

The Origins of Captain Flint's Houseboat

By Claire Barnett

Researching the people and locations in the Arthur Ransome stories involves asking the right questions. When we encounter his world for the first time, we ask, along with millions of others, "Is it real"? As we discover a real lake that resembles Ransome's or learn of people who may have inspired some of the characters, and even discover boats that resemble his, a balance needs to be struck between reality and invention.

Here is what does *not* work. The truth is more complicated than an either/or question. If we ask if Ransome's lake is Windermere or Coniston, is Wildcat Island based on Blakeholm or Peel Island, or is the Houseboat really Gondola or Esperance, we are not getting closer to the truth. The answer to a question phrased that way, will always be "both" *and* "neither". A better way forward is to look at the similarities between Ransome's creations and the realities that inspired them.

The following article appeared in an addendum to the September 2009 Signals from Tarsus, the newsletter of the U.S. branch of The Arthur Ransome Society. It was a short article meant as a summary of the differences between the 3 boats - Gondola, Esperance, and Arthur Ransome's fictional Houseboat. A more detailed article including the histories of the two real vessels, as well as an analysis of their specifications has been planned for a long time, but has been delayed. In the meantime, this shorter Signals from Tarsus article is a good beginning.

The following article does contain two errors. There is mention of all three vessels having 7 cabin side windows. This is not true in the case of the Houseboat. Ransome's illustrations suffered a loss of detail as multiple editions used the same printing plates. In the article, there is an illustration of "The Houseboat's frozen in". This picture is from the "New Edition, Type Reset, 1961" and is so smudged that it is hard to know how many windows there are. There might be 7 like the Gondola and Esperance. The type was reset, but the printing plate is on its 23rd edition use. Earlier and cleaner versions of this illustration show that the number of windows is 4, as do other illustrations, although sometimes that has to be guessed at since the complete cabin is not shown.

There is also a mistake in the article's assuming that the fo'c'sle space is only under the foredeck. Examination of Ransome's illustrations and an email discussion with both Geraint Lewis of the Arthur Ransome Literary Estate, and Roger Wardale, author of many books about the people and places in the Ransome books, has shown this premise to be false – what Dick in the books would describe as "an exploded theory". The reality of the space and its inspiration will be examined in the future article.

And finally, although all of the books now have the Ransome illustrations, there are two earlier English artists who also did illustrations for one or two books. Their interpretations and sources need to be examined. Helene Carter, who did the illustrations for the American Lippincott editions, was admired by Ransome, and the evolution of her houseboat illustrations in the 3 early lake books needs to be examined further in the future article.

Captain Flint's Houseboat

by Claire Barnett

From *Swallows and Amazons*, Chapter 3: "*She was a long craft with a high raised cabin roof, and a row of glass windows along her side. Her bows were like that of an old time clipper. Her stern was like that of a steamship.*"

There are two boats in the Lake District that roughly fit that description, and Ransome was familiar with both of them. The Gondola was a passenger steam yacht that ran on Coniston Water where the Ransomes spent family holidays. In his Autobiography, Ransome mentions that as a small boy, he was once allowed to steer her. The Gondola later became a houseboat, then a derelict, and was finally rebuilt by the National Trust, and once again offers passenger service.



The replica Gondola on Coniston

There is a photograph of a Gondola post card that had added sketching by Ransome to show Clifford Webb, the first illustrator of the books, what the houseboat should look like. Permission to use it in this article has not been obtained as of publication date, but it can be viewed in Christina Hardyment's "*Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk*", or in Hugh Brogan's "*The Life of Arthur Ransome*". Webb did not use the postcard, but the American edition published a year later in 1931 apparently did, since Helene Carter's drawing is the same perspective and shows the same canopy on the stern and has the decorative bow boards of the Gondola and its curved cabin stern as well as its distinctive front cabin door enclosure, which in this illustration is widened to become the cabin front.



The Houseboat in Houseboat Bay.²

The Esperance was a similar looking steel yacht that was brought to Lake Windermere and used by a wealthy industrialist to commute from his home in Rio to the foot of the lake where his private train car would take him to work at Barrow-in-Furness. It too was later used as a houseboat.

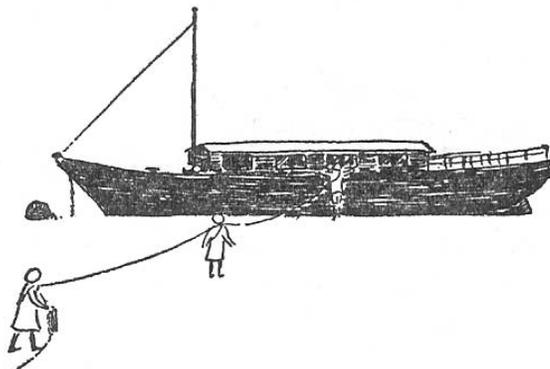


*Esperance*³

But it will come as no surprise that Ransome's houseboat, like his lake and Wildcat Island, is yet another composite. It uses features from both Gondola and Esperance, as well as having features different from either of them. All three ships had 7 square side windows, (though Gondola's cabin was later shortened to 5), and all three have a small side deck along the cabin.

