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Sails on the Severn



Barry Hudges/North Devon Museum

Part Four - North Devon

Colin Green continues his series on the maritime history of this fascinating region

It is hard to decide which of Devon's coastlines has the longest tradition of seafaring and trading. The South coast is twice as long as that in the North, with more ports, but trade out of Barnstaple and, latterly, Bideford and Appledore, can be traced back to the early 14th century and probably beyond. In the late 14th century there were 21 ships belonging to North Devon and 20 in the Royal Service.

Barnstaple was created a borough early in the Norman period and, as a result, was the main trading centre for the North of the county, dealing largely in cloth, much of which was exported. It was not long, however, before Bideford caught up with the larger town, largely because of the less difficult passage up the Torridge than that up the nine miles of winding and frequently shifting channel of the Taw to the quays of Barnstaple.

It was the colonisation of Newfoundland and Virginia that boosted the prosperity of many ports in Devon, including both Barnstaple and Bideford, although the latter gained a greater benefit with the vast fishing trade on the Newfoundland banks. It was Raleigh's view in the 1580s that the Newfoundland fishery was the mainstay of the maritime economy of this country, and the intrepid North Devon men went time and again across the Atlantic, probably in quite small vessels, to bring back the cod. Bideford became the third largest landing port in England and founded its prosperity on fish. Sir Richard Grenville, who was the Lord of the Manor at Bideford, was largely responsible for the colonisation of Virginia and this led to the other great trade of the town, that of tobacco which, in the late 17th century, made Bideford one of the foremost import places for this trade, second only to London. Some tobacco also went into Barnstaple and, curiously, made its way to Bristol by land. It seems probable that this was because of the pirate and privateer activity in the Bristol Channel which would have preyed upon ships carrying such a valuable cargo.

In the late 16th century the 'Spanish affair' was badly depleting other trade with Europe and this hit Barnstaple even harder than other places, so that when John Leland visited the area he observed that Barnstaple was somewhat decayed, but that at Bideford he found 'a whole street of smiths and other occupiers for shipcraft'.

Nearer the mouth of the Torridge lies the wonderful village of Appledore which prospered in tandem with Bideford and gave rise to numerous mariners in the 16th century. In recognition of the good work of Appledore men during the Armada conflict, Queen Elizabeth decreed that the town should become a free port where ships should not have to pay berthing or mooring charges, and that is so to this day. In one's mind's eye, the little

Elizabethan alleyways, even now, are populated with ancient seafarers and shipbuilders. Again, quoting the ubiquitous Leland, Appledore was 'a good Village' in Tudor times and it still is, with stunning views across to Braunton Burrows and out to the rolling Severn Sea. This view was capitalised upon by Thomas Chanter, a local merchant, in 1841, when he built a tower above the village so that a watchman could observe the arrival of his trading vessels over the Bar and preparations to discharge them could be made. Alas, the tower no longer exists: having become unsafe, it was demolished in 1952.

Appledore has been a building place for fine ships and, indeed, for repairing them for a long time. For almost 200 years men have operated shipyards of varying magnitude in the village, constructing well built and maintained vessels. Incidentally, it is a local nicety to refer to a sailing ship as a 'vessel'. To quote Vernon Boyle in his account of Appledore in *Devon Harbours*: 'Two small boys are talking and one says 'My father's cap'n of a steamer' and the other, with vaster pride, 'My father's got a vessel'.' Several local builders operated successively at two yards through the early part of the 19th century but it was a son of Appledore who had emigrated to Prince Edward Island in 1819, James Yeo, who really took over the industry in the middle of the century.

Yeo had sailed to the New World as a relatively poor man, but by virtue of extreme energy and application, typical Victorian qualities, became the most powerful man on

the island with interests in trade, shipbuilding and timber. Yeo sent his son, William, back to Appledore to act as his British agent and came to visit him in the early 1840s, when the two men decided upon a scheme to construct a great dry dock in one of the tidal inlets where they would build ships. Actually, most of the vessels that emerged from the Richmond dock, as it became known, were roughly built of local softwood back at the island off Nova Scotia and towed across the Atlantic to Appledore where they were finished off by the local skilled work force.

William Yeo built upon the foundation laid by his father and became the most powerful man in North Devon with many business interests which gave employment to much of the population on the Torridge. He so dominated trade that when he died, childless, that trade fell away and the area became quite depressed, although other shipbuilders, notably Robert Cock and John Westacott, son of the Barnstaple shipwright, revived the two yards and went on to construct numerous ships into the 20th century.

