

Cawsand Bay Pilots by Tony Carne

It can be said that Henry VIII laid the foundations of the pilotage service when, in 1514 he granted a charter to the Brethren of Trinity House. Henry was concerned about national security and was unhappy with foreigners being acquainted with the channels and entrances to English ports. Early pilotage legislation was concerned with river Thames but later Trinity House was empowered to regulate all British ports. All incoming ships had to take a pilot, the pilots were to be licenced with their fees being proportional to the draught of the vessel. The former of these regulations has only recently been superseded by E.C. regulations, consequently Brittany Ferries sailing into Millbay flying the French flag no longer require the services of a pilot.

Cawsand, positioned on the approaches to Plymouth, was well suited as a base for pilots. Many large ports had similar pilots' bases which operated largely unaffected by legislation until George III's Outports Pilotage Districts Act of 1808. Increased maritime activity brought with it increased regulation of shipping which was not always welcomed and was sometimes strongly resisted. There was a terrific rumpus in Plymouth for example in 1827 when Trinity House insisted that all Plymouth registered ships should also carry a pilot when entering their home port.

It was the same with the pilots. initially they were fishermen who would watch for incoming ships and it was from these men that the official Trinity House Pilots were later appointed. They always retained their links with fishing however, and when business was slack would head back to the whiting grounds.

In those days it was the tradition for sons to become apprenticed to their fathers. The skills of a craft would be passed on in a family to successive generations. The Cawsand families associated with piloting were the Chapells, Eddeys, Hancocks, Hoopers and Parfords.



The Chapells owned the 'Pilot Boat Inn' in Cawsand Square. At its rear was a small boat yard adjacent to the beach and it was here that the cutters were beached at high tide for routine maintenance.

The boats they used at first were small fishing boats but, by 1850, larger, cutter rigged, fully decked craft were used. The largest Cawsand boat was the 52 ton 'Alarm'. She was built in Plymouth in 1859 and was 64 feet long with a 9 foot beam. She drew 9 feet of water and was owned by the Parfords. With such a deep draught she was unsuitable for navigating far up river. If a sailing barge wished to sail up to Millbrook, Saint Germans or Morwellham she would drop the deep water pilot at Devil's Point and take on a 'Mud-Pilot' for the remainder of the voyage.

The Port of Plymouth didn't draw its pilots only from Cawsand. There had long been established a base at Turnchapel with six boats operating in 1860, twice as many as there were at Cawsand. Competition between the pilot boats, particularly between the Cawsand and Turnchapel crews, was fierce with the fees going to the first boat to put a pilot aboard.

There was no shortage of work however, for the amount of shipping in and out of Plymouth gradually increased and reached its peak, in sheer numbers of ships handled in 1860. A glance at the shipping columns of the 'Western Morning News' for this period records the movement of thousands of ships annually making it Britain's sixth busiest port. This was just as well for not only did fishing and piloting go hand and hand but fishing and smuggling were similarly associated. The establishment of the Coastguard in 1820 caused a sharp decline in smuggling activities; piloting took up the slack.

Each cutter carried a crew of seven, five pilots and two 'strappers'. The Strappers were fishermen or apprentice pilots who would work the cutter when all the pilots had been put aboard incoming vessels. For transferring pilots, and for ferrying the crews from the moorings, the cutters carried a pulling boat on deck. These craft were strongly built to withstand the bumping involved in launching over the cutter's side. This required precise timing to launch on the crest of a wave and the hazards involved in such a manoeuvre in foul weather may readily be imagined. The cutter would approach on the lee side of a vessel, the dinghy would be launched and come alongside the vessel which would be trailing a rope. It would then stop and the rope made fast around a thwart. The pilot would then climb the ship's side by a rope ladder. In very rough weather the ship would follow the cutter and not undertake the manoeuvre until it was inside the Breakwater.

Instances are on record of boats being crushed between wildly pitching vessels. Some ships' masters, resenting the necessity of having to take on a pilot (and pay the requisite fees) were downright unhelpful. Coming alongside a ship that was still under way and securing the rope could result in a terrific jolt and many of the old pilots had fingers and thumbs missing. Rope ladders would come clattering down and finally when the pilot was aboard the master would ring for 'full ahead' leaving the small boat swirling in its wake. Ironically, in the years before the 1914 war, it was the masters of German vessels who were the most considerate to pilots. They were also the most hospitable and frequently had a full brass band playing on deck; although the latter was not necessarily for the benefit of the pilot.

Foul weather occasionally did bring a windfall. William Hancock once received £60 as his share of salvage money for going to the aid of a dismasted ship. In November 1924 Richard Eddey was involved in a dramatic rescue in the Sound. The 110 ton ketch *Coromandel*, bound from Faro to London with a cargo of cork capsized off the Eddystone in a south-westerly gale. The captain and two of the crew were trapped up to their necks in water in the coalhouse. She drifted for six hours, keel uppermost before being thrown onto the Breakwater. As the tide ebbed the crew escaped and the ship began to break up. It was at this point that pilot Eddey, whose cutter had

been sheltering inside the Breakwater, managed to get close enough to rescue them for which he received a silver medal for his courage and seamanship.

