

PILOT GIGS

by Vivian Prior July, 1999

I thought it would be of some interest to tell 'ee a bit about the Pilot Gigs of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. I wouldn't be surprised if somebody amongst you knows a lot more about them than I do. But that isn't going to stop me, so you will have to resign yourselves to 'arking for a bit o' while. Gigs are a heritage thing for Cornwall. Back to the roots in tradition yet they are intensely topical. Gig racing has become enormously popular in the past few years and generates a wonderful show of enthusiasm, particularly among our young people. This is good news and a change from the usual doom and gloom. Those of you who are at home here in Torbay will perhaps be aware of some of this because it is well reported in the Western Morning News. But they that have come down from 'upalong' might not have heard much about it.

In his book about the gigs, RHC Gillis, one of the Newquay Rowing Club stalwarts, wrote that their history began in 1793. 1793 was a significant date and I'll tell 'ee why dreckly. But he wasn't the beginning, because gigs were on the go long before that. They were having their heyday as working boats throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

It is even on record that gigs from St Marys on Scilly went out to rescue the crew of one of Charles the Second's naval vessels, the Royall Oacke, wrecked on the Bishop's Rock on January 18th 1666.. So obviously, the gig had evolved over a long period. This evolution was influenced by the position of Cornwall and the Scilly Isles.

You do all know where that's to and if you don't I must tell 'ee that they project out into the shipping forecast areas Lundy, Sole and Plymouth.

Stormy seas

In the days of sail the first landfall was where incoming windjammers needed to take a pilot on board. Although there was great demand, there were many pilots. The times were hard and there was great competition for this work. So, to get a pilotage, your pilot had to get out to the incoming vessel before any of his rivals. This is where the gig was needed. So our pilot gig turns out to be a fast rowing boat with the formidable power of six stalwart rowers and a coxswain. Above all, the gig needed to be seaworthy and had to be tight not only for speed but because she had to be launched whatever the state of the weather or tide, Thus sometimes she might have to be carried by her crew across a rocky shore or down a beach.

It was the Customs service that decreed that gigs should be limited to six oars. Otherwise it was feared that a gig would outpace the Revenue cutters and so the poor Cornish might get away with it if they were doing a bit of smuggling.

Apart from speed and impressive sea-keeping qualities, the gig is a vessel with a respectable carrying capacity. Thus gigs were used as the earliest lifeboats and indeed some have continued to complement motor lifeboats even within living memory. They also excelled in salvage operations. Very important in times when wrecks provided a welcome bounty from the sea. But this was not all. When rigged with a dipping lugsail and a mizzen, the gig was quite nimble under sail. Stones were put in the bottom to give the necessary stiffness. In this form, gigs often made the crossing to Roscoff in Brittany, a return trip of about 250 miles from Scilly. Once over there, the stones would be replaced by more interesting ballast. This was politely known as "Free Trade" and even when England and France were at war, these duty-free activities seem to have carried on just the same. With such a boat, it was inevitable that on feast days and regattas, they would be raced for fun and so, a tradition of tracing grew up.

On the Scilly Isles, the gigs were indeed an essential part of daily life. They were used to carry passengers and all kinds of freight between the islands. The young men used them to go courting. A bride from Bryher was ferried by gig to the church on Tresco for her wedding. When the doctor was urgently needed on St Martins, the gig would be launched to fetch him over from St Marys. Some were even fitted out for funeral duties to carry a coffin As well as on the Scilly Islands; these versatile craft were to be found in every fishing cove and port round the Cornish coast.

As we approach the threshold of the 21st century, it is impressive to note that eleven gigs survive today which were built way back in the 19th century. One of these, the Klondyke, and this one happens to be the odd one out, was built by William Gluyas on St Marys in 1877 for the Coastguard service and was later sold to the pilots of St Agnes. Klondyke is on show in the museum at Hugh Town

on St Marys, and is the only one no longer in the water. All the others continue in use and remarkably all of them were built by the Peters family in their boatyard at Polvarth down at St Mawes. The yard still exists and has only recently passed out of the Peters family. William Peters founded the yard in 1793, This was the significance of the date I mentioned earlier. I told ee I'd tell ee didn't I. The longevity of these old gigs is amazing, particularly since they suffered very hard usage during their time as workboats and this hard usage continues in their present role as racing and pleasure craft. Together they comprise a collection of veterans attributed to one family and to one boatyard which is perhaps unique. These survivors are very carefully preserved and by now some of them have seen so much renovation that they are perhaps getting to be a bit like George Washington's axe, which I am told has had two new heads and three new handles.

