# Ships and Shipping in North Devon in the 1920s

*John Bradbeer*

Shipping played a part of everyday life in North Devon in the 1920s, which is hard to imagine a century later. Vessels would arrive and leave the Taw–Torridge estuary on almost every tide, and it would have been unusual to have walked on the quaysides at Barnstaple and Bideford and not seen several vessels moored alongside.

Devon's two coasts have experienced maritime histories in parallel, with similarities usually more apparent than differences. In the 1920s, this was no longer accurate, and the two coasts saw quite contrasting patterns of maritime activity. North Devon was rapidly becoming the last place in Britain and Ireland with its own fleet of sailing and motor-auxiliary sailing vessels, a fact that was being recognised by both local and national maritime historians at the time.[1] North Devon was a part of a wider Bristol Channel and Celtic Sea maritime community and while some of North Devon's vessels ranged more widely than this in the 1920s, this sphere of operation was integral to the local character of shipping at this time.

This essay will commence with a brief review of the ports and harbours in North Devon and the important distinction between ports that were regularly handling cargoes and ports where vessels were owned, but which saw few cargoes loaded or discharged. The North Devon fleet of the 1920s will then be discussed in general terms and a few of the vessels considered in a little more detail, as both exemplars and for their particular interest. Any account of North Devon shipping must include some discussion of the owners, masters and crews and of the cargoes handled by these and visiting vessels. Finally, the question is addressed of why North Devon and nowhere else perpetuated essentially a nineteenth-century practice of sailing small wooden vessels, not just through the 1920s but on a diminished scale even into the late 1950s.

## Ports and Harbours

Writing in 1952, Vernon Boyle suggested that there were a dozen or so little seaports in North Devon, with five of these located inside Barnstaple or Bideford Bar.[2] North Devon lies within the jurisdiction of the customs and registration ports of Barnstaple and Bideford, with the latter also including Bude. In 1882, Bideford lost its status as a head registration port, being made subordinate to Barnstaple, although vessels were recorded as 'Bideford, port of

[1] Vernon Boyle (1895–1954) was North Devon's own indefatigable maritime historian and Commander H. Oliver Hill was responsible for ensuring that hull line diagrams and sail plans of several of North Devon's ketches and schooners were made while they were still working vessels. Perhaps the later fame of North Devon owed much to the work of Basil Greenhill (1920–2003) who wrote the classic, *Merchant Schooners*, and was responsible for encouraging Captain W.J. Slade (1892–1982) to write his memoirs, *Out of Appledore*. Anyone writing on North Devon's maritime history will always be in their collective debt.

[2] Vernon C. Boyle and D. Payne, *Devon Harbours* (Christopher Johnson, 1952), p. 135.

Barnstaple'. The port agitated for restoration of its full registration status, and this was granted again in 1928, with an impressive monument erected soon after (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** The port monument, Bideford

The ports and harbours in use by commercial shipping in the 1920s are shown in Figure 2.

