Robert the Devil

I have found five references to Robert the devil in various publications about the history of Erith.

1. The first is from John A Pritchard's booklet *A History of Erith, Part III: 1837-1894* published by London Borough of Bexley's Libraries and Museums Department.

There were several local owners of sailing barges, and a few barges were built at Erith. Several Erith owners and skippers were associated with the barge races, some of them being colourful characters. Such a one was Robert Austen, owner of the "Chance", whose escapades earned him the title of "Robert the Devil". He would swim across to Coldharbour Point and back for a pint of beer, and would have a granite kerbstone broken across his chest for a gallon. Another famous Erith skipper was Samuel Beadle, whose "Whimbrel" he skippered to victory in the 1882 race. The Stone family of Erith were noted barge owners and builders. There was old John Stone and two of his sons, Robert and Charles. Robert had several sons, one of whom, John, carried on the business at Erith known as the General Wharfage Co. Another son, Douglas, founded the ship-building firm of Stone Brothers at Brightlingsea, Essex, which continued as James & Stone Ltd. Stones of Erith were the first to fit a steering wheel to a barge, when in 1882, they replaced the tiller of the "Anglo-Norman" by a wheel taken from the schooner "Azalia". After being a familiar sight off Erith for over a century, the sailing barges dwindled and all but disappeared from the Thames in the years after the Second World War.

2. The second is also from John A Pritchard in his introduction to *Erith 1864, Old Ordnance Survey Maps (Kent Sheet 3.09)*, published by Alan Godfrey Maps, 1995.

The waterfront provided much of the life and activity of Victorian Erith. In the days of sail many ships paid off at Erith, providing trade for the growing number of public houses. The river was full of sail, particularly the collier brigs which brought coal to the coal wharf and the gas works, and also the brown-sailed sailing barges, some of which were locally owned. From 1863 to 1893 the annual sailing barges races were started from Erith. They had been initiated by Henry Dodd, known as the 'Golden Dustman', who provided the inspiration for the character of Mr Boffin in Charles Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*. The waterfront was the haunt of some colourful local characters, such as Robert Austen, known as 'Robert the Devil', who would swim to Coldharbour Point and back for a pint of beer, or have a granite kerbstone broken across his chest for a gallon.

3. The third is from an article by W L Beardmore, 1892-1978 entitled *Memories of Erith* which was published in the Tenth Anniversary celebration booklet by Erith & Belvedere Local History Society, 1983.

Then there were the Regattas. Each firm had a crew. My favourite was the Canaries from the ballast wharf who wore yellow singlets. There were pairs and single sculls and the rumtum where the oar was used over the stern. We had several Doggetts Coat and Badge men who also owned the freedom of the city of London and could attend the Lord Mayor's Show. I think they represented the Royal Barge crew at that time. A great friend of mine, George Luck, beat Bert Barry, the world champion in a handicap race sponsored by Cherry Blossom Boot Polish and won £1,000. After the races came the greasy pole which was held in front of Beadles timber yard. Two ducks were in a box at the end of the pole and had to be released by pulling a lever. When this happened, they all dived in to try to get a duck which
was part of the prize. Then came the Miller & Sweep. Two well known characters, Robert the devil and Mr. White would throw bags of soot and flour at each other from their boats until the policeman came to arrest them and he would get the lot! The boats were stored in a barge, open one end owned by Jim Cole and the others were stored at the back of the ‘Yacht’ which had a licence to open and sell beer at 6.30 am for seamen going off to their ships. There was a shop which sold shrimps which were caught at Gravesend.

[The shrimp shop mentioned would have been that of Mr W Gilder]

4. The third quotation was a caption accompanying a sketch which was published in a newspaper, of which I have a very poor, undated and unattributed, photocopy.

The above sketch is of interest as showing the improvements and alterations which are taking place on the waterfront of Erith, of which the opening of the new riverside promenade on Saturday is a recent example. It is that of Hudson’s coal wharf and the nearby cottages and was drawn from a photograph. A copy of this photograph is in the possession of Mrs. E. Gilder, of High Street, who was born 72 years ago in a cottage in what was then known as “Blood Yard”, probably because the principal business located there was that of a butcher named Smith and afterwards taken over by Mr. Fillary. The yard was reached by means of the alleyway between Hudson’s wharf and the cottages.

Mrs. Gilder’s father, a Frenchman named Godier, was a refugee escaping from France at the time of the French Revolution and settling first in London and afterwards at Erith.

Today that site is occupied by the Erith police-station. What a difference between High-Street in those old times and the street today? Then the houses and shops were old-fashioned, red-tiled, and thatched buildings, with stucco and ivy-covered walls, irregular in line. On one side of the street they stood nine or ten feet above the level of the roadway, on the other side five feet below, and were reached by
steps. The roadway itself in those days was lower than it is to-day, and the river wall was also lower, so that it was no uncommon thing for these cottages to be flooded at high tide. The water rushed over the low river wall and poured through the doorways and ground floor windows of the cottages.

In the first cottage one of the famous Cole family once lived, whilst round the corner in another cottage, lived the father of another well-known Erith man – Dave Wilders. Robert the Devil (Robert Austin), perhaps one of the most famous of Erith's watermen, lived in Blood Yard itself, as did Charlie Wright, who was known far and wide as "Blood Charlie", presumably because of his residence. Mrs. Gilder's family afterwards moved from "Blood Yard" to the cottage shown on the right of the sketch.

[The artist is Llwyd Roberts, 1875-1940.
The new police station was opened in 1908.
Cannon & Gaze flour mills were demolished in 1937 to make way for the Riverside Gardens.
Elizabeth Gilder was born in 1866 which would date the newspaper cutting to c. 1938.]

