

DUTCH DUNG BARGE RACE

In a bid to revive traditional barge skills
one of the most exciting sailing events
in the Netherlands was born

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Main picture: The start of the Strontrace through Workum's narrow harbour entrance is a real spectacle

Right from top: 'Bomen' (punting) can make a difference getting ahead at the start; 'Jagen' (pulling the ship) is the best option when the wind is unfavourable for sailing; Deck work is all manual; Keeping a thorough log is essential





One more time before we pass the bridge I manage to push the pole into the muddy bottom of the canal in Amsterdam. “Didn’t hit a bicycle this time.” On the bridge the usual metropolitan buzz continues without us noticing. It’s 3am, about 8C and we haven’t slept much in 72 hours. A little drizzle makes me slip on the deck whilst I push the pole from my chest into the bottom, walking to the back of the 30-tonne barge, which is sliding smoothly forwards below my feet. With this technique it’s the six of us that has been ‘bomen’ – or punting, as you will – through Amsterdam and some 40km of canals before that. Welcome to the Strontrace, the Dutch Iron Man on the water.

Once a year in autumn, a fleet of traditional sailing barges gathers in Workum, Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands. They come together for what is known to be one of the toughest and most authentic sailing races in the country for traditional cargo barges – De Strontrace. Literally this translates into ‘Dung Race’, and they actually transport a symbolic cargo of dried cow manure to the midpoint destination of the race, Warmond, in the south of the country.

At this point they pick up a symbolic cargo of tulip bulbs to be taken back up north to the finish. The winner takes home a silver spoon. That’s the short story of an event that was recently included into the national inventory for the application to the Unesco immaterial heritage listing. Let me tell you why.

Above: October conditions can get quite rough and keeping the barges upright a real challenge

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Sailing through the centre of Haarlem; Tiredness and sail trimming are a rough marriage; The route of the Strontrace; Offloading the dung at Warmond; Only four crewmembers are allowed on this ‘skutsje’

Traditionally there has been a booming business in sailing actual dung from the north of the country, where the livestock of cows has been historically big, to the south, where flower farmers needed the dung from the stalls collected over winter to enrich their poor soils. This was a short but booming business in the beginning of spring, when Frisian farmers cleaned out their winter stalls. Relatively small flat-bottom barges, called skutsjes, brought the dung from the farms to the coastal cities of the Southern Sea (now IJsselmeer), where the cargo was loaded into larger Tjalken, Aken and Klippers. They would cross the sea to Amsterdam and take alternative routes through the many choices of canals reaching southwards from Amsterdam.

With the motorisation and development of rail and roads, let alone artificial manure, this transportation of dung became a dying business, as did cargo under sail in general. After the Second World War there was a small revival of cargo sailing, but it was only a glimpse of the trade and all the beautiful ships, the craftsmanship and traditional culture of seamanship. Of the thousands of barges, many were either taken apart to use the steel in industry or left to rot away.

In the 1960s some young people, mostly hippies, started to revive some of these ships. Not only did they appreciate their historical value, but with the cargo spaces converted into living spaces, they quite conveniently made themselves rather spacious and comfortable mobile floating homes.



Some logbook fragments

On board Gea 1995

At the bridge over highway A6. Tuesday night 2100hrs. We have just sailed into the bridge. No one is hurt and the ship can go on with a big dent. To boost morale we decided to get some hours of sleep before continuing the race. The wind has picked up from Force 4 to Force 6.

On board Verwisseling 2014

At the Bosrandbrug. We knew this moment was coming and we practiced it before. The bridge is too low for us, even with the mast down. We have brought a big bag that we have attached to the bowsprit and have allowed it to fill with water. With a [chain hoist] we have pulled it slowly. By doing so we have lowered the ship's height by 5cm and now we have passed the closed bridge ahead of our competition, who cannot pass it either due to the height restrictions.

On Board Anna-Mijntje 2016

Wednesday 1600hrs. We have just sailed our mast overboard. The wind had steadily increased and luckily we had it on a broad reach until a big bang saw the mast and the entire rigging come down into the IJsselmeer. It has taken us a good three hours to get things in such order that we could continue on engine and find a harbour to wait for calmer weather.