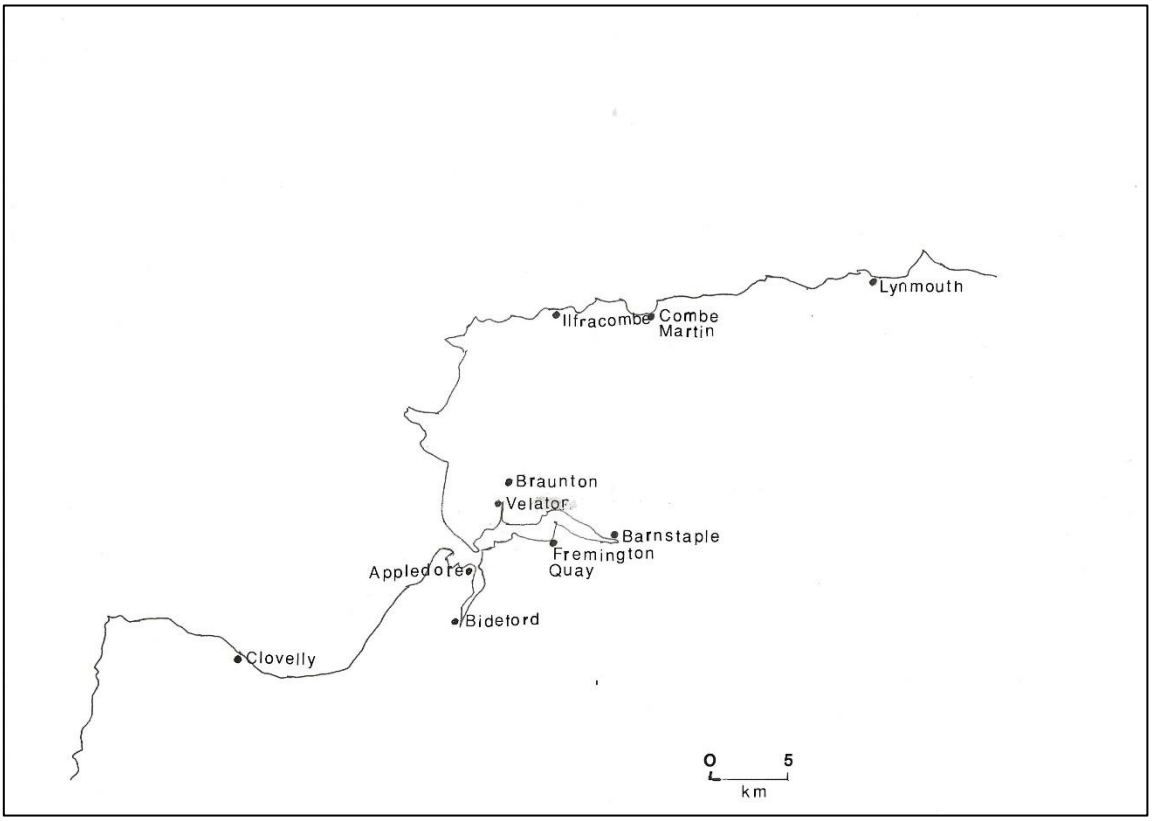


**Figure 2:** The ports and harbours of North Devon in the 1920s

One way in which North Devon's maritime life in the 1920s was very different from that of a century earlier was that almost all the beach landing places – of which there were perhaps a dozen – had now been abandoned, with the sole principal exception of Combe Martin. Here vessels came up the beach on the tide and were loaded or discharged over the side into waiting wagons. Combe Martin had a sandy beach, as did Watermouth to the west, which saw far less regular use. Both were far more sheltered than most of the nineteenth-century beach landing places, with many of these having an additional hazard of shingle, rather than sand.

An important distinction among the North Devon ports was between those where vessels were owned but handled little cargo, and those where only a handful of vessels were owned but which handled far more cargo. Fremington Quay was arguably the principal port in North Devon but there was just the railway-owned quay with steam-powered cranes and no habitation or vessels owned there. Combe Martin, Ilfracombe and Lynmouth were the homes of a handful of vessels that traded to and from their home port with coal, fertiliser, timber and other essential supplies. Barnstaple and Bideford – having been significant centres of ship ownership in the nineteenth century – no longer owned many vessels but still maintained significant trade, now carried in North Devon-owned vessels based in Braunton and Appledore, or in vessels from other British and European ports. Braunton itself lay beyond the tidal limit of Braunton Pill. Its vessels used Velator Quay and were moored in the lower reaches of the Pill when not at sea. Clovelly, because of its isolation, received a few cargoes each year, especially of coal, and was a popular destination in the summer for pleasure

steamers, which lay off in the roads and discharged passengers into small boats to land at the pier head.

Apart from Ilfracombe, none of North Devon's harbours remained accessible at all states of the tide. The only docks with gates were at New Quay and Richmond Dock in Appledore, used for ship building and ship repair. Clovelly had the massive pebble-built pier head that still stands today but which could only accommodate a single small ketch or smack alongside, and the primary function was to protect the fleet of luggers and picarooners used for fishing. Appledore's quay also still exists, although it was much widened in 1939–40 and raised in height more recently for flood prevention. At Lynmouth, the pier head was destroyed by the floods of 1952 and rebuilt. By the time of its destruction, no cargo vessels were using it.