The 19th century gigs were usually about 30 feet long and 5 feet in the beam. Small leaf Cornish elm was traditionally used for the planking. The Peters family felled their own timber and one can visualise that most of it came from the woodlands around the Fal and the Roseland Peninsula. Nowadays because of the Dutch elm disease, Ralph Bird who is building at Devoran has to go very much further a field to find elm. Only mature trees in their prime were selected and the Peters insisted they should provide up to 30 foot lengths so as to avoid having more than one scarf joint in each plank. Having been dragged or floated to Polvarth, the baulks of timber were submerged in the creek for about 5 years to mature. After that, they were removed to the sawpit in readiness for the sawyer who used to come over from Penryn, He must have been a highly skilled tradesman because these elm butts had to be sawn into planks very little more than their finished thickness of a quarter of an inch. Once cut, the boards were stacked for a further 12 months to air dry before being used. Legend has it that the Peters' sawpits were brought into use at weekends and holidays for cockfighting.

The keels and frames were chosen for lightness and flexibility, to produce a fast strong boat. American Rock elm was mainly used but sometimes the keel was of oak. Copper nails were used in the building and these were ragged with a chisel. That is to say

barbs were cut on them, before being driven into pre-bored holes. The holes were drilled with a wimbrel and a spade headed boryer made from umbrella steel. A wimbrel was the old-time precursor of your Black and Decker and I expect some of you may know that a boryer was the business end of a drill. In riveting the planking, copper fastenings were used and secured on the inside with square rooves. These rooves were cut from copper sheet. They were superseded by round rooves - or washers as we now know them - in the 1850's. Tradition is still followed closely in gig building and I have noticed that when Ralph Bird built Fly for the Newquay club in 1993, he used square rooves. The club members used up an awful lot of time and patience in cutting them by hand.

When the gigs were used as workboats, they had flatbladed oars, known as sweeps, made of ash and about 18 feet long. The "long and strong" sweeping stroke was used and this style was thought to be ideal for long-distance rowing. Nowadays they use shorter oars which they call "paddles" with a faster striking rate. Silver spruce or laminated wood is used, A recent proposal to use carbon fibre paddles was firmly rejected. Sea conditions in, say, Newquay bay where half the length of the boat can be out of water are vastly different from the river at Henley and so gig rowing differs from the other sort. The racing shell has sliding seats and the oarsmen use their leg muscles as well as the arms. Gigs have fixed seats - I'm sorry, I should have said thwarts - and the only concession to comfort or modernity is to tape a bit of foam rubber onto the seat to ease the pain on the bottom. The thin gunwales and light construction of the gig rule out the use of metal rowlocks. So, to avoid the danger of damage, Oak thole pins are used instead. These can be broken with relative impunity and it is easy to carry replacements when racing. In the pilot service, it was the practice to paint the gigs black and they were often black-leaded below the water-line to improve performance.

Steamships replaced sail and with improving communication and navigational aids, the need for pilotage diminished. Motorboats came into use and the heavy loss of young men's lives in the first World War had a deep effect on the waterfront. Thus, in the first quarter of this century, gigs fell into the doldrums. Many were left to rot on the beach, some were burned and some were even turned upside down to serve as chicken coops.

The tradition of racing the gigs was kept alive, however, both at Newquay and on the Scilly Isles where a few gigs managed to survive. Those who are old enough may recall the bright hopes we entertained at the time of the Coronation when to herald the new Elizabethan age, various community projects were encouraged. For its part, the Newquay Rowing Club, set out to revitalise rig racing. A delegation of enthusiasts went over to Scilly to rescue such of the surviving gigs as could be restored. These were brought back to Newquay and after renovation were raced there for a time. Eventually they were all returned home to Scilly.

I don't suppose that anyone started with a design for a gig, more probably each successive one incorporated improvements derived from experience with previous boats. However the design is generally regarded as having reached its zenith when in 1838, the gig Treffry was built for use by the Treffry Company at Newquay. The Treffry Company was the one which had laid the railway and developed the harbour at Newquay for exporting china clay and importing coal. From the start Treffry was intended to be a bit special. The Peters were so proud of her that instead of being painted in their usual white, she was polished with linseed oil. On her way to Newquay, she was saluted by the dipped ensign of a warship standing in Carrick Roads whilst being rowed up river to Truro. From Truro the crew carried her home overland.

Treffry is still in use today and is the pride of the fleet of gigs at Newquay, This gig is now regarded as the standard design for the racing gig and today all new gigs are being built exactly to her lines and dimensions, namely length 32 feet, beam 4ft 10in.

We have two gigs at Newquay even older than Treffry the Newquay, built in 1812 and Dove built in 1820. All three have recently returned home from refit by Ralph Bird at Devoran. and have been brought back to pristine condition so that they ought to be good

for another 180 year's service. There is a long- established race within the Newquay club confined to these three veteran gigs. The trophy is a silver model of a gig, so valuable that it has to be kept in the bank, The race is keenly contested because it is a matter of great pride for a rower to be thought good enough to be chosen to crew in it.

