

Barging Up The Wye



Ian Wright follows *Wye Invader* upriver to Hereford

It was impossible, most people said, but the impossible has happened. On Sunday 12th November Hereford garage owner and ex SAS man Frank Barton brought his 230 ton steel barge *Silver Cloud* (now defiantly renamed *Wye Invader*) up the swollen river Wye to Hereford where he moored her at the Wye Inn, two miles below Hereford Bridge. Frank's unshakable belief that his voyage was possible, his skill in handling the large craft, and his patience in waiting for just the right flow in the Wye, have all contributed to the success of this historic operation. Not since the late 1850s can the city of Hereford have seen a trading craft on the Wye.

The long dry summer of 1989 will not be easily forgotten by Frank Barton. I last saw his barge on 26th April marooned in the Wye at Hadnock above Monmouth (see *WW* August). The water levels dwindled further and *Wye Invader*

spent the whole summer on that gravel shoal unable to move.

The next phase in this amazing story unfolded with the coming of the rains to Wales and the West. The Wye began to rise and on 22nd October Frank took a crew down to Hadnock, cleared the summer's flotsam from around the barge, and set *Wye Invader* into the strong current. They made good progress round the spectacular wooded loops of the Wye and in 45 minutes they had reached the bottom of the New Weir, Symond's Yat. "We rubbed the river bed once," said Frank. He successfully took the barge up the rapids with a little help from the winches and lines he carries. "In the Army," he said, "we reckon you can winch a 50 ton tank on a six inch sapling." Unfortunately for Frank there were a lot of canoeists milling about the rapids on this Sunday. *Wye Invader* stayed overnight with her stern on the top of the falls and on Monday 23rd she

was taken on as far as the Saraćen's Head pub and moored.

On the afternoon of 31st October Frank judged the river right for the run up to Ross, a distance by water of 14 miles. Paying no heed to the unfriendly vibrations coming from the National Rivers Authority and the Wye Preservation Society, Frank passed the fishery at Huntsham where even canoeists are warned to keep clear of the salmon. There was a mere 18in headroom above his cabin at Huntsham Bridge and "no serious problem" at Lydbrook where he negotiated the railway bridge that now carries only a footpath. Watching the boiling water ahead Frank could not savour the autumn beauty of the limestone gorge with its dramatic pinnacles at Coldwell Rocks. It was getting late in the afternoon at Bishopswood where *Wye Invader* moored and entertained aboard some home-coming schoolchildren who could