Admiral of the Greatest Show on Earth

THE DIAMOND JUBILEE

Lord Salisbury tells Christopher Middleton how he will steer a flotilla of 1.000 vessels down the Thames as the man behind the Diamond Jubilee Pageant



"I am reliably informed," the noble lord announces, "that it will be the largest one-day event in human history."

The figures bear him out, too. On the afternoon of Sunday June 3, up to 30,000 participants will be piloting 1,000 craft from Battersea Bridge to the Tower of

London in a flotilla seven miles long. At the head of the "watercade" will be a giant, floating bell tower of eight newly cast bells, each named after members of the Royal family (the biggest being halfa-ton Elizabeth).

Following closely behind will be an 88ft gilded royal rowbarge, the Gloriana, powered by 18 straining oarsmen. In pride of place, of course, will be Her Majesty's vessel, decked out in gold trim and flowers, its prow adorned with a swirling-bearded sculpture of Old Father

Stand in whatever spot you have selected on the riverbank, and, over the course of two and a half hours, you will see every conceivable kind of conveyance pass by. From immaculate yachts to grizzled fishing trawlers, from lifeboats to police boats, from speedboats to steamboats, from tall ships to a Maori dugout canoe (now admitted after an initial incompatibility with health and safety guidelines).

The parade is going to be meticulously organised, with the flotilla divided into 10 sections, each headed by its own music barge. We are talking massed orchestras, choirs and military bands: everyone from the Academy of Ancient Music to the Shree Muktajeevan Indian Pipe Band, from the Royal Marines to the London Philharmonic, playing at least a dozen pieces composed for the occasion.

Nor is it just among the performers that the big names are to be found. There will be a veritable A-list of

celebrity boats: the Golden Hinde (a replica, of course); the Gipsy Moth IV (in which Sir Francis Chichester circumnavigated the globe); the Havengore, the boat that carried Sir Winston Churchill's coffin; and 40 of the little ships that helped rescue the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in

The size of the spectacle is matched only by the list of things that could go wrong. "Organising an event like this is a hundred times harder on water than on land," muses Lord Salisbury, as we stand on Chelsea Embankment, which will be a mass of spectators (1.8 million are expected) on the day.

"Take the music, for example. How far ahead of the Queen's boat should the bell tower be, so that the bells don't deafen her? How far apart should the music barges be, so that they don't drown each other out?"

Questions to which answers are still being found. That said, Lord Salisbury, 65, does have form in this sort of thing, having organised the 50th anniversary

celebrations for V-E Day, V-J Day and the D-Day landings. Plus he has had experience commissioning church bells (for St Albans cathedral) and musical compositions (to mark the 400th anniversary of Hatfield House, his

ancestral home).

He insists, though, that when it comes to the river pageant, he has been thrown

in at the deep end.

"With the other anniversaries, I was a minister and had government funds to spend," he says (as Viscount Cranborne, he was a leading light in Sir John Major's administration). "With this, though, not only are we raising the money ourselves, but we are intending to create a surplus, to be distributed to charitable projects in Britain and the Commonwealth.

A figure of £100 million has been mentioned, to which end Lord Salisbury and his committee are seeking backing from corporate sponsors and individual benefactors. Sainsbury's is on board, for instance, but Lord Salisbury said last month that the organisers were reluctant to "go a bit downmarket to make it a Tesco pageant". They are also, however, approaching anyone planning a Jubilee party in a riverside location. "The first lot of letters has just gone out," he says when we repair to his Chelsea home. "I am writing to all riparian owners, pointing out that they wouldn't be having a party were it not for our pageant, and gently suggesting that they might like to make a donation to the Thames Diamond Jubilee Foundation."

As to how much the event is costing, and how much has been raised already, Lord Salisbury is not saying. "I think

we'd better keep that under wraps for the moment," he responds. "Experience shows that if you say you're getting anywhere near your target, people decide not to bother contributing."

The other thing that experience has taught him is the importance of keeping helpers happy. Which is why he hasn't allocated himself a berth on the royal boat. "If I, as chairman, am not going to be on the Queen's launch, then it's easier for others to accept that they aren't going to be," he explains. "It's something I picked up when I was doing the D-Day anniversary celebrations, and there was space for only 172 people at the big dinner in the Portsmouth Guildhall. All sorts of people were telling me it was outrageous they hadn't been invited. In reply, I could say that I wasn't going either. I was able to ask them which guest they suggested I should bump off the list of dinner guests to make room for them. President Clinton, perhaps? Another world leader?'

He is making a big effort to please all those boat owners who wanted to be part of the flotilla, but who did not get selected (4,500 applied, only 1,000 were

chosen).

"They are to be invited to watch from Albert Bridge, which will essentially be our salon des désolés," he says. "We are also exploring the possibility of asking charities to take the centre span of the river bridges for the day, with corporate

sponsors providing the hire fee.
"That said, we want to maintain as far as possible the principle that this is a free event for the public. Even in the flotilla, the biggest section is taken up with what we term our Tupperware Navy (ie people who just like messing around

in boats).'

True enough, among the grand,

historic vessels are to be found a fleet of little clippers and pleasure cruisers. But there is no mistaking the sizeable contribution being made by the Armed Forces, port authorities and worshipful companies of everyone from tallow chandlers to shipwrights, from innholders to painter stainers and even information technologists.

"This event will be a chance to showcase Britain," says Lord Salisbury. "Our theatre, our culture, the fact that we eat better here than in Paris, and the City of London's position as one of the world's great financial centres.

"There will be boats from every county in the United Kingdom and, even more significantly, from every country in the Commonwealth. This pageant gives us the perfect opportunity to demonstrate that we are open to the non-European part of the world.

There could be no more appropriate occasion than this one to express our gratitude towards the Queen. I think it's fair to say that, were it not for her, the

Commonwealth would not exist today."
With so much at stake, Lord Salisbury and his crew are determined not to let anything scupper the pageant plans. Even the river will be tamed for the day, with the Environment Agency agreeing to shut the Thames Barrier for its annual service and inspection, thereby minimising any choppiness.

"We've made plenty of Plan B-type preparations," says Lord Salisbury. "There's only one type of bad weather that can stop us — and the chances of thick fog on an afternoon in early June

are quite small.

See Travel section

CV

Name Robert Michael James Gascoyne-Cecil, 7th Marguess of Salisbury

Born Sept 30, 1946

Education Eton College and Christ Church, Oxford

Career Worked as a merchant banker before being elected Conservative MP for South Dorset in 1979. Appointed Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords under Sir John Major in 1994.

Accepted a life peerage in 1999 before taking leave

Family Married, two sons and three daughters

Interests Breeding pigs on his estate; Chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire