

The *Southern Belle*,
following her 1945-47 refit.



Southern Belle: still ferrying passengers

Alan Barnes follows the trail of the 1925-built *Southern Belle*, a classic ferry boat from the Tamar that is now enjoying a new lease of life in East Anglia following an extensive restoration from near derelict condition.



Southern Belle in the colours of the Milbrok Steamboat & Trading Co, passing Mashfords Boatyard where she was originally built by Rogers of Cremyll.

For the best part of 80 years the small wooden ferry boat *Southern Belle* carried passengers across the Tamar Estuary and on the coastal waters around Plymouth. Badly in need of extensive restoration work, the *Southern Belle* was bought by Steve 'Tug' Wilson in 2003 and moved to Great Yarmouth where she has been restored and returned to passenger-carrying service on the River Yare.

Although first documented in 1204, the ferry crossing the Hamoaze probably dates from Saxon times. This estuary, where the rivers of the Tamar Valley flow into the sea at Plymouth – while affording a safe harbour and a navigable waterway – did present something of a barrier to travellers between Devon and Cornwall.

Records show that the ferry was originally operated by the Valletort family before the rights to the rents from the crossing passed to the Earls of Edgcumbe in 1493 and 1511. The Mount Edgcumbe estate continued to operate the ferry until 1944, when the line of descent ceased following the death of the fifth earl and



The installation of the essential instruments.

responsibility for the ferry then passed to the Millbrook Steamboat & Trading Co.

In 1885 the ferry service from Cremyll had been operated by a single small craft, the *Dodo*, but in 1887 she was joined by two wooden steamboats, the *Armadillo* and the *Shuttlecock*, while another steamer, the *Carrier*, joined the fleet in 1889. These boats continued to operate the regular services until the mid-1920s when they were replaced by two new boats, which were also called *Shuttlecock* and *Armadillo*. These were both built by local boatbuilders Rogers of Cremyll, and the 26 tonne, 66ft long steamboats entered service in 1925 and 1926 respectively.

The Millbrook Steamboat & Trading Co can be traced back to 1885 when John Parson acquired the steamer *Millbrook* and began operating services across the River Tamar from Millbrook to Plymouth. Over the next few years more steamers were added to the fleet, and by 1914 the company was operating services with the *Cornubia*, *Devonia*, *Britannia*, *Hibernia* and the *Brunel*. The outbreak of WWI saw a reduction in the fleet and by the end of the war only *Britannia* remained in operation. Having been requisitioned by the War Office for duties at Scapa Flow, *Hibernia* eventually returned to the Tamar in 1921 and re-entered service with *Millbrook* for a few more years.

In 1929 the business was incorporated as a limited company with John Parson being joined by Frank Pearson, and William Crawford was appointed manager. During the early 1930s the fleet grew and by 1939 the company had seven