Ilfracombe had a quay on the south side of the harbour, about 150 metres in length, which handled most of the cargo, but it also had the Steamer Pier, which had enough water at low tide for steamers to moor. Velator Quay was only around 50 metres in length and handled relatively few cargoes. It acted more as a place where the Braunton vessels could take on board supplies for future voyages. It was also a relatively modern creation, benefitting from the works on the River Caen and Braunton Pill to reclaim Braunton Marshes and Horsey Island in the mid-nineteenth century.

Bideford had its quay, built in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, about 300 metres long, although widened and raised since the 1920s. The council, as the port authority, maintained a crane for cargo handling. East-the-Water also had wharves, although the longer of them by the freight station, was closed to shipping by the Southern Railway in the mid-1920s. Bideford Borough Council had become the port authority in 1881 after acquiring the rights of the former Lord of the Manor, and in 1925 secured a Private Act of Parliament, renewing its powers to levy charges, make by-laws and dredge the River Torridge.

At about the same distance from the Bar as Bideford, is Fremington Quay. This was created by a combination of the Barnstaple merchants and railway interests in the 1840s to offer a deepwater harbour, accessible at high tide throughout the tidal cycle. The railway provided three cranes for cargo handling, and several sidings ran along the quay. Barnstaple is effectively beneaped for about a week in every lunar month, as there is not enough water on neap tides to navigate the shallow and tortuous reach of the estuary upstream of Penhill Point. Paradoxically, Barnstaple had the most extensive network of quays of any North Devon port.

The original quays of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century port along the Taw were lost when the railway was extended to Ilfracombe in 1873–74, but Castle Quay was provided in compensation. This was about 200 metres in length and reached by two level crossings over the railway. It had no railway siding and the council, as the port authority, never acquired its own crane for use there. The railway crossed the River Yeo at its confluence with the River Taw via a swing bridge, which gave access to quays further upstream.

Rolle Quay, at 300 metres – Barnstaple's longest single quay – dated from work instigated from the 1820s by the Rolle Estate, the principal landowner on the west bank of the Yeo. It was given a single, long railway siding in 1881. Shunting the siding was a complex affair and so the railway working timetables allowed for two trains to run each weekday, as required. Access for shipping was not much easier, as vessels entered the Yeo bow first and had to be warped out, stern first, through the swing bridge between trains. At the northern end of Rolle

Quay was a second swing bridge, linking Mermaid Cross with Rolle Street. Immediately inside the Rolle Bridge was Baker's Quay – about 30 metres in length – on the east bank, which had been built in 1898 by the Lynton and Barnstaple railway specifically to unload coal from coastal shipping for conveyance by rail to Lynton. No doubt the steepness of Lynmouth Hill, and the unreliability of brakes on carts and early motor lorries, meant that Lynmouth's coal continued to arrive by sea. Yet further up the Yeo, around the bend that contains Pilton Park, lay Pilton Quay, which in the 1920s still received a few cargoes of coal and fertiliser, although only the smallest smacks and barges reached this far and were hauled by men and/or horses to and from. Pilton Quay only had a couple of metres of water at high tide, even on spring tides, and so it was the first of Barnstaple's quays to be abandoned.

## The North Devon Merchant Fleet

The Mercantile Navy Lists (MNL) of 1921 and 1929 show North Devon ports as having 116 vessels with a total tonnage of 74,572 and 108 vessels with a total tonnage of 106,051 respectively.[3] The Merchant Shipping Acts required all vessels to be registered and that all changes in the vessels' specification and changes in ownership to be recorded in the register. There was no obligation on behalf of owners to register vessels at their place of residence or at the usual home port; and in the case of the Reardon-Smith line of Cardiff, many of its large steamers were registered in Bideford, the port of registration within which Appledore lay. Sir William Reardon-Smith was born in Appledore, and his attachment to North Devon was such that not only did the company register ships in Bideford well into the 1950s but the management companies of individual ships celebrated locations such as Cornborough and Instow. As will be shown, the Reardon-Smith fleet dominates the North Devon fleet in terms of tonnage. A rather less serious distortion is the fact that vessels often retained their original port of registration when changing hands and being bought by new owners outside of North Devon. Similarly, some North Devon-owned vessels did not have their port of registration transferred to Barnstaple or Bideford.

The Mercantile Navy List is not as easy to search by owner and place of residence as by port of registration, although Lloyds Register, which generally excludes vessels of under 100 tonnes, does have an alphabetical listing of owners, and this suggests that only a handful of vessels in the 1920s were not locally registered. So, it is not unreasonable to assume that North Devon-owned vessels not locally registered, and those North Devon registered but no longer locally owned, roughly balance each other out.

Tables 1–4 show the vessels registered in the two North Devon ports in 1921 and 1929; Tables 1 and 3 giving the number of vessels of each type in 1921 and 1929 respectively and Tables 2 and 4 doing the same for the tonnages.

[3] The Mercantile Navy List had official status and listed all vessels owned in British ports (which included all the British Dominions) and was discontinued in 1977. Some digital copies are held by Memorial University Newfoundland <http://www.collections.mun.ca/digital/collection/mha_merchant> [accessed during January and February 2023]. For steamers and motor vessels, the MNL gives net and gross tonnages, and for sailing vessels, registered tonnage. As a steamer's gross tonnage includes engines and bunkers, it seems a fairer way of making comparisons to use net tonnage.

**Table 1:** Numbers of vessels, 1921

| Port | Barquentine | Schooner | Ketch | Yawl | Barge | Yacht | Steamer | | MV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Local | R-S | |
| **Barn.** | | 4 | 29 | | | 2 | 1 | | 1 |
| **Bid.** | 1 | 6 | 37 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 20 | |
| **North Devon** | 1 | 10 | 66 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 20 | 1 |

***Key:*** *R-S = Reardon-Smith; MV = motor vessel*

**Table 2:** Tonnage of vessels, 1921 (net tonnages for steam)

| Port | Barquentine | Schooner | Ketch | Yawl | Barge | Yacht | Steamer | | MV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Local | R-S | |
| **Barn.** | | 410 | 1429 | | | 32 | 36 | | 41 |
| **Bid.** | 362 | 446 | 2065 | 69 | 86 | 44 | 621 | 68931 | |
| **North Devon** | 362 | 856 | 3494 | 69 | 86 | 76 | 657 | 69831 | 41 |

***Key:*** *R-S = Reardon-Smith; MV = motor vessel*

**Table 3:** Number of vessels, 1929

| Port | Schooner | Ketch | Yawl | Barge | Yacht | Steamer | | MV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | Local | R-S | |
| **Barn.** | 2 | 23 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 1 |
| **Bid.** | 5 | 21 | 1 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 32 | |
| **North Devon** | 7 | 44 | 1 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 32 | 1 |

***Key:*** *R-S = Reardon-Smith; MV = motor vessel*

**Table 4:** Tonnage of vessels, 1929 (net tonnages for steam)

| Port | Schooner | Ketch | Yawl | Barge | Yacht | Steamer | | MV |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | Local | R-S | |
| **Barn.** | 262 | 1282 | | 16 | 19 | 46 | | 46 |
| **Bid.** | 560 | 1420 | 17 | 122 | 73 | 678 | 101516 | |
| **North Devon** | 822 | 2702 | 17 | 138 | 92 | 724 | 101516 | 46 |

***Key:*** *R-S = Reardon-Smith; MV = motor vessel*

While the Reardon-Smith line's steamers were only 17.2% of the total number of vessels in 1921, they accounted for 95.5% of the total tonnage – roughly the same as they did in 1929 – although by this time the share of the North Devon fleet accounted for by Reardon-Smith vessels had risen to 29.6%. The number of yachts rose slightly during the 1920s but compared with ports such as Salcombe, they were very much a minority of the registration

and all had owners from outside North Devon. The barges in the MNL were all engaged in the sand and gravel trade, digging sand and gravel from the foreshore around Crow Point and carrying it up to Barnstaple and Bideford, and sometimes to Appledore, both for local use and for transfer to ketches for carriage to Cardiff and Bristol for construction purposes. The tables show that the majority of North Devon's shipping was small sailing craft, often fitted with auxiliary engines.

**Table 5:** Numbers of North Devon sailing and auxiliary vessels (excluding barges) by age classes: 1921 and 1929[4]

| | **Barnstaple** | | **Bideford** | | **North Devon** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age classes** | **1921** | **1929** | **1921** | **1929** | **1921** | **1929** |
| **0-19 yrs** | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **20-29 yrs** | 8 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 7 |
| **30-39 yrs** | 5 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 12 | 10 |
| **40-49 yrs** | 16 | 11 | 14 | 7 | 30 | 18 |
| **50-59 yrs** | 7 | 4 | 14 | 11 | 21 | 15 |
| **>60 yrs** | 5 | 5 | 17 | 7 | 22 | 12 |
| | | | | | | |
| **Mean age** | 45.7 | 43.9 | 51.5 | 56.1 | 49.0 | 49.7 |

Of the seventy-nine sailing and auxiliary sailing vessels on the MNL in 1921, thirty-nine were still present in 1929. Table 5 shows the mean age of the sailing vessels for each port in 1921 and 1929 and suggests that the turnover in vessels ensured that the mean age remained roughly constant. Nonetheless, the figures in Table 5 stand in sharp contrast with the situation for much of the nineteenth century, when the mean age of the vessels was usually between 10 and 15 years and in 1840 more than half of the vessels were less than 10 years old.[5]

In 1929, the youngest vessels registered in North Devon were the auxiliary ketch, the *Traly,* which had been built at Millwall in 1912, and the auxiliary ketch, the *Did C*, built in Sweden in 1921. In the nineteenth century, North Devon had usually had one or two veteran vessels of more than 50 years of age, but in 1929, there were twenty-one vessels aged 50 years or over (40.4%), with the doyenne being the 74-year-old *Madby Ann*, a schooner built on the Wear at Hylton, Co Durham.

As Tables 1 and 3 show, ketches comprised most of the sailing vessels. A ketch had fewer sails than a schooner, although it was not as fast. Most of the schooners still surviving were eventually converted to ketches, often allowing a reduction in the crew by a man and – in the case of three-masted schooners converted to ketches – giving the opportunity to increase the size of the hold. Although, as will be seen, one or two ketches were re-rigged as schooners, allowing the main sails to be smaller and more readily managed. Throughout the 1920s, North Devon's most famous schooner, the *Result*, retained her three masts. Eventually after the Second World War, she too was converted to a ketch but with a larger engine than most.

[4] Calculated from the *Mercantile Navy Lists.*

[5] John Bradbeer, 'The Devon Merchant Fleet in 1840: An Analysis of the *Lloyds Register*', *The Devon Historian,* 91 (2021). Data in Table 5, p. 29.

The trend to ketches and the conversion of schooners to ketch rig had become a common trend from the 1880s, although perhaps a little slower to be seen in North Devon.

Another significant contrast between the North Devon fleets of the mid and late nineteenth century and that of the 1920s was the decline in the number of vessels that had been built in North Devon yards. In 1921, sixteen of the seventy-seven sailing vessels had been locally built; in 1929, this had fallen to seven of the fifty-two sailing vessels. By contrast, in 1865, no fewer than fifty-seven of the ninety-one vessels in *Lloyds Register* had been locally built and forty out of fifty-three in 1875. All four of the home countries of the United Kingdom had built ships in the North Devon fleet in the 1920s.

Another difference between the 1920s and the mid to late nineteenth century was that the Canadian built vessels, which had typically contributed about a fifth in number (and rather more in tonnage) were almost entirely absent, with just the small schooner the *Annie* built in Caribou, Nova Scotia in 1859, surviving. Given that most Canadian vessels were built of soft woods and expected to have a life expectancy of 15 to 20 years, this is perhaps unsurprising.[6]

## Some North Devon Vessels of the 1920s

This makes no attempt to be a comprehensive review of the 153 vessels registered in North Devon in 1921 and 1929. Rather it is a personal selection, although made with two principal concerns: to illustrate the variety of the fleet, excluding the Reardon-Smith vessels, and to include some of the more interesting and perhaps iconic vessels. The handful of leisure craft – yachts in all but name – will not be covered. Some of the vessels had eventful lives in the periods either side of the 1920s and a little attention will be given to these parts of their history.