Of the remaining seven 19th century Peters built boats, six remain on their various home islands on Scilly where they saw many years in the pilot service, attending wrecks and with the occasional smuggling trip. Today they continue as racing craft. Bernice and Bonnet were built in 1830 for the pilots of St Martins, In 1869 Bernice was sold to the St Agnes pilots who renamed her Slippen. Slippen was joined on St Agnes by Shah in 1873 and by Campernell in 1895. The Bryher pilots acquired Golden Eagle in 1870 and she was joined by Czar in 1879. There were two wrecks on Bryher on the day Czar was delivered. So she was put to work immediately and earned enough salvage money to pay for herself.

All these boats have colourful histories, but I will only talk a little about the last of the group, Sussex, which came to Bryher in 1886. This was the boat which ferried Bertha Jenkins to her wedding in 1929. In 1955 Sussex was launched in thick fog to search for a ship sounding distress signals near the Golden Ball reef. I think this may probably be the last time a gig was used in this way. In 1969 a crew from the Truro River club rowed her from Scilly to Penzance in 9 hours. Sadly, in 1971, Sussex was left out on the bank and was blown over. She was badly damaged. However, Ralph Bird acquired the wreckage and brought it back to Devoran where Sussex was painfully restored. She appeared at Henley in 1987. Since then she has been on loan. First to the Roseland Gig club and at present she is acting as stablemate to the Porthleven club's Energetic

.Gig racing as we are now seeing it really began to take off in 1967 when the good folk on St Marys commissioned their local boat builder, Tom Chudleigh, to build a new boat. This was the first gig of the 20th

century. She was copied from Bonnet and was named Serica. Tom Chudleigh went on to build a further copy of Bonnet in 1969 for St Martins. This one, Dolphin, like Serica has built up impressive racing form.

Another builder, Gerald Pearn of Looe, came forward with Nornour in 1971 for St Marys. In her first year Nornour was rowed to Sennen and back within a day and made the crossing to Roscoff in 37 hours a year later.

Tom Chudleigh then went on to build three boats for the Newquay club. These were based on the Treffryin effect 32 feet long instead of 30. This began a new trend which later became the standard. These boats were named after old-time Newquay Pilchard seining companies and fish cellars - Active, Good Intent and Unity. Unity has since been sold to the Yealm gig club where she was renamed Hornet. Hornet has returned to Newquay for the County Gig championships and it was good to see her when she visited Porthleven for their gig day.

That's a long way to trail a boat. Whilst she was still Unity, she was once rowed the 57 miles from Newquay back home to Scilly in a little over 11 hours.

By 1989, the individual islands on Scilly who were racing their 30 foot boats felt at a disadvantage in competing with the 32 foot boats of the mainland clubs. So as an all-Island project they commissioned Tom Chudleigh to build them their first 32 foot boat. This one is called Islander and has proved a very formidable racing machine.

Meantime other builders have begun to appear in Padstow Falmouth Mevagissey as well of course as Ralph Bird of Devoran. Ralph had a hand in building the Falmouth boat Energy which started in 1983 and he went on to build Buller for the Cadgwith Club and then the appropriately-named William Peters for the Roseland Gig Club. Indeed all the gigs carry names relevant to their home club. For example, the East Caradon club's Ann Glanville commemorates a famous oarswoman of the last century. Zennor has Senara, their patron saint, Fowey has Gallant and perhaps the most poignantly named is Porthleven's Energetic a memorial to five of the six Richards brothers who formed the crew of the 25-ton fishing boat Energetic PZ114 and were lost when she was run down by an American ship in June 1948.

As the place names tell, gig clubs have by now spread all round our Cornish coastal waters and over the border into Devon There are about 26 of them and the number of gigs is about to reach 50. Each gig has its distinctive colours and on tYie water they make a lovely sight whilst the enthusiasm of the support is exciting. In May when they hold the World championships on Scilly, they have 40 or more gigs taking part. Actually, it isn't much of an exaggeration to say "World Championships" because crews come from Norway and Holland as well as those from England that I mentioned. We can even look forward to exchanging visits with Australia crews before too long because recently The Cornish Association of Victoria has set up a Cornish Pilot Gig Club in Melbourne. Morwenna and I had the honour of being made founder members. Now there is just one more little custom I would like to mention When the coxwain of a Newquay gig wants his crew to pull he calls "Hevva" the old word used by the pilchard seiners and to have them pull harder he shouts "Azook"

So now I will turn from gig-talk and cry Hevva and Azook to ask all they that came down from upalong and all they that came up from downalong - there are two categories of these the neverbeenawayers and that twice blessed group the Homecomers as well as all of you who reckon to be home here to charge your glasses and be upstanding to join in the toast which I am honoured to give you.

To Cornwall, our beloved homeland, and to the future of the Cornish Associations! Kernow bys vyken.