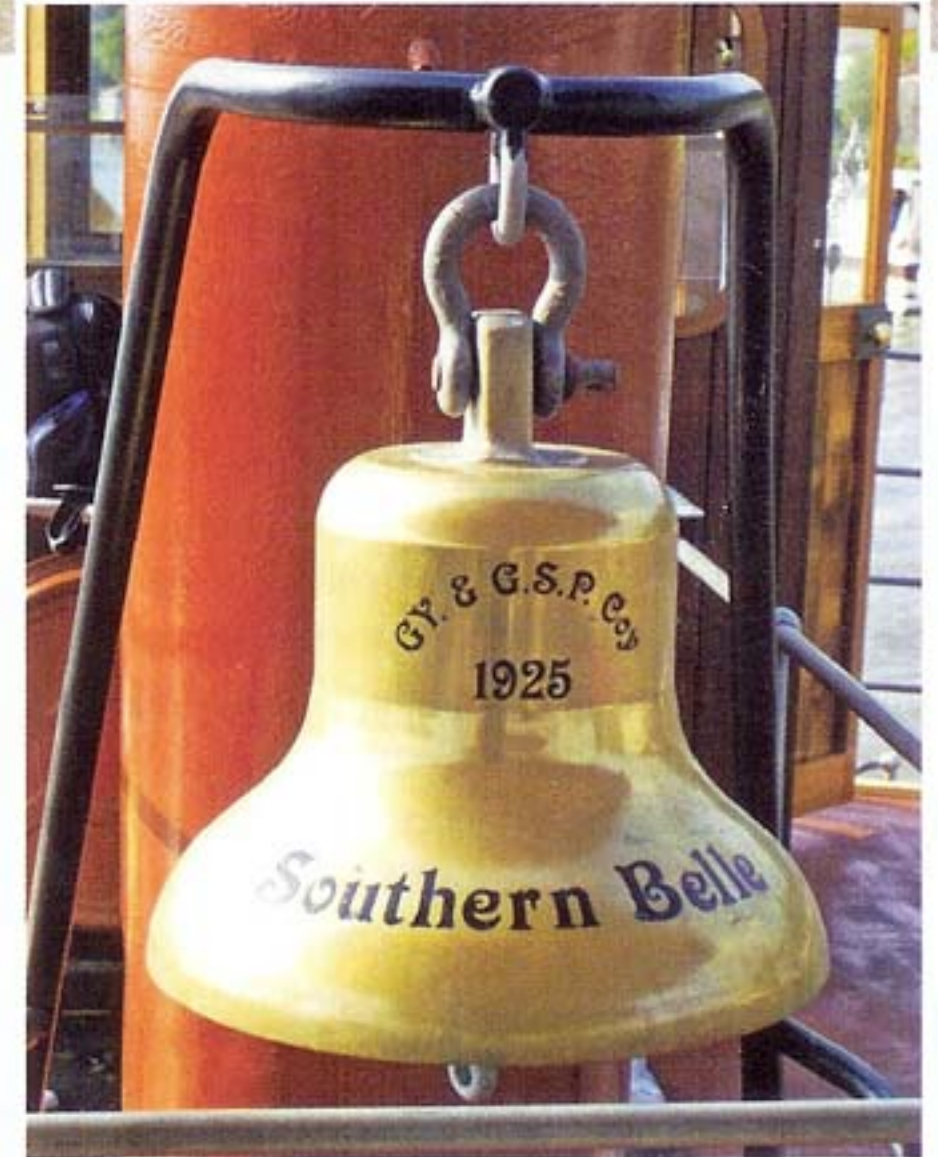
Southern Belle at Great Yarmouth on 1 August 2006. Inset: The ship's bell, taken off an old Trinity House marker buoy from a scrapyards in Portsmouth.

boats in service. Operations continued through the war years and in 1943 Millbrook took over the running of the Cremyll Ferry on behalf of the Edgcombe estate. The following year they took over this ferry completely and both *Armadillo* and *Shuttlecock* were added to the Millbrook fleet.

When hostilities ended these two steamboats had their engines replaced by diesel units; the *Shuttlecock* being converted in 1945 and *Armadillo* in 1946/47. This work was carried out by Mashfords, who now owned the Rogers boatyard at Cremyll, where both vessels had been built. When they returned to service, the re-engined boats were renamed *Southern Belle* and *Northern Belle* respectively.

The 1950s and 1960s were prosperous times for the company, which had by this time become the major ferry operator in the area. The *Northern Belle* continued to operate the service from Cremyll, as she does to this day (although under different ownership), while the *Southern Belle* was used for trips around the dockyard. In 1980 the directors of the company sold their shares to Dart Pleasure Craft and *Southern Belle* passed into new ownership.

In 1985 she passed to Plymouth Boat Cruises



and remained in service for several years until being sold to the Isle of Wight Pleasure Boat Co in 2000. Now in need of some extensive repairs, the *Southern Belle* was laid up and eventually sold to Steve 'Tug' Wilson in 2003, and for the first time in her history the boat left the Plymouth area and was moved east to Great Yarmouth.