Robert Cock and Sons of Appledore built four steel steamers between 1918 and 1922, keeping three for their own use: the *Orchis*, the *Orleigh* and the *Ortona*, all with a gross tonnage of 484 tonnes and varying slightly in net tonnage at around 190 tonnes. They were engaged in the coastal trade and fairly regularly called at Bideford, but because of their size, were much less frequently to be seen in Barnstaple. In 1932 all three were sold, two going to J. Fisher and Sons of Barrow. Fishers sold the *Orleigh* (by now the *Race Fisher*), and the *Ortona* (by now the *Stream Fisher*), to Brazilian owners in 1939. The latter was lost off the Brazilian coast in 1954 and the former met the same fate in 1963.

Two far smaller steamers also merit some attention. The *Devonia*, a single screw steamer of 99 tonnes gross and 29 tonnes net, was built at Irvine in Ayrshire by John H. Gilmour and Co. in 1893, although not registered until the following year. She was built for the Bideford and Bristol Steamship Company, with offices in Bridgeland Street in Bideford. She was owned by the company until her loss. She was in terms of her net tonnage comparable only to the smaller ketches, and like these found employment in the Bristol Channel trade. Figure 3 show just how small she was, when compared to a typical steam coaster alongside Bideford Quay.

[6] Eric W. Sager and Lewis R. Fischer, *Shipping and Shipbuilding in Atlantic Canada, 1820–1914* (Canadian Historical Association, 1986), p. 10.

**Figure 3:** The *Devonia* at Bideford (photographer unknown)[7]

She was a casualty of the Second World War and sank after hitting a mine off Barry in October 1940 with the loss of her crew of three. The other small steamer was the *Snowflake,* of 90 tonnes gross and 42 tonnes net. She was a classic West of Scotland puffer, of the kind made famous by Neil Munro in his tales of Para Handy and his puffer the *Vital Spark.* The *Snowflake* had been built as the *Maid of Lorn* in 1893 and plied the Clyde before purchase by three mariners in Hayle in Cornwall in 1896, who renamed her *Snowflake.* She was purchased the following year by James Irwin at Combe Martin and re-registered at Barnstaple. Irwin used her principally to carry soft fruit from Combe Martin to South Wales and to return to Combe Martin, Ilfracombe and occasionally Watermouth, with coal. Uniquely, she was the only steamer known to have used beaches as well as quays and jetties. Figure 4 shows her entering Ilfracombe harbour, fully laden. She was sold in 1940 and then apparently owned at Split in Croatia in the 1950s.

[7] Shipping and Shipbuilding <https://shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed 23 April 2024].

**Figure 4:** The *Snowflake* entering Ilfracombe (photographer unknown)[8]

The single motor vessel registered in North Devon in the 1920s was the *Lerina*, a former North Sea herring drifter built at Oulton Broad, Lowestoft in 1917. She was acquired in 1919 by Augustus Christie, the then owner of Lundy Island, for use as the island's supply vessel. She was re-registered in Barnstaple and used Barnstaple, rather than Bideford, as her usual

[8] Shipping and Shipbuilding <https://shippingandshipbuilding.uk> [accessed 23 April 2024].

departure point for the island. In 1927, Lundy was purchased by Martin Harman and with the purchase came the *Lerina.* Bideford became her more usual point of departure and she soldiered on until 1950, after a period of war service with the Admiralty, but increasing unreliability caused her to be replaced.[9]

As already noted, probably the most famous of North Devon's sailing vessels of the 1920s was the three-masted schooner, the *Result.* She had already achieved some fame from her service as a Q-ship in 1916 and 1917. Q-ships were requisitioned merchant ships with naval crews and concealed armament so that when German submarines surfaced to sink the intercepted vessel by gun fire or using charges placed on board by a boarding party, the Q-ship would respond. In February 1917 she engaged and damaged the U-45, but two months later came off second best in an encounter with an unknown German submarine, and some of her plates showed the effects of gunfire. She was returned to civilian use in August 1917. Her second claim to fame was that she proved to be the last North Devon sailing vessel in commercial use, only retiring with the death of her master Captain Peter Welch in 1967. She has since been acquired by the Ulster Transport Museum and is on display at Cultra near Holywood, Co Down.