5. The fifth reference is from an article published on the Internet about Erith Arts Project.

Public art schemes can be extremely complicated to deliver. They involve many experts, from artists to engineers, and there are lots of elements to consider, from lighting to paving. This made the Erith Arts Project, Bexley LBC's first co-ordinated approach to using public art to reinvigorate a town, all the more challenging.

The council made sure all the necessary experts were involved in the process, including people from planning and cultural services departments, technical staff, schools and members of the local community. And one of the criteria for commissioning artists was that they would work in partnership with the council.

Saskia Delman, arts manager for the council, says this co-ordinated approach has meant that all the elements of a piece of artwork were "considered in harmony, ensuring a much more open, more user-friendly town in Erith".

She adds that the projects have helped to give back the town "a bit of its heritage and to create a sense of belonging".

"One resident told us of their relative who had great notoriety in the area. He was a barge man who would regularly try and swim across the Thames," Ms Delman says.

"So we produced a Thames barge mural depicting the barge sailed by 'Robert the Devil'. And by creating this lasting tribute to Thames barges we were also able to make one local resident's wish come true," she adds.
Photograph courtesy of a friend

M R Payne
16 May 2009
Mr. Weeks,
14, Newberry Road,
Slade Green.

Background  b.c.1908. Not a waterman but of a river family. Keen yachtsman, etc. and has made many trips in barges, coasters, etc.


Traffic.  Cannon & Gaze
          Thames Steam Saw Mills
          Callender's had their own fleet of barges - see Sam Cole below. Bricks for building were landed at Erith between wars.

Personalities

1). Jim Cole. Was a bumboat man at Erith. He took stores out to ships in a skiff and sold them off the boat. Had a shop in Berley Road near the Post Office. Had the first motor boat in Erith, "Village Belle", also "Phoebe".

2). Sam Cole, barge owner, contracted to Callenders, who also had their own barges.

"....Old Tom Callender in the end said:'Look, you've been a good man, you've helped me all this time - I'll start you off - I'll give you the fleet of barges'. By then they'd got a steam tug. It was a yacht at one time, a steam yacht, but they had it converted to a tug...."

Sam also kept the "Running Horses" Sold out and went out to Vancouver.

3) "Doggett" Jim Graham lived in a villa near Manor Road Bridge. He owned a barge and took wife and children to Margate in it in Summer

4). Hunter went out in a boat to meet "Early Bird", winner of the barge race. "Early Bird" had so much sail on and was going so fast they did not see him. The boat was run down and he was thrown into the water.

5). Robert "the Devil" Austen lived in Corinthian Road and taught Mr. Wicks much about sailing.

Coming down on stern of lighter towed by "Lady Bertha" of Erith & Dartford Lighterage. Boy named Crone on tug - Captain Craddock - father of present manager of Cory Tank Lighterage. The boy pulled overboard by a bucket. Robert Austen dived in, swam around, failed to find him. No-one else saw the boy fall. He swam ashore and walked up the mud to meet tug.

Swimming the river. This was done on the last of the flood. Going up the flood and catching the ebb on the Essex bank, which is always two hours earlier than the rest of the river.
The "Three Crowns" at Rainham. Robert Austen took parties over. Mr. Weeks saw him once in a skiff. Got in at Rainham and lay down, knowing the boat would drift to Erith.

Mr. Weeks once met a man on a train who, as a young man, sailed his first barge from Pin Mill to Clarke's Wharf. He had been warned of "Robert the Devil". When Robert Austen walked into the "Prince Alfred" he walked up and knocked him cold to be on the safe side.

Mr. Weeks remembers him rowing with Christopher Cobb and Bob Watts the huffer in a single scull veterans' race in a regatta. Bob Watts wore a bowler hat.

Robert Austen was once arrested. He was standing on the causeway (the previous stone one) at Erith when the police arrived. He walked out with his hands in his pockets until he was chest deep. The river police were called but Robert Austen simply dived under the boat. Eventually the police retreated and waited for him to come out.

6). Brothers Gilder, ran a fishing boat catching shrimps at Gravesend, which they sold in their shop in the High Street. Later worked for the P.L.A.

The 'S.F. Pearce', a schooner, called at Erith with china clay from Newlyn. In Summer the Captain brought his family and on Sunday evenings they would all come ashore in Salvation Army uniforms to join the parade.

Masters of schooners commonly took their families. Also not uncommon on barges. Master of the 'Gascoyne', belonging to Taster of Greenhythe, lived in a cottage near the Jolly Farmers at Crayford, which is still there. He ran wheat and barley to Vitbe Mills. His wife was mate. "Now she was the loveliest, clearest old lady you ever saw. She used to wear a black dress, and they all wore the same.... Well, she'd wear high leather boots with buttons - old fashioned... and her apron was spotless white...."

7). Fenner.

"Now he was a great lad, used to wear a little black captain's cap - he had a very large ginger moustache - he wore gold ear-rings in his ears. And now he sailed a barge called the 'Martinet'......"

They lived in a terraced house near Kennington Oval. During the war Mr. Weeks met Fenner, with the 'Martinet's' deck sand-bagged, delighted with a new machine gun mounted on the quarter.

Conditions. Bargeman's usual bed was a 'donkey's breakfast'. If times were good, he would gradually acquire a hair mattress and blankets.

Bargemen bought their own stores. Many Erith tradesmen were dependent on shipping for trade. All down West Street were butchers advertising "ships provisioned". These would give credit to bargemen who had a long wait for orders, e.g., Stevens.

Erith also an important watering station, e.g., Loam Wharf.
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(The returns are not to be used for general purposes, and not for any other purposes than the preparation of Statistical Tables.)