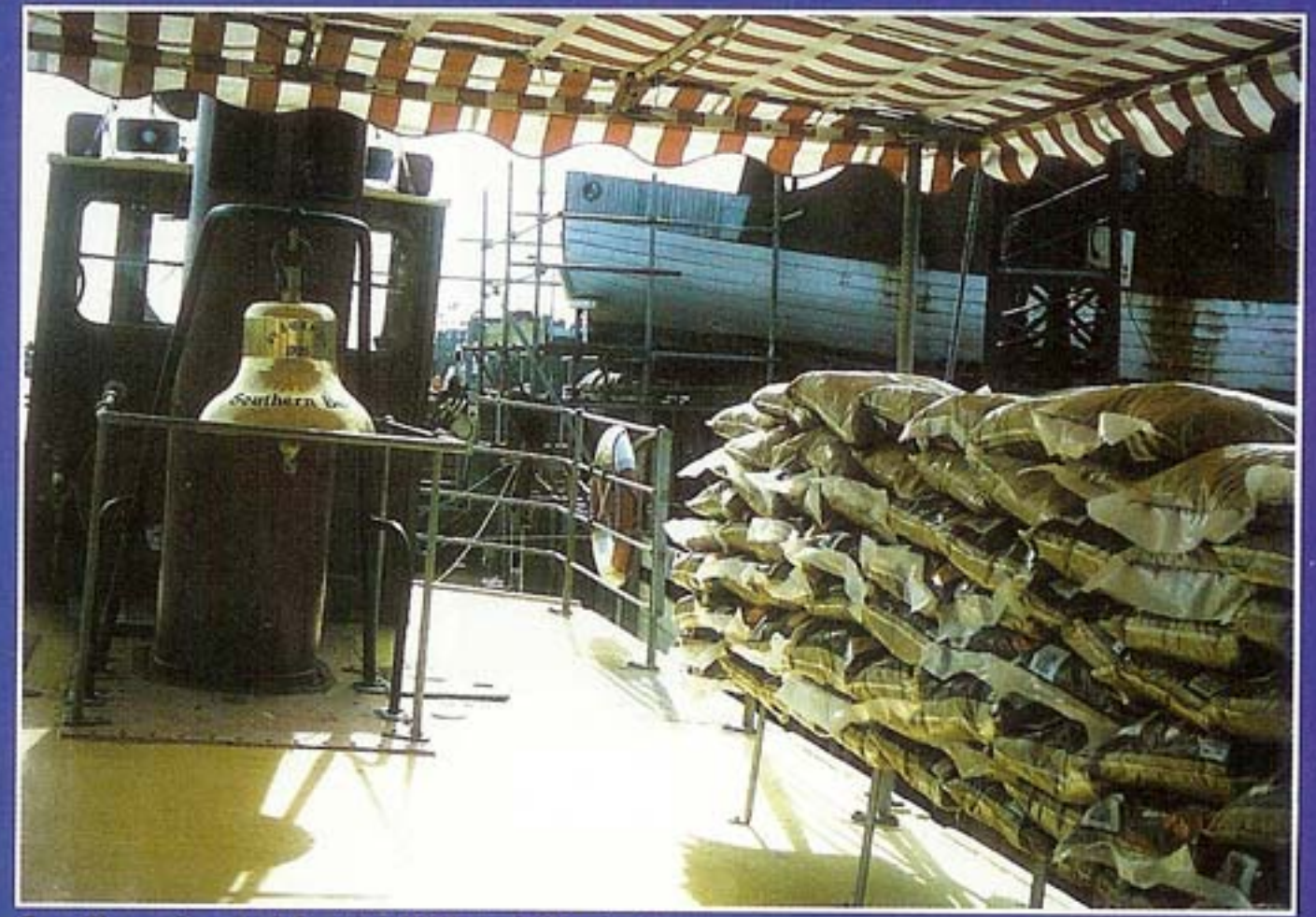
"The old girl was certainly in a bit of a state when I bought her," observed Steve, "and any restoration would certainly be a lengthy project. We bought her in November 2003 from a



Sister vessel *Northern Belle* awaits her passengers at Cremyll.



Repairing the wheelhouse floor. There was much timber replacement required throughout the whole vessel.



Sandbags loaded for the BOT stability test.

company based in Cowes, which had tried to charter the vessel but without carrying out any major repair work. We were quite surprised to find that the boat had a current MCA certificate, which allowed her to work the Solent and the Medina. When we inspected her, she had a large mains pump connected to a shore supply, which was keeping her afloat, and when it rained more water was finding its way through the coach roof and the decking. The rear deck was also breaking away from the superstructure.

“Apparently the owners had run her for a season and due to her ‘tired’ condition, had tried to sell her. She had been used that year as a hospitality ship for Team Volvo during the Cowes Regatta and had hosted at least one wedding on board. However, there were plans to haul her into a mud berth on the Medina and convert her into a houseboat. If we had not been looking for a classic vessel, I doubt that it would have been too long before *Southern Belle* was abandoned as a hulk.

“The journey back from Cowes to Great Yarmouth took around six weeks during November and December 2003, a trip which had to be made in stages due to her somewhat frail condition. Any sea state above a Force 3 would cause the planks to ease and water

would flood into the saloon. I did not realise just how bad a state she was in until I tried to engage the emergency tiller when the cable steering snapped and I put my foot clean through the three inch planking of the aft deck.

“However, we managed to get her back to Great Yarmouth more or less in one piece and made our plans for the restoration. We wanted to restore the *Southern Belle* to the same condition she was in after her 1945 refit, but we also wanted to maintain her as a working passenger vessel.

“This meant that some original features could not be replicated, as they would not comply with current safety legislation. We were unable to replace the smaller windows in the superstructure as they did not provide adequate means of escape, and we could not restore the aft well deck, as this didn’t meet modern safety standards. The restoration that we have achieved is a balance between originality and regulation, which has resulted in a very practical classic – which all being well should have at least another 50 years ahead of her as a working boat.

“Repairs were carried out to the superstructure with new modern windows fitted and the coach roof and outer decks were also repaired. They would originally have had a

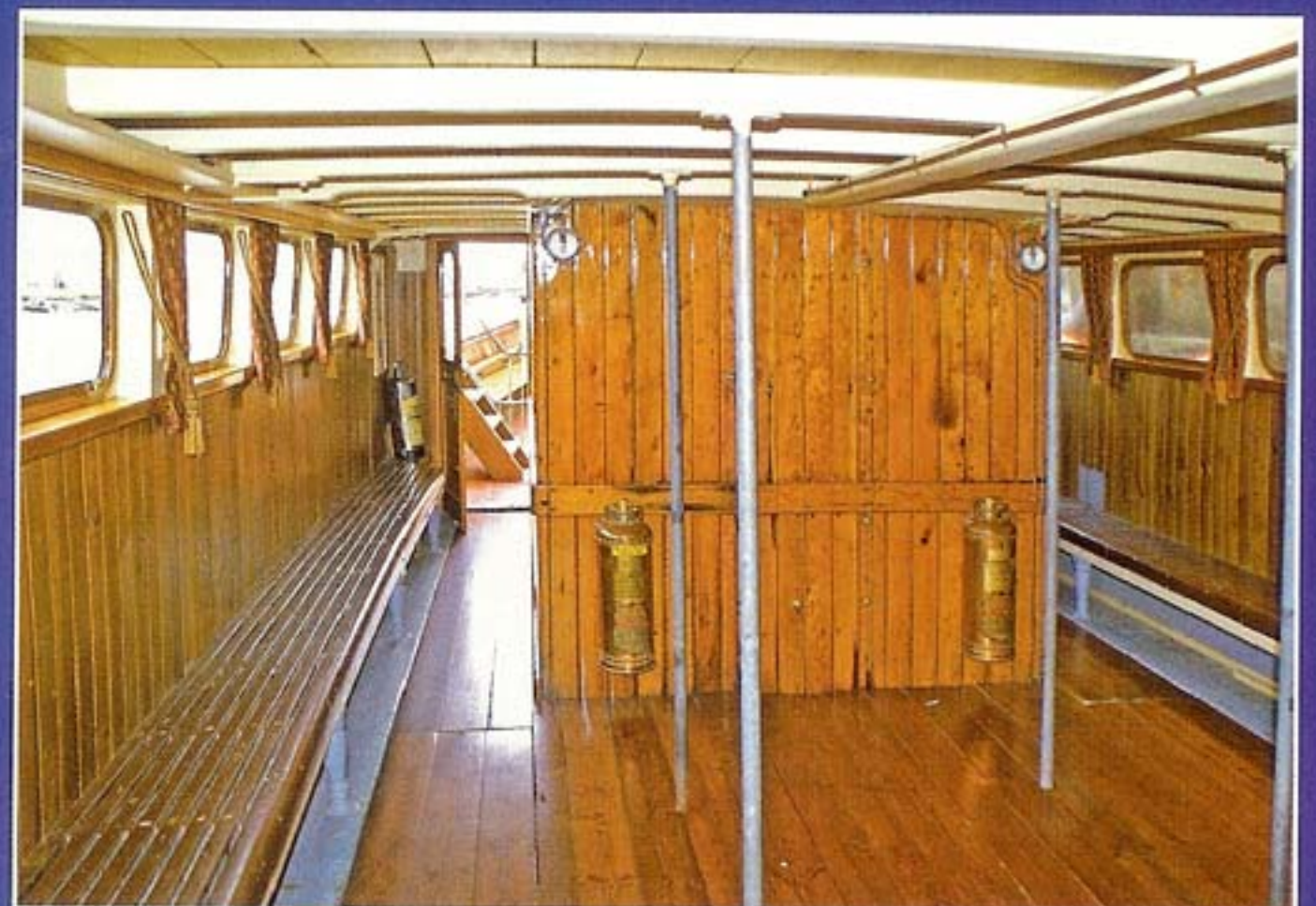
painted canvas covering, but we bonded a layer of plywood over them, which was then covered in glass fibre and painted with non-slip chlorinated rubber paint. The finish is as near to the original as is practical for everyday use. The original elm rubbing strake was fairly rotten and was replaced with English Oak and the entire aft deck and deck beams were also replaced. The aft steel ring frame, which connected this section to the end of the saloon, was also badly corroded so this was replaced as well.

