

SPRINGFIELD BOAT WORKS

Saunders Boat Business

The Saunders family started their boatbuilding business at the Swan Inn at Streatley around 1870. They originally made and hired punts, gigs and skiffs for local use but the Thames boating boom in the 1880s led to a demand for a wider range of boats. With the development of steam, electric and then petrol engines, Saunders were soon building much bigger launches and cruisers. The Swan site became too small and Samuel Saunders, the eldest son, moved across the river to Goring where he set up a separate business. His brother Arthur carried on at the Swan.

Sam Saunders became so successful that even his smart new boathouse and showroom opened in 1894 (now the Royal Mail Sorting Office) could not cope with the orders for the fast racing boats for which he was becoming renowned. Its location below two adjacent locks also made it difficult to test speed boats. By 1897 Sam was leasing some land upriver at Springfield on the boundary with South Stoke where he put up new boatsheds.

In 1899 Sam obtained a patent for Consuta. He decided to give up the small boat business altogether and focus on building speed launches at Springfield. He sold up in Goring to raise funds for the expansion and moved with his family to a cottage on the site. A further £20,000 was produced by selling shares in the Saunders Patent Launch Building Syndicate, registered on 28 December 1900.

Even the facilities at Springfield could not satisfy Sam. His fame spread amongst the international boating set who commissioned marine craft. It was tricky to test these on the Thames due to speed limits and with no direct rail link, delivering the launches was difficult. The Isle of Wight was by then the place to be and Sam set up in business at Cowes. He moved there himself in 1901, taking with him a team of designers and engineers.

Saunders continued to produce boats at Springfield until about 1911, when the works was sold to Hobbs of Henley. In addition to fast racing boats for rich people such as Lionel de Rothschild, Saunders built more functional craft adapted to fit the conditions in countries across the globe. These included a 50 ft launch for the Governor of Gambia; the 40 ft launch *Rohilla* (one of the last steamers produced by the company) for the Nawab of Rampur; a 40 ft motor launch for the Egyptian government; the *Rattler*, a twin screw 75 ft motor boat for a company in India to carry 4 tons of bullion up the Ganges; a 70 ft shallow draft twin screw boat for the British North Borneo Company to carry passengers up river and 20 tons of cargo on the return journey; and a river launch for the King of Siam.

Also at this time Saunders built one of the first sidewall air cushion boats: a prototype hovercraft. There is a record of the hull being completed but not of any trials.

On the Isle of Wight Sam Saunders went from strength to strength, moving into aviation, registering many patents and mixing with royalty. He gained contracts with the Admiralty, the Air Ministry, Crown Agents and RNLI. By 1920 S.E. Saunders Ltd had a London office and styled itself 'Engineers, Yacht and Aircraft Builders'. The company was given a Royal Warrant by King George V. In 1929 Sam joined with Sir A.V. Roe to form Saunders Roe, a company that still exists today as GKN Aerospace. The family connection with the company died with Sam in 1933.

Springfield

The site was originally a part of Spring Field, one of the big open fields in the old Goring field system where villagers had strips of land that they cultivated in rotation with their strips in the other fields. It lived up to its name with numerous springs bubbling up out of the chalk. The nearby pub now called the Leathern Bottel was originally known as the Spring House and was famous for the curative powers of its water. The land near the river was meadows where animals were grazed and an ancient enclosure on the bankside was called Sunxham Mead, suggesting it was rather marshy. On late 19c Ordnance Survey maps the site is marked 'liable to floods'.

At Enclosure In 1818, which marked the end of the open field system, the land passed into private hands. Sam Saunders leased the 2 acres on which he built the Springfield Works in 1897. He also acquired some adjacent land in South Stoke parish called Doctor's Gift Island to complete his ideal location for a boat works.

Consuta

In the late 1890s Sam developed a revolutionary new material for building boats. It was called 'Consuta' from the Latin 'sewn together' and consisted of layers of plywood stitched with copper wire and impregnated with a waterproof solution. Consuta was very light, allowing boats to go much faster than before. Sam was invited to build a new umpires' launch for the Henley Regatta which did not leave much wash. This boat, actually named *Consuta*, the first to be made with the new material and of novel design, was a great success and provided an excellent advertisement for Saunders' products. Business boomed as a result.

This boggy site was flat and had a natural inlet where two streams converged and fed into the Thames. From this Sam dug out the slipway to where he built the first big boatshed. The ancient track known as the Ridgeway cut through the plot, giving access to South Stoke and to Goring with its railway station. The Great Western Railway formed the Eastern boundary and Sam probably thought that it would be possible to make a siding at Springfield, but this never materialised.

The Boat Works

Maps of the site at different dates show how the complex of buildings developed. To start with there was just one boatbuilding shed at the head of the new slipway. A plan of 1910 shows the final extent of the Saunders works. There were two main sheds, one for building and fitting out and the other for repair, a joiners' shop, fitters' shop, timber stores and a sawmill, a boathouse built over the backwater for storage, a blacksmith's shop, a paint shop and a sail loft where boat covers and awnings were made. The slipway winching gear could haul up to 30 ton boats up from the river. There was also an electric power station where batteries for electric launches were charged.

Saunders aimed to be self-sufficient and employed around 30 men with the necessary skills to carry out the different aspects of building timber boats. This approach also enabled the high standards to be maintained for which Saunders boats were renowned worldwide. Sam was known to be a hard taskmaster, although he was always fair. He paid good wages and treated his workforce well.

After Hobbs of Henley took over the Springfield Works just before World War I they built a few boats on the site, including the 50 ft Henley Regatta Umpires' Launch *Enchantress*, used first in 1913 and still going strong.

From 1914 to 1918 the works were used for boat storage only and this continued until after World War II when Hobbs sold the works to CW Wise – his wife became Mrs Carpmael, founder of Withymead Nature Reserve. One of the sheds was taken over by the Government during the war for storing materials from the London Docks.

Images

Portrait of Sam Saunders

Springfield Works & creek

Workmen 1899

Advert 1899 for Springfield and Goring

Plan of works – OS map? Inland Revenue Valuation Survey sketch?

Slipway and winch in recent years

Samuel Edgar Saunders

(1857-1933)

Sam Saunders was an amazing man. He has been described as 'the Brunel of the river'. Like his father and grandfather before him he built boats by the Thames, but his flair for design and innovation, coupled with sound engineering skills and tremendous drive, led to the formation of an international transport company that still exists. He was a great character.

When he lived in Goring and Streatley, not content with running the business, he was an active participant in village affairs. He was a churchwarden and made many improvements to St Thomas' church, he was a Parish Councillor, a member of the School Committee, instrumental in the building of the parish room in 1899 (now Goring Village Hall), and allowed the use of his boat showroom for public events until it was completed. He was a pioneer of hydroelectricity, using Goring Mill to provide the village with electric lighting in the 1890s. Sam was a co-founder of Goring and Streatley Regatta in 1887. He loved sport and was a keen gardener.

In some ways he was no respecter of authority and was taken to court more than once for speeding on the Thames testing new boats. One story has him upsetting camping skiffs and swamping a houseboat with the wash!

Sam Saunders married Kate Baigent in 1878 and had a son and daughter, both of whom worked in the business. He was a kind man and looked after his extended family when personal tragedy struck several members.

On the Isle of Wight he continued to serve the local community. He received many honours, including an MBE. He was a fervent Conservative and a freemason as well as a member of several professional bodies. One of his final acts was to donate a new community centre to the parish of Whippingham where he lived. Sam died in 1933, aged 77.