

# BUDE CANAL & HARBOUR SOCIETY

## Ship Building and the Atlantic Ocean

### LIFEBOATS

At Bude there was no organised way of saving lives at sea until the early 1800s. The first rescue boat, stationed at Bude, was in 1817. It was a large rowing boat, without a crew or under the control of any organisational body. It was kept to be made available in emergencies due to the increase in coastal shipping. Not being used or cared for the boat became unseaworthy and was abandoned.

In 1837 King William IV gave the first lifeboat. It was 24 feet 9 inches long, with 8 oars and cost 100 guineas, paid for by the Duchy of Cornwall. Although it had no official name it was often referred to as 'The Royal Bude Lifeboat' or 'The William IV'. This well-intentioned gift had an unfortunate existence. Again it had no crew, there was no training in its use and for sixteen years there is no evidence that it was used to save any lives.

Local boatmen had little confidence in the boat which was of north country design. Its untimely end occurred during a practice launch on 10th October 1844. The boat went broadside into the surf with two successive waves smashing the oars causing it to overturn. The crew were trapped underneath, eventually drifting to shore. Two crewmen, William Skitch and Nicholas Bladden were drowned.

In 1853 the National Shipwreck Institution replaced this boat with another, some 27 feet long and with 8 oars. Lifeboats and trained crews continued until 1923 when the R.N.L.I. closed the Station.

### SHIPBUILDING

There was some shipbuilding prior to the Construction of the canal. In 1813 a William Barrow built the brig 'Mary' launching it from the beach.

In 1830 probably the most successful shipyard was established by Robert Stapleton, Master Shipwright. he set up his yard on the Higher Wharf of the Canal. Ships were launched sideways or removed by putting a chain around the hull and using a greased slipway, were pulled broadside ashore with a winch. The yard also did repairs, lengthening ships such as smacks into ketches.

The following are ships owned or built at Bude between 1826 and 1842:

1826: Sloop 'Friends', built and owned by Thomas Round and W. Whitefield – Lost at sea in 1851

1828: Sloop 'Enterprise', built and owned by Thomas Round – Sold in 1830

1835: Ketch 'Lady Acland', Messrs Davey, Elliott & Wonnacott – Future unknown

1836: Sloop 'Affo', Messrs Beer, Gorman & Drew – Wrecked Hartland 1871

1837: Sloop 'Victoria', ownership unknown – Future unknown

1842: Sloop 'Mire', Messrs Pickard & Bate – Wrecked 1875

1837: Sloop 'Velocity', ownership unknown – Future unknown

### WEST COUNTRY SHIPYARD PRACTICE

*The following is an extract from 'Mariner's Review' 1959, in an article by Vernon C. Boyle*

Robert Stapleton, master shipwright, of Bude, said to me: 'It's wonderful what you can do with main strength and foolishness.'

We were talking about some of the heavier work done in the small West Country shipyards fifty or sixty years ago. Robert was born in 1876, son of a master mariner and grandson of Robert Stapleton, the Bude master builder who built many little craft on the canal side where they were, incidentally, launched sideways!

The elder Robert died in 1875 and the yard passed to his nephew, Henry, to whom the younger Robert was apprenticed, and from whom in turn he inherited the tools and the business.

At Bude any nautical conversation comes, usually sooner or later, to the ketch *Ceres*, built in Salcombe in 1811, which, after over a century in local ownership, foundered in 1936 in Barnstaple Bay. The old shipwright said: 'We hove that old vessel up twice in my time, and a good many others too.' The chance to take down a full description of this intricate task was

too good to be missed.

We had the *Ceres* in the higher basin alongside the little quay wall next to our yard on the west bank. Her bows were towards the canal entrance and we had lightened her as far as possible. We set up lengths of cable from the mast heads, above the hounds, down to the deck on the outer side to help the shrouds take the strain of the masts when she lay over.

Then with mast-head tackles made fast to posts ashore we hove her down, at the same time easing off her moorings so that as she listed her hull lay farther off from the quay. That was to allow us to bring in a couple of canal boats under her mast heads.

These boats were square ended, box-like things, carrying about 4 tons each, which were towed about the canal. Purchases hung down from the mast heads into the two boats and were made fast by chains right round them. They had a ton or two of stones in them too.

As in Figure 1A.

The purchases were then set up and now we could slack off the first tackles, for the two canal boats hung from the mast heads and held the ship down. She was so far over that the water came up her deck on the port side within 8" of the hatchways.

Fig. 1