She had been built for the Ashburner brothers of Barrow in 1897 by Paul Rodgers, although completed in the same yard at Carrickfergus by Robert Kent. Her name came from the vessel's final design being the outcome of discussion between Paul Rodgers, Richard Ashburner (who had training as a naval architect) and her intended master, Captain Robert Wright. In 1909, the Asburners decided to sell their entire fleet. Percy Harris of Appledore and Captain Sidney Incledon, on behalf of a group of Braunton men including Captain Henry Clarke, went to the auction and agreed not to bid against each other for selected ships. Percy Harris was unable to acquire his choice, but the Braunton men successfully purchased the *Result.* In 1921, she was still in the principal ownership of Captain Henry Clarke, with her master, Captain Sidney Incledon another major shareholder, but he retired that year, and Captain Tom Welch left the *Democrat* to be her master. By 1929, Captain George Clarke was her principal owner, with Captain Tom Welch as a main shareholder – during the 1930s, he assumed complete control of the vessel. The *Result* lost her topsails in 1921 but was briefly given them back in 1951 for her role as the *Flash* in the Carol Read film, *Outcast of the Islands,* an adaptation of the Joseph Conrad novel. After this film role, the *Result* was re-rigged as a ketch, with an enlarged hold.[10] Figures 5 and 6 show the *Result* as she would have been in the 1920s, without topsails.

[9] A.F. Langham, *The Island of Lundy* (Alan Sutton, 1994), p. 135.

[10] Information on the *Result* from Michael Bouquet, *Westcountry Sail: Merchant Shipping 1840–1960* (David and Charles, 1971), pp. 102–08; and Tom Welch 'The Story of the *Result'* in R.D. Andrew (ed) *Braunton: The Home of the Last Sailing Coasters* (Braunton Museum, 2007), pp. 31–44.

