

Scotland Yard—members' explanations of things from the books

Captain Flint's Houseboat

by Claire Barnett

From "Swallows and Amazons", Chapter 3: "*She was a long craft with a high raised cabin roof, and a row of glass windows along her side. Her bows were like that of an old time clipper. Her stern was like that of a steamship.*"

There are two boats in the Lake District that roughly fit that description, and Ransome was familiar with both of them. The Gondola was a passenger steam yacht that ran on Coniston Water where the Ransomes spent family holidays. In his Autobiography, Ransome mentions that as a small boy, he was once allowed to steer her. The Gondola later became a houseboat, then a derelict, and was finally rebuilt



The replica Gondola on Coniston¹

by the National Trust, and once again offers passenger service. There is a photograph of a Gondola post card that had added sketching by Ransome to show Clifford Webb, the first illustrator of the books, what the houseboat should look like. Permission to use it in this article has not been obtained as of publication date, but it can be viewed in Christina Hardymont's "Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk", or in Hugh Brogan's "The Life of Arthur Ransome". Webb did not use the postcard, but the American edition published a year later in 1931 apparently did, since Helene Carter's drawing is the same perspective and shows the same canopy on the stern and has the decorative bow boards of the Gondola and its curved cabin stern as well as its distinctive front cabin door enclosure, which in the following illustration is widened to become the cabin front.



The Houseboat in Houseboat Bay.²

The Esperance was a similar looking steel yacht that was brought to Lake Windermere and used by a wealthy industrialist to commute from his home in Rio to the foot of the lake where his private train car would take him to work at Barrow-in-Furness. It too was later used as a houseboat.

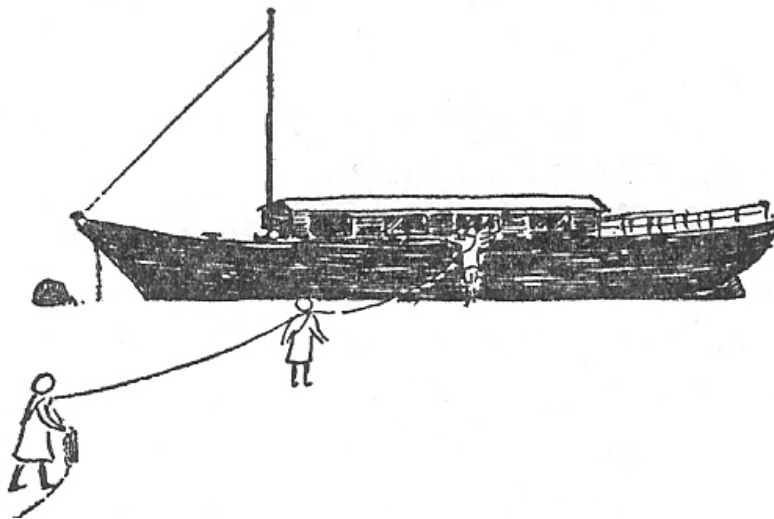


*Esperance*³

But it will come as no surprise that Ransome's houseboat, like his lake and Wildcat Island, is yet another composite. It uses features from both Gondola and Esperance, as well as having features different from either of them. All three ships had 7 square side windows, (though Gondola's cabin was later shortened to 5), and all three have a small side deck along the cabin.

Ransome's own drawings often show an Esperance-like exterior shape. Now at the Windermere Steamboat Museum, Esperance's interior was at one time decorated to resemble the party on the houseboat from S&A, and had a sign stating that she was the inspiration for the houseboat in the books. There is a letter from Sir Oliver Scott whose family once owned Esperance, stating, "I can confirm that Esperance really was the model for the houseboat, as Arthur Ransome told me so himself."⁴ Esperance is really closest in *exterior* profile detail to the houseboat in many of Ransome's illustrations.

But the major difference between the houseboat and its prototypes is one of scale, interior layout, and deck space. When seen from the outside in Ransome's illustrations from "Winter Holiday", "Swallows and Amazons", and "The Picts and the Martyrs", the houseboat, is **huge**; its hull is very high out of the water, far taller than Gondola, or the Esperance, both of which ride quite low in the water. Its length to height ratio is also completely different.



*Detail from "The Houseboat's frozen in", (WH)*⁵



Gondola photo by Claire Barnett



Old postcard view of Esperance

The interior of the three ships is different too. Captain Flint's houseboat has one large open cabin with a smaller fo'c'sle space under the foredeck for the Primus stoves and galley.



Airing the Fram, from "Winter Holiday"⁶



Gondola interior photo by Claire Barnett

The Gondola is the biggest ship of the three and has a roomiest cabin, divided into two lounges with built in seating, as shown in this recent photo of the aft compartment. The Esperance is divided into 4 smaller compartments, the first of which is a small lounge, shown in the following photo in "Swallows and Amazons" party trim with Dave Thewlis:



Esperance main lounge⁷



Houseboat interior "Picts and Martyrs"⁸

It has built in seating, but the seating is not as wide as either Gondola or the Houseboat. Gondola and the houseboat each have a center door at the stern end of their cabins, but Esperance has one on each side. Both real ships have recessed rear decks for seating, but the illustration on the next page from "The Picts and The Martyrs" shows a high covered deck with 3 steps leading down to the cabin door:



Esperance stern doors and recessed deck⁹

The same differences are apparent at the bow of the 3 ships. Both of the real ships have an open front cockpit for seating and a door to walk through from the cabin to the bow. Captain Flint's houseboat has a raised deck and solid cabin front. Ransome also describes a forehatch from a fo'c'sle space under the front deck.

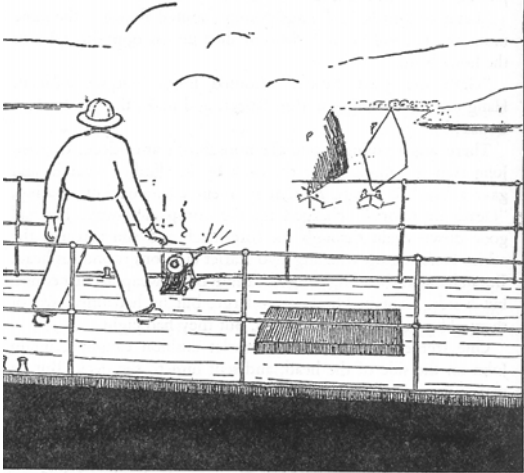


Gondola photo by Claire Barnett



Esperance photo by Claire Barnett¹⁰

Compare the scale of the AR illustration of the houseboat foredeck showing Captain Flint and cannon, with a similar photo of Esperance with Dave Thewlis and cannon:



Excerpt from "There was a bang"¹¹ (SA)



Dave Thewlis on Esperance¹²

Captain Flint is standing on a raised deck, and Dave is standing in a bow well, below side deck level.

So in conclusion, with the houseboat, we have Ransome using his usual license to combine elements from ships from both Coniston Water and Lake Windermere, then changing the scale and details to suit his own purposes.

Notes: A longer, more detailed version of this article will appear in late 2009 on the All Things Ransome website:

<http://www.allthingsransome.net>

The opening quotation from "Swallows and Amazons", and all Arthur Ransome drawn illustrations are © Arthur Ransome Literary Estate and are used by permission.

¹ Gondola on Coniston, Tony Richards photo, Lakeland Camera.

² Helene Carter chapter heading from Lippincott American edition of S&A.

³ Esperance at the Windermere Steamboat Museum, courtesy of Roger Wardale.

⁴ 1993 letter from Sir Oliver Scott to Roger Wardale, used by permission.

⁵ Arthur Ransome illustration from Winter Holiday.

⁶ Arthur Ransome illustration from Winter Holiday.

⁷ Photo of Dave Thewlis on Esperance, used by permission.

⁸ Arthur Ransome illustration from The Picts and the Martyrs.

⁹ Esperance photo by John Lambert, used by permission.

¹⁰ Esperance photo by Claire Barnett, copyright retained by Windermere Steamboat Museum.

¹¹ Arthur Ransome illustration from Swallows and Amazons.

¹² Photo of Dave Thewlis on Esperance, used by permission.

A Clue for Future Investigators

By Claire Barnett

Like any good investigation, researching people and places in the Arthur Ransome stories involves asking the right questions. When we encounter his world for the first time, we ask, along with millions of others, "Is it real"? As we discover a real lake with a resemblance to Ransome's, learn of people who may have inspired some of the characters, and even boats that resemble his, we feel the need to investigate further.

You must find your own way, but here is what does *not* work. The truth is more complicated than an either/or question. If we ask if Ransome's lake is Windermere or Coniston, or is Wildcat Island Blakeholm or Peel Island, we are not getting closer to the truth. The answer to a question phrased that way, will always be "both" **and** "neither". A proper investigation will always look at the similarities between Ransome's creations and the realities that inspired him.



Claire Barnett is a semi retired pirate girl who likes to write and who has steadfastly refused to grow up in the way once expected of her. She lives in South Central Wisconsin, but likes to frequent the "Up North" lakes and woods area of Northern Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan.

She recently visited the Lake District in England, rode on the Gondola on Coniston as well as the classic steamers on Lake Windermere. She generally explored the Coniston and Windermere area, hiked to the shore opposite Peel Island, visited the Dogs Home, climbed Gammers Howe, found Claife Station, and visited the closed Windermere Steamboat Museum.
