse, on the River Stour.

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Neil Catchpole from the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project dressed for the part as horseman with the leaping horse.

<< Exploring Constable's country

The artist John Constable (1776-1837) grew up in East Bergholt and regularly painted scenes along the Stour, many of which are still recognisable today. *Boat-building near Flatford Mill*, painted in 1814, is a very detailed record of a Stour lighter in a dry dock, with a boy picking at hemp rope to make the oakum, which was forced into the seams of the lighter with a caulking iron and mallet. Since then, Flatford has become a honey pot for Constable fans, and tearooms and information centres have crept up upon the rural idyll.

However, in the 1980s, the dry dock of the painting was excavated – and can now be seen next to the National Trust centre, with the three planks to support the lighter still in place.

Getting on board

The lighter is available as a floating classroom for educational visits and is operational from Easter for cruises between Sudbury, Great Comard and Great Henny.

She will be available on weekdays and weekends from Easter until the end of October, subject to existing bookings and commitments. Pub meals, gourmet picnics or a visit to the Granary tearooms are pleasant extras.

- Half-day charters, up to 4 hours, cost £250; a full day, up to 8 hours, is £400. Telephone 01787 313199 www.riverstourtrust.org.



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Griff Rhys Jones, a Vice President of the River Stour Trust, on board with the flag of the National Historic Ships UK.



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The completed project; the *John Constable* on the upper reaches of the river Stour.

John Constable's vital statistics

The *John Constable* is a Stour barge and was built in about 1880, possibly at Flatford. She was scuttled during World War I, and raised from the mud in 1972 by the newly formed River Stour Trust.

The restoration was completed in 2012 with financial assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

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| Beam: | 10.85ft |
| Length: | 46.72ft |
| Depth: | 2.98ft |
| Weight: | 14 tons |
| Top speed: | 9mph |