Another member of the Eddey family, John, earned himself some salvage money in February 1841. The Dutch barque, *Yonge Willem*, was driven from her moorings behind the Breakwater in a north-easterly blizzard towards Penlee and Eddey was put aboard and managed to beach her at Cawsand. This feat made him very popular, not only with the crew but in the village also for she was laden with coffee, spices and sugar from the West Indies for Rotterdam.

Other vessels were not so fortunate. In a violent storm in 1880 the collier, *R H Jones*, was washed clean over the Breakwater. On this occasion it was pilot Hancock who was on hand and managed to save one man before she sank.

As the 19th century progressed sail gave way to steam, and wooden ships to iron ones, the tonnage and draught of individual vessels increased with the result that fewer were needed. The pickings available, though fewer, were considerably richer. The competition between the pilots, which was already keen, became intense.

Trinity House regulations decreed that one pilot boat had to remain on station in the Sound and all took turns to perform this duty. The others though would scour the Channel from the Start to the Lizard racing and jockeying after expected steamers, or mailboats, as they were known locally.

There were other men permanently employed at Penlee Point to keep watch for mailboats. These men were known as 'lumpers' and were employed by the ship's chandlers in Plymouth. In the days of sail it was a frequent occurrence that after a long voyage a crew might be close to starvation, especially if the captain was a penny-pincher. Such a ship would signal that she was short of provisions and in turn the lumpers would alert Millbay to send a tender out to meet her. The pilots would also provide fresh food such as fish, eggs or meat in small quantities and in exchange receive payment in tea, spirits or other dutiable goods. Both pilots and lumpers worked closely with the shipping agents whose tips could be very valuable.

In such a competitive situation speed was an essential quality for the cutters. A certain amount of stealth, reminiscent of the smuggling days, was desirable to mislead a rival as to one's position at night. Muffled oars and navigation lights screened by sacks were often employed. Piloting became an arduous and risky business. If no ships were encountered one week then the families went without and by 1880 there were only two pilot cutters in Cawsand and four left in Turnchapel. Inevitably, with risks being taken a tragedy occurred which was to end the rivalry and result in the amalgamation of all the Plymouth pilots.

It happened on Midsummers' Day 1881. The day had been foggy with a strong south-easterly breeze and a lumpy sea running. Towards the evening the fog lifted slightly, although the sea off Penlee Point ran rough with the ebbing tide. The Cawsand cutter, *Mystery*, owned by the Hooper and Eddey families was on station in the Sound and was at her moorings off Pier Cellars. Suddenly, at 7pm, between the swirling fog banks, appeared a fine mailboat flying flag 'G', 'I need a pilot'. She was the Direct Demerara Line steamship *Blenheim* which the other boats had missed in the fog. With much elation five of the crew of the *Mystery* pulled out to her and put pilot Sam Hancock aboard. But on the return journey disaster struck. The men's high spirits were to be their undoing. Whilst over the Draystone reef a large sea swamped them and before they could recover they were capsized by the following wave. Two men drowned and a third, hit by rescue ropes thrown down from the *Blenheim* was never seen again.

The three drowned men were James Eddey, Henry Hooper and apprentice pilot Edward Hancock, the nephew of the pilot on the steamer. Two women were widowed and twelve children orphaned by the tragedy and the Rector of Rame launched a relief fund. The survivor was strapper, William Marks, the sole member of the crew who couldn't swim, and who had managed to cling to the bottom of the boat. Trinity House subsequently offered him his Pilot's licence but he refused it and returned to fishing.

The 30 ton *Mystery* was built at Richmond Walk in 1874 and jointly owned by James Hooper, Henry Hooper and John Eddey. According to a local wag the only mystery was where they had found the money to buy her.

It was just ten years later in the Great Blizzard of March 1891 that *Mystery* herself came to an untimely end. She was driven ashore in a cove under the Cawsand coastguard cottages, and her bottom was broken out. Funds were then raised and the *Ferret* was bought from Turnchapel to replace her. She was smaller but could sail better when close hauled. The *Ferret* was the last pilot boat to operate from Cawsand.

These two disasters together spelt the end to Cawsand's use as a piloting base. Following the triple drowning of 1881 all the Plymouth pilots amalgamated. Instead of competing and ranging far and wide for trade they co-operated, and worked a two-days-out and two-days-in system. They pooled their earnings and had a monthly share-out in the Pilots' Office in Sutton Harbour. The fishermen had a similar system, with each man having a share and one share going to the boat for maintenance.

The wrecking of the *Mystery* emphasised the fact that Cawsand Bay is exposed to the south east and is not a safe anchorage. In 1910 the *Ferret* moved back to her original Turnchapel base but was found to be superfluous. In December 1910 her owners, pilots Hooper, Parford and Odgers, sold her to a Norwegian. The five remaining Cawsand Pilots, the former three plus William and Samuel Hancock then worked the Turnchapel boats and when the weather permitted were picked up at Penlee Point. Both the Hancocks and Hooper retired shortly afterwards and Odgers and Parford later moved to live in Plymouth. In 1917 it was Tom Odgers's local knowledge that enabled the torpedoed liner *Orsova* to be grounded off Pemberknowse Point in 1917. The last Cawsand man to work as a pilot was the late Frank White.

Sadly, the *Ferret* never did reach Norway. She foundered in a January storm in the North Sea on what was to be her final voyage.

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