DUTCH BARGE RACE



This trend continued, and one particular sailor, Reid de Jong, initiated the Strontrace in 1974 in a bid to revive the old skills of sailing with these barges in a traditional way; without the use of an engine, modern materials or electronics. It was a stormy and dark Monday morning when the skippers of those pioneer ships came together in the Workum harbour pub Zeezicht (Sea view). After many hours of drinking, smoking and debating about when to go, Reid stood up and shouted out loudly: “En nou Oprotten!” (in other words: “And now piss off!”) So, off the went, and the first Strontrace began – back then, actually fully loaded with manure. Depending on the size of the ship and the amount of sail it carries, there is a certain amount of crew that can join. Light ship with much sail area equals few crew members, and vice versa. Over the years the underlying formula turned out to be a real consideration for skippers in their decision to buy a certain ship or rig them in a certain way. A large sail area sounds good, but in a heavy storm a few more man on deck or few more pushing the ship through the canals can be the winning factor.

Top: The sight of sleep deprived, wet and hungry sailors can cause traffic jams

Left: Try to overtake here!

Right: On the IJsselmeer all the sails go up

The way the Strontrace is won begins with good preparation. A fit crew and Strontrace-proof ship are key, but the race itself brings many challenges. The first one is the tactical decision of the course to take. The race splits the fleet in two ways, which are crucial in determining the winner. The first choice is between two docks on either end of the 50km Houtribdijk, a dyke that separates the IJsselmeer from the Markermeer on the south side. Once in Amsterdam the ships can choose to go through the city and take the easterly canals to Warmond, or sail on to Haarlem and take the Westerly canals to Warmond. Each choice made on the way south has to be mirrored going back up, so crews must study the weather forecast well. A wrong choice or a shifting wind might see crews pushing and pulling the ships through the canals for over 80km. Long lines are thrown on shore to two to six crewmembers that jumped off. They carry special bands they can attach to the long rope and lean into to slowly get the mass of the ship going. This is called ‘jagen’. The surname ‘De Jager’ in Dutch thus speaks of the profession that person’s ancestors practised when Napoleon came around to give the Dutch surnames back



The Strontrace barges of the Netherlands

The Strontrace barges are quite a typical sight and unique to the Netherlands. Quite heavily flat-bottomed and without a keel, (like the Thames Barges), they carry wooden leeboards that are thrown down into the water on lee to prevent the ship from drifting too much. A 10 degree drifting angle is common, as these leeboards have an actual wing profile in them. The leeboards are round and quite

short because of the shallowness of the Dutch waters. The rigging is always roughly the same, with a large main and a big gaff on top, a jib and, sometimes, an outer jib. On the lakes, larger downwind sails are also allowed. To make sailing in narrow waters a safe business, everything on board is designed for the sails to come down in an instant, and for sailing downwind in heavy conditions. To get under fixed bridges

smoothly, most of the barges have a mast hinged on a mast bolt at deck level. The mast goes down further under deck, with a big counterweight balancing it above deck. Well balanced out, the mast can be pushed flat in a matter of half a minute, and back up to continue sailing right after the bridge; good timing to preserve enough speed to make it under the bridge takes courage and experience.



in the 19th century. You can imagine the traffic jams that form when people see the old ships on the canals, pulled by a bunch of sleep deprived, wet and hungry sailors.

But when the wind is right, the canals are a big joy to sail on. Bridge operators are called (VHF is allowed for safety reasons) miles ahead announcing: “We are headed to your bridge with the full main up, and jib and outer jib. It will be very hard for us to drop the sails and stop in time, so can you please open up in due time so we can have safe passage under sail?” This goes well most of the time, but spectators and unexpected dog walkers might suffer the occasional heart attack, as does the crew on

Left: Sailing continues day and night

Right: Dressed for the occasion

board. Once Amsterdam has passed on the way north, the physical, tolling part is over, but then the battle against tiredness and maybe heavy weather begins.

Worst is when the wind stays down completely. Then there's one option left – push the boat northwards with the poles. The fastest Strontrace has been sailed in 30 hours, but many ships haven't made the deadline to pass the finish line on Friday at noon; it starts on the Monday at noon. This helps to make the race one of the most exciting sailing events in the Netherlands, which many skippers aspire to do at least once in a lifetime.

You can find videos of Strontrace on YouTube.