Ransome's own drawings often show an Esperance like exterior shape. Now at the Windermere Steamboat Museum, Esperance's interior was at one time decorated to resemble the party on the houseboat from S&A, and had a sign stating that she was the inspiration for the houseboat in the books. There is a letter from Sir Oliver Scott whose family once owned Esperance, stating, "I can confirm that Esperance really was the model for the houseboat, as Arthur Ransome told me so himself."⁴ Esperance is really closest in *exterior* profile detail to the houseboat in many of Ransome's illustrations.

But the major difference between the houseboat and its prototypes is one of scale, interior layout, and deck space. When seen from the outside in Ransome's illustrations from "Winter Holiday" Swallows and Amazons, and "The Picts and the Martyrs", the houseboat, is **huge**, its hull is very high out of the water, far taller than Gondola, or the Esperance, both of which ride quite low in the water. Its length to height ratio is also completely different.



*Detail from "The Houseboat's frozen in"*⁵



Gondola photo by Claire Barnett



Old postcard view of Esperance

The interior of the three ships is different too. Captain Flint's houseboat has one large open cabin with a smaller fo'c'sle space under the foredeck for the Primus stoves and galley.



Airing the Fram, from Winter Holiday



Gondola interior photo by Claire Barnett

The Gondola is the biggest ship of the three and has the roomiest cabin, divided into two lounges with built in seating, as shown in this recent photo of the aft compartment.

The Esperance is divided into 4 smaller compartments, the first of which is a small lounge, shown here in "Swallows and Amazons" party trim with Dave Thewlis.



Esperance main lounge



*Houseboat interior from Picts and Martyrs**

It has built in seating, but the seating is not as wide as either Gondola or the Houseboat. Gondola and the houseboat each have a center door at the stern end of their cabins, but Esperance has one on each side. Both real ships have recessed rear decks for seating, but the illustration above from "The Picts and The Martyrs" shows a high covered deck with 3 steps leading down to the cabin door.



Gondola recessed deck and seat photo by Claire Barnett



*Esperance stern doors, recessed deck and seat.**

The same differences are apparent at the bow of the 3 ships. Both of the real ships have an open front cockpit for seating and a door to walk through from the cabin to the bow.

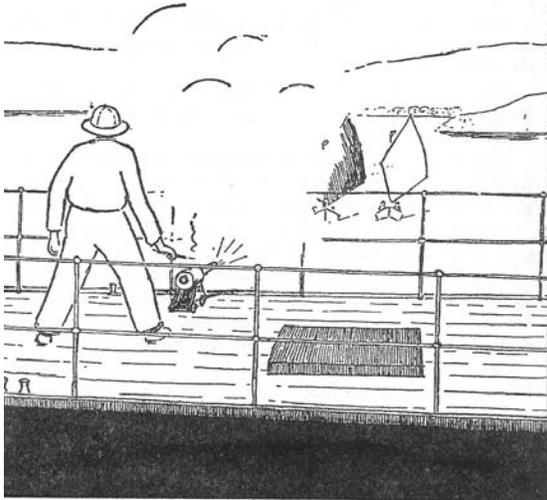


Gondola photo by Claire Barnett



Esperance photo by Claire Barnett¹⁰

Captain Flint's houseboat has a raised forward deck and solid cabin front. Ransome also describes a forehatch from a fo'c'sle space under the front deck. Compare the scale of the AR illustration of the houseboat foredeck showing Captain Flint and cannon, with a similar photo of Esperance with Dave Thewlis and cannon. Captain Flint is standing on a raised deck, and Dave is standing in a bow well, below side deck level.



Excerpt from "There was a bang" ¹¹



Dave Thewlis on Esperance ¹²

So in conclusion, with the houseboat, we have Ransome using his usual artistic license to combine elements of ships from both Coniston and Windermere, and then changing the scale and details to suit his own purposes.

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¹ Gondola on Coniston, Tony Richards photo, Lakeland Camera.

² Helene Carter chapter heading from Lippincott American edition of S&A.

³ Esperance at the Windermere Steamboat Museum, courtesy of Roger Wardale.

⁴ 1993 letter from Sir Oliver Scott to Roger Wardale, used by permission.

⁵ Arthur Ransome illustration from Winter Holiday.

⁶ Arthur Ransome illustration from Winter Holiday

⁷ Photo of Dave Thewlis on Esperance, used by permission.

⁸ Arthur Ransome illustration from The Picts and the Martyrs.

⁹ Esperance photo by John Lambert, used by permission.

¹⁰ Esperance photo by Claire Barnett, copyright retained by Windermere Steamboat Museum.

¹¹ Detail of Arthur Ransome illustration from Swallows and Amazons.

¹² Photo of Dave Thewlis on Esperance, used by permission