“A previous owner had fitted a horrible plywood box for the wheelhouse. The wood was rotten and it was also much too big – so that definitely had to go. Once it had been removed, we discovered that the original soleplate carrying the date 1947 was still present beneath the plywood structure, so a new wheelhouse was built on this.

Records show that the refit and conversion to diesel was carried out in 1945 so this seems to indicate that further work was undertaken some time later. It may be that she returned to the yard when the work on *Northern Belle* was being carried out but this is only a guess. All the original railings were badly corroded and rusted completely through in many places and some sections were missing. However, the stanchions were fairly sound so these were shotblasted,



Rebuild of the Gardner 6LX unit – probably the oldest example in regular daily use.



Plenty of woodwork in the saloon interior.



Aft view on the slipway, prior to painting the rudder.



Repairing the cabin sides.

galvanised and re-used. While rebuilding the railings, we managed to design a section housing an hydraulic hoist to allow access for wheelchair users. It could also be used to recover anybody unlucky enough to fall overboard although we haven't had to test this out yet!

"The main saloon has been changed many times during her life and had been lined out with 1960s Formica and painted white throughout. Some sections had retained the original tongue and groove timbers underneath the Formica so all the covering was stripped away, the timber made good and revarnished.

It was impossible to restore the original saloon layout so we decided on the most practical version. Age-related timber was used wherever practical and we built a small galley in an area, which had already been disturbed by an earlier fitment. We found the head so small and impractical that we decided to double its size by extending it onto the area of the aft deck and we also installed a washbasin as had been fitted when she was first built for the Earl of Edgcumbe. We also managed to find some correct period bar equipment and a 1920s copper water boiler to make the tea. On the upper deck there was no proper seating so we made up some similar units to the ones in the saloon and on the forward well deck.

"Originally *Southern Belle* had been a steamboat but the engines were replaced during the 1945 refit. Her main engine is one of the first of the Gardner 6LX units and is probably the oldest one in regular daily use. It had already been rebuilt once by Perkins when they owned Gardners, but it was now in need of another complete overhaul.

"We completely restored the engine gearbox and reduction units in our workshops and we were lucky enough to get the last set of clutch plates and planetary gears for the 2UC box, which were on the shelf at Gardners. We also managed to come by a self-changing gear assembly, which had come from a Thames passenger vessel, and an old WWII engine room telegraph from an MTB was used to work them. The Vickers steering gear was also retained and converted to hydraulic operation.

"The most important missing item was, of

course, the ship's bell. Nobody knew the whereabouts of the original so we went hunting for something appropriate. What we found at a breaker's yard in Portsmouth was a massive roughcast bell taken off an old Trinity House marker buoy. Appropriate or not, you will have to judge for yourselves. We had the bell turned down and the boat's name was engraved on it, and as far as I know the *Southern Belle* has the largest bell of any boat afloat on the English waterways.

"Restoring the *Southern Belle* has been a labour of love but the result is the return of a classic vessel to daily use. Some compromises have had to be made in the restoration, but I think the essence of the vessel has been preserved.

"While conditions on the Yare and around Great Yarmouth are different from her old Devon haunts, she handles well and is popular with tourists and holidaymakers and there is good demand from charter parties. The *Northern Belle* is still operating on the Cremyll Ferry service today, and now her sister vessel is back in action they certainly are a pair of remarkable maritime survivors."

The *Southern Belle* is currently based at Great Yarmouth, where Steve has revived the passenger services of the long lost Gorleston & Great Yarmouth Steam Boat Co, which

operated in the region in the early 1900s. Their boats used to carry passengers and cargo to Ipswich, Norwich, Wroxham and Oulton Broad, and although the *Southern Belle* is unlikely to carry very much freight, she now works on the same rivers as the old steamers used to do over 100 years ago.

My thanks to Steve Wilson for providing the information and restoration pictures and also to Ian Boyle for further details and archive photographs from his collection. ■

■ Full details of events and sailings for the *Southern Belle* can be viewed at www.southernbelle.co.uk



Jubilation! The first trial run.



On the River Yare at Reedham, 5 September 2006.