

William Kitt
Stanstead Abbots
Boatman

By
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In many pictures of the River Lea at Stanstead Abbots between 1900 into the early 1920s two steam launches are to be seen. These are usually moored at Stanstead Wharf or in winter views in storage close to the road bridge. These passenger carrying leisure craft were owned by William [Bill] Kitt who was a High Street resident during those years. These boats were often used to provide river trips associated with The Rye House Pleasure Gardens a much favoured leisure destination for those who lived in East London.



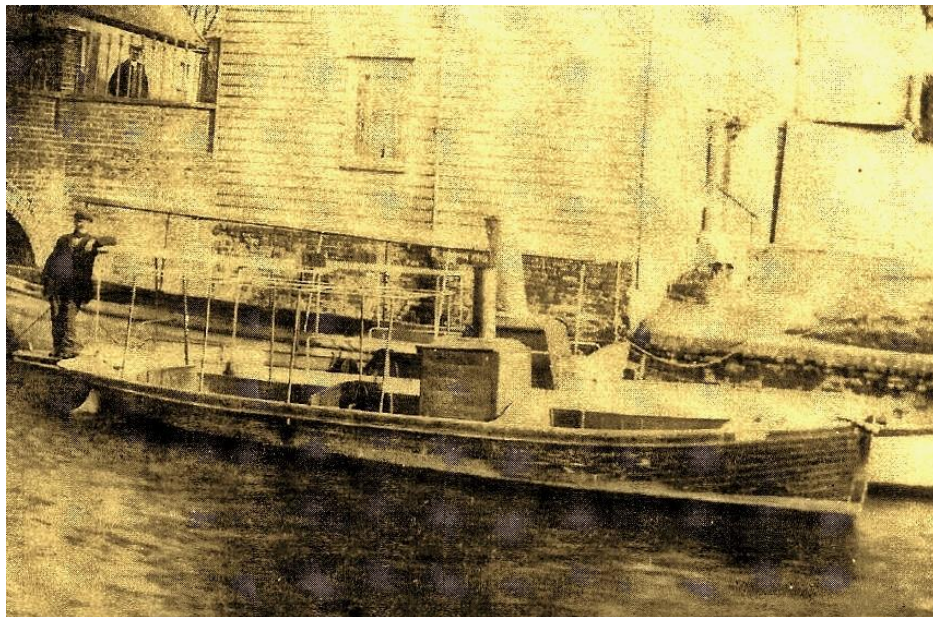
A view dating from about 1904 showing Bill Kitt's two boats one slightly larger than the other. One is moored near the brick arch that then formed part of the river bridge. The larger vessel is seen to the right moored at Stanstead Wharf the embarkation point for many enjoyable journeys on these steam launches setting out from the village. Visitors to the village arriving by water gained access to the High Street through the archway seen to the right of the riverside building. The building to the right of the arch was the Rose and Crown pub which no doubt attracted some trade from Mr Kitt's passengers

Bill Kitt was from the East End of London himself having been born in Poplar in 1859. He married his wife Charlotte at St Johns church in Limehouse Fields on the 20th August 1880. They were to have three daughters Dorothy, Harriett and Alice all born in the 1880s, before the family moved to the village. By 1901 we find William, Charlotte and family living in the High Street Stanstead Abbots not far from the river bridge. William's occupation was recorded as a steam engine driver with his wife and all three daughters working as laundress workers. Their home was listed as functioning as a laundry business as well as a home. It is thought that William began to operate steam pleasure launches on the river from Stanstead Abbots around 1900. Kelly's Directory of 1908 records Dorothy as running the laundry in place of her mother. Dorothy married in November 1908 and subsequently no longer lived with her parents. By 1911 William is recorded as a Jobbing Engineer working on steam engines a job it is thought involved keeping the steam engines working on the flourishing nursery establishments in the area. This type of work mainly in the colder months would have fitted in well with his own family business of running the summer steam launches on the River Lea.



This picture of the Kitt Family boat was taken about 1900 on the River Lea at Bromley in East London. The frame supported a canopy which no doubt offered some shade on journeys along the river on hot summer days.

The boats based at Stanstead Abbots ran trips as far as London with some of the work being focused on the leisure traffic associated with the Rye House Pleasure Gardens. The main events drew very large crowds on some weekends and especially Bank Holidays when many "Bean Feasters", as they were called by some, enjoyed a day out in the country. Much custom was available for journeys on the river between Rye House, Stanstead Abbots and Broxbourne the main destinations attracting these workers from the East End. Other events organised at The Rye House included special dances sometimes for private groups of some size which may well have enjoyed the chance to cruise up and down the river for a short pleasure cruise as part of their festivities. Despite the Teale Family, the originators of the Pleasure Gardens, selling up to Christies [Brewery] Company of Hoddesdon in 1904 the Rye House venue continued to provide the river craft with a steady trade for many years.



The smaller of the two boats just downstream of the River Bridge at Stanstead Abbots. The canopy hoops are clearly seen in this view. In the winter months this boat, minus its canopy and its boiler and engine sheeted over was often moored up close to the river bridge.



William Kitt Boatman of Stanstead Abbots.

This picture dated to 1909 appears to be part of a wedding picture which may have been taken at the wedding between his daughter Alice and Albert Rayment which took place on the 12th April 1909 in Stanstead Abbots

The steam launches required crew to assist with the steering, stoking the boiler as well as looking after the passengers. William seems to have cultivated a small reliable group of local men who could on the days required provide a crew for one or both boats. They like William would have had other jobs and saw this work as an additional way to make some much appreciated extra money. Indeed many villagers were able to find extra days work in a variety of ways to provide services for the invasion of visitors from London. He needed it seems about six crew if both boats were in operation.



This photograph was taken on Mr Kitts larger boat thought to have been named the “Morrilla” moored alongside the Stanstead Wharf. Mr Kitt is seated on the far right with the “Gaffers” hat and his crews for the day are well captured in this likely professionally taken photograph. On the grassy area behind can be seen some of those visitors to the village generally taking their ease. Something of a contrast to the parked cars and line of moored privately owned narrow boats of today’s riverside view.

By 1911 all three of the Kitt daughters had been married in Stanstead Abbots church and William is found aged 52 living with his wife in the same house in the High Street. They have by now been joined by his 61 year old brother Thomas Ridley Kitt who was listed as a general labourer. William’s wife Charlotte was no longer working but the premises are still noted as being a laundry. The impression is that William had moved up the income scale during his time in the village some of it undoubtedly due to his mechanical skills and his river boat business. He embarked on this business venture at the end of the golden period for East End visitors coming to the River Lea for their days out. WWI it is known reduced the number of visitors and like many things those days out were never quite the same after the war. None the less for some 20 years Mr Kitt’s boats were a familiar feature on the river at Stanstead Abbots and provided him and his family with a welcome additional income.