After shipbuilding ceased, activity at the yards continued with the repairing of many sailing craft, the Harris family being responsible for an ongoing business of keeping old vessels going through to the middle of the 20th century when quite a few such coasters were still operating. In fact, Bideford, Appledore and Braunton, on a creek near the mouth of the Taw, were the home of many a sailing coaster up to that time. In the last 30 years shipbuilding has recommenced at ➤

Left: the ketch Francis Beddoe, with the three-masted topsail schooner Mary Jones, moored in the Pool, Appledore, probably in the early 1920s

Below: Appledore Quay in 1930 with the originally-named Ketch alongside - she came to Devon from Scotland where she was built by Fife in 1894



Barry Hedges/North Devon Museum

Appledore with the formation of Appledore Shipbuilders, which built a great covered yard at Bidna Marsh where numerous specialised ships continue to be built to this day. This modern industrial yard was complemented in the town by the smaller yard of Hinks, where wooden vessels were still being constructed until a few years ago. Over the last 30 years replicas of the *Mayflower*, *Nonsuch* and *Golden Hind* have emerged from Hinks's yard and are regarded as being authentic in every detail. Hinks, Waters and Ford were also the main builders of the Torridge salmon boats, another distinctive local type.

The Torridge and Taw were the last refuge of the sailing coaster in the West of Britain, the schooner being predominant until the late 19th century, but being supplanted by the ketch after this when owners (many of whom also skippered their own vessels) were seeking to save money by reducing crews. The ketch could be sailed by a crew of three, although it was known for two men to do the odd trip, and at a time when the motor ship was beginning to take the coasting trade, any savings were of importance. At the turn of the 19th century there were a couple of hundred sailing vessels

on the Taw and Torridge and it was not unknown for the residents of Appledore to see 50 or more sailing out over the Bar after a period of bad weather.

Over the water, Braunton was an interesting and important place, lying at the head of Braunton Pill which winds north from the mouth of the Taw. Because it is well inland it might be thought that the place could not be part of the maritime activity of the Two Rivers but this was far from the truth. Men of Braunton owned numerous sailing vessels over many years, much of their outgoing trade in agricultural produce coming from a medieval anachronism known as Braunton Great Field. This piece of land, some 350 acres in extent, lies to the west of the small town, bounded on the west by Braunton Burrows, that vast area of tall sand dunes fringing the mouth of the Torridge. The Great Field was a remnant of the Saxon practice of common fields divided into hundreds of strips, each farmed individually by men of the parish. It is the only surviving example in the South West, one or two others still existing in the Midlands where hundreds probably thrived in medieval times. The Great Field gave rise to abundant arable

crops and market garden produce which was taken to the markets of the Bristol Channel and South Wales in the small fleet of Braunton ketches which returned with coal, stone, sand and basic slag for dressing the land to the tiny quay of Vellator, where many masts were to be seen on a daily basis. The quay used to be the home of the 'oarweed' boat, which was taken down the Pill to load bladderwrack seaweed which was highly-prized as fertiliser for the bulbfields of Braunton. Alas, Vellator is now grass-grown and almost derelict, but there are still local memories of the sailor farmers of Braunton.

One could mention many ships belonging to Braunton Pill: *Bonita*, the last ketch to sail without a motor; *Democrat*, the first ketch in the area to have a motor, about 1912; and the *Enid*, the only known ketch to have had a Bermudian jib-headed rig later in life. She worked the Channel until 1951, when she went into the adventurous foreign trade and sailed for the West Indies, having been built at Pembroke Dock in 1898.

Out in the mouth of the Two Rivers lie the shining golden gravel banks which provided both a hazard for sailing vessels and a source

Below: the historic quays at East-the-Water, Bideford. Topsail schooner Ebenzer of Padstow lies to the Clarence Wharfe and a barge is under repair in the small dock. Kathleen and May is currently under restoration at the quay in the foreground



Barry Hedges/North Devon Museum

of income. At the end of the 19th century numerous dock construction and extension projects were under way, and a lucrative trade developed for the North Devon ketches in loading gravel on the banks and hauling it to the construction sites in South Wales and Bristol. At the same time a more localised trade flourished for the gravel barges of Taw and Torridge. These small sloop-rigged craft went down river on each ebb tide and sat upon the ridges, all with their different names such as Pulleys, Crow Ridge and Sprat Ridge. Best of all was the Klondyke Ridge, right at the mouth of the estuary, where men made large amounts of money from the hard labour of loading their barges between tides (about six hours maximum) and sailing back up river to the wharves of Bideford and Barnstaple, only to do it all over again next day. Sometimes, though, they didn't sail back up river when the barge failed to lift on the flood due to being overloaded, and then it was a matter of taking to the boat until the next ebb. Lightening the load usually allowed the barge to rise on the next flood.

Barry Hudges/North Devon Museum



Above: a man with attitude. This crew member of a Barnstaple barge has done a hard day's graft and wants you to know it. Note the hatch covers and the minimal freeboard

Below: Gravel barges lying on the Klondyke Ridge at the mouth of the Torridge, the crews toiling to load its bounty into the holds, an arduous task between tides. The calm day has enabled the sails to be dried - or is it just to save energy when it comes to setting them?!



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