

Travels With Mary Gordon

© By Hilary Dyson

Just who was Mary Gordon? Some Leeds people remember her with affection. They have happy memories of days out with her. To many, however, she is just a name. Where is she now? Certainly she is not in Leeds any more. Let's end the mystery.

Mary Gordon was the name given to a pleasure boat that once sailed on Waterloo Lake in Roundhay Park. The boat was named after the wife of John Gordon who was mayor of Leeds at the time. He was a well-to-do accountant and stockbroker and lived off Potternewton Lane at Potternewton House, which has since been demolished.

Members of Leeds City Council are believed to have paid a visit to Southport to see two electric boats operating on an artificial lake there. Afterwards they decided that the previous passenger-carrying boat, the Maid of Athens, should be replaced by a new boat. This was ordered in 1900 from boat builder, William Sargeant, and built at his Strand-on-the-Green works in Chiswick, at a cost of £600. She was made of teak planking on oak frames and the batteries were arranged along the keel beneath the seats.



Mary Gordon at Roundhay Park in 1902

Electric powered boats, driven by large numbers of batteries, were very fashionable in the 1890s and the Mary Gordon was one of the largest electric launches ever built. She is believed to be the largest and oldest electrically powered boat still in existence and is only one of three electrical launches included in the Register of Historic Vessels. After a long history of service and periods of inactivity, she is currently being restored by an enthusiastic charitable organisation, The Mary Gordon Trust, to carry passengers on Britain's oldest canal, the Fossdyke in Lincoln.

When the Mary Gordon was completed, she was brought to Yorkshire by steam lorry and launched on Waterloo Lake. She could carry 70 adults in comfort. Trips on Waterloo Lake were very popular and she remained there until 1923.

Sometimes, of course, things did not go according to plan. It was said that much amusement was caused when Jimmy Webb, the cabin boy who joined the crew soon after leaving school, sometimes missed the length of his leap to the landing stage and fell into the water. Probably skipper, Jim Abbot, was not amused!

In 1914 the Mary Gordon was converted from electrical to aerial propulsion. An 8 to 10 horse power Alpha marine motor was supplied by Blackburn's Aeroplane Co. and fitted on the rear deck complete with propeller. It appears that a long driving chain was fitted between the motor and the propeller. It had no safety guard, without which it would surely have fallen foul of today's Health and Safety regulations!



The Mary Gordon with Marine Motor and Propeller

Blackburns specialized in the development of naval bombers, sea planes and flying boats. At the time they were situated in Balm Road in the south of the City. Readers of Oak Leaves Part Three will remember they relocated to Roundhay Road onto the site now occupied by Tesco's supermarket (see the blue plaque outside the entrance).

In 1923 the Mary Gordon was sold to Stephen Askew, a Wakefield cinema owner. He moved her on a wagon drawn by six horses from Roundhay Park to the river Aire to where the Royal Armouries is now situated before being taken on to Wakefield. She was then fitted with a petrol engine and ran Sunday trips on the River Calder between Chantry Bridge and Kirkthorpe Weir.

Somewhere along the line she was neglected and fell into disrepair but in 1943 she was discovered on the river Ouse at York by three enthusiastic boatmen from Lincoln. These were war years, and the men had a lot of trouble arranging for her to be moved, the War Department demanding 26 different pieces of paper to be properly filled in. The subsequent journey to Lincoln took five days. One can imagine the interest this would have generated and the amazement of people seeing this large boat making its way along the Humber towed by two boats.

Missing doors and windows had to be replaced and a new deck canopy was added. She was fitted with a new engine, a marinised Model T Ford petrol engine, later modified to run on paraffin.

The Mary Gordon was kept very busy during the war taking children on trips between Lincoln and Gainsborough including free trips for all on VE day. For working on the tidal river Trent a second Model T Ford engine was fitted but eventually the sand took its toll on the prop shafts. From then on, trips were restricted to the Fosdsyke Navigation canal in Lincoln and the two engines were replaced with just one Kelvin 40 horse power motor.

In 1948 the Mary Gordon was sold to a well-known skipper, William Hendry. During the time he owned her, the boat carried thousands of local people between Brayford Pool in the centre of Lincoln and Pyewipe Inn (a distance of about two miles), giving many children their first experience of water travel. These trips were remembered with affection by numerous Lincolnshire families.

Skipper Hendry was a much-loved colourful character. His stories and adventures live on. Bottles of beer and cordials were purchased from the Pyewipe pub and taken on his boat trips. A returnable deposit was paid on the bottles in those days and it is said the skipper made a few bob by returning the empty bottles to the pub when he was back on shore. Also the skipper himself liked a drink too and it is said he was a little worse for wear on occasions so that a passenger had to steer the boat back to its mooring!

Not long after Hendry died in a road accident, the fortunes of the Mary Gordon went into decline. She was abandoned and sunk in the Trent during which time she suffered much damage. For a while things looked better for her in the late 1970s when the Mary Gordon was moved to Hartlepool where British Shipbuilding Apprentices attempted the task of restoring her. The work was sponsored by Leeds City Council who hoped one day to see her return to Roundhay Park. Sadly, their work was not completed and again she was abandoned.

The future looked bleak for the Mary Gordon but in 1999, the old boat was offered to the people of Lincoln and accepted. A group of interested local people formed the Mary Gordon Trust and at the moment she is out of the water awaiting full restoration at Brayford Pool near the Pyewipe Inn. They were awarded a grant of £23,600 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and are hopeful of a further grant to help them restore the boat again with an electric motor as she had when she was first built over a hundred years ago.

Would it be too much to hope for, to see the Mary Gordon in Roundhay Park on the Waterloo Lake again? It would be wonderful if this could be arranged sometime in the future.

Acknowledgement

I have drawn heavily on the Mary Gordon Website (www.marygordon.org.uk at April 2015) designed and maintained by Heather Hobden to which I refer the reader for more information about the Mary Gordon and the wonderful work of the Trust. My thanks and best wishes go to her and her fellow workers and to everyone who contributes in any way to the Mary Gordon restoration venture.