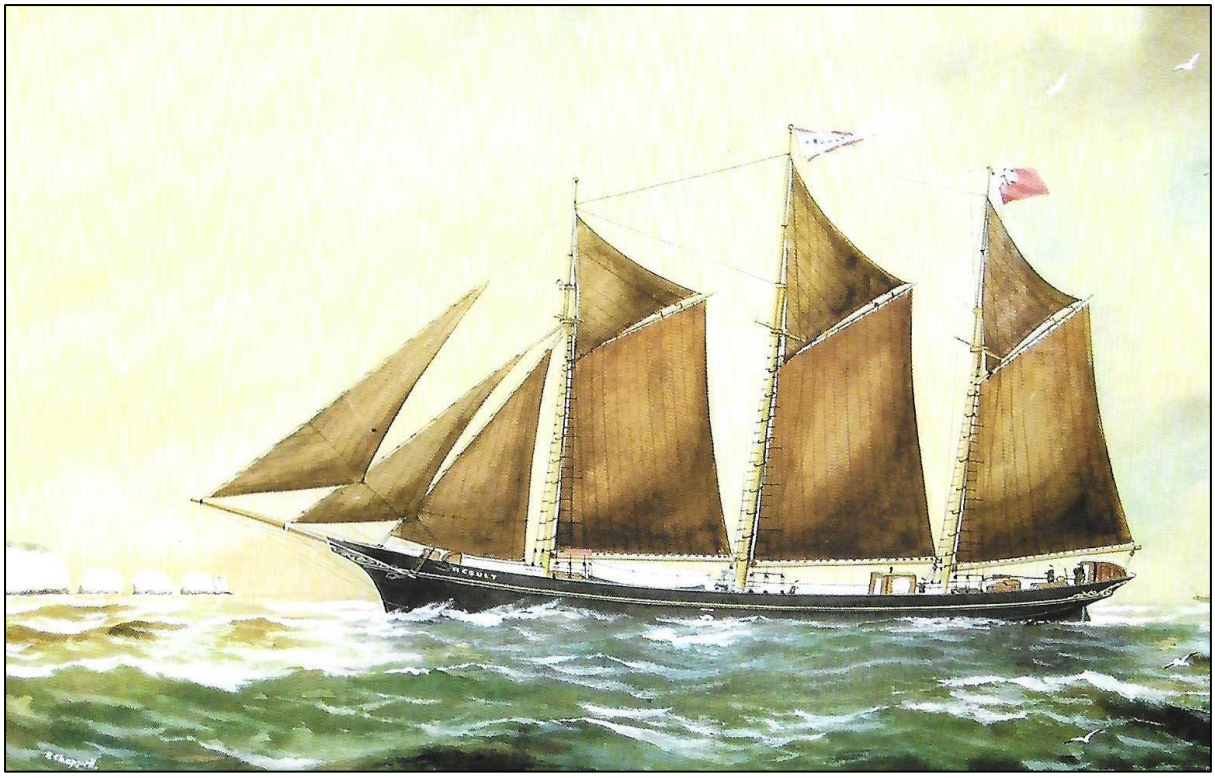

**Figure 5:** The *Result* painted by Reuben Chappell (collection of Susan Sankey)

**Figure 6:** The *Result* (foreground) and the ketch, the *Bessie,* at Velator Quay in the 1930s (Braunton Museum collection)

Another on North Devon's schooners in the 1920s was the *Haldon*, of roughly similar size to the *Result.* She had been built as a ketch in Plymouth by Hawke Brothers in 1893, her name deriving from the use of timber blown down on Haldon Hill, west of Exeter, in the great gale of the previous year. After ownership in Exeter, the Orkneys and Haverford West, she was purchased by the Slade family in 1922, and Captain W.J. Slade was given command. He said that he did not initially like her, finding her weak in construction and heavy at sea. At an inspection in 1924, her mainmast was found to have been affected by rot. This was cut out, with the mast reused as a foremast, with the vessel being re-rigged as a three-masted schooner and later given an auxiliary motor. In typical Appledore fashion, rather than have new sails made, the existing sails were cut back for use.[11] She became a particular favourite of Captain Slade's, and he remained with her until poor eyesight caused him to retire from seagoing and sell her in 1943. Figure 7 shows her at anchor as a three-masted schooner.

**Figure 7:** The *Haldon* (North Devon Maritime Museum collection)

A third North Devon-owned schooner of similar size was the *Eilian*, built by W. Thomas and Sons at Amlwch on Anglesey. She was initially owned at Rock Ferry on the Mersey and then bought by Captain Sidney Incledon of Braunton in 1923. Like the *Result*, she had seen service as a Q-ship. Captain Incledon was her managing owner, and other shares in her were owned by William Drake, John Newcombe and her master Captain George Hartnoll, who commanded her until his retirement in 1934. Jack Newcombe was George Hartnoll's brother-in-law and succeeded him as master in 1934.

The *Eilian* (see Figure 8) was built with a 50hp Kromhout paraffin engine; one of the first vessels built in Britain to be fitted with an auxiliary engine at the time of launching. Her usual voyages were – like the other schooners and larger ketches – to Lydney for coal to be carried to North Devon or Irish ports and with return cargoes of oats from Ireland. Ball clay to

[11] W.J. Slade, *Out of Appledore* (Percival Marshall), Chapter 4, especially pp. 68–73.

Avonmouth from Fremington or from Teignmouth to London or European ports was another cargo often carried.[12]

**Figure 8:** The *Eilian* entering Ilfracombe (North Devon Maritime Museum collection)

[12] Robert d'Arcy Andrews (ed.) *Braunton: Home of the Last Sailing Coasters* (Braunton Museum, 2007), pp. 154–57.

The ketch, the *Lewisman*, as her name implies, had been built at Stornaway in 1878 by an unknown builder. After more than a decade of ownership in Scotland she had passed to owners in Plymouth and was purchased by W.K. Slade of Appledore in 1901. In due course she passed to his younger brother, James Slade, and remained in his principal ownership until being sold to Sydney Slatter of Barnstaple in 1927, a fairly rare instance of a vessel changing hands within North Devon. At this time, a small auxiliary engine was fitted. The Mitchell family of Braunton also had shares in her, with Captain George Mitchell as her master, and so she was as often at Velator as at Slatter's Brunswick Wharf on the east bank of the River Yeo in Barnstaple. Figure 9 shows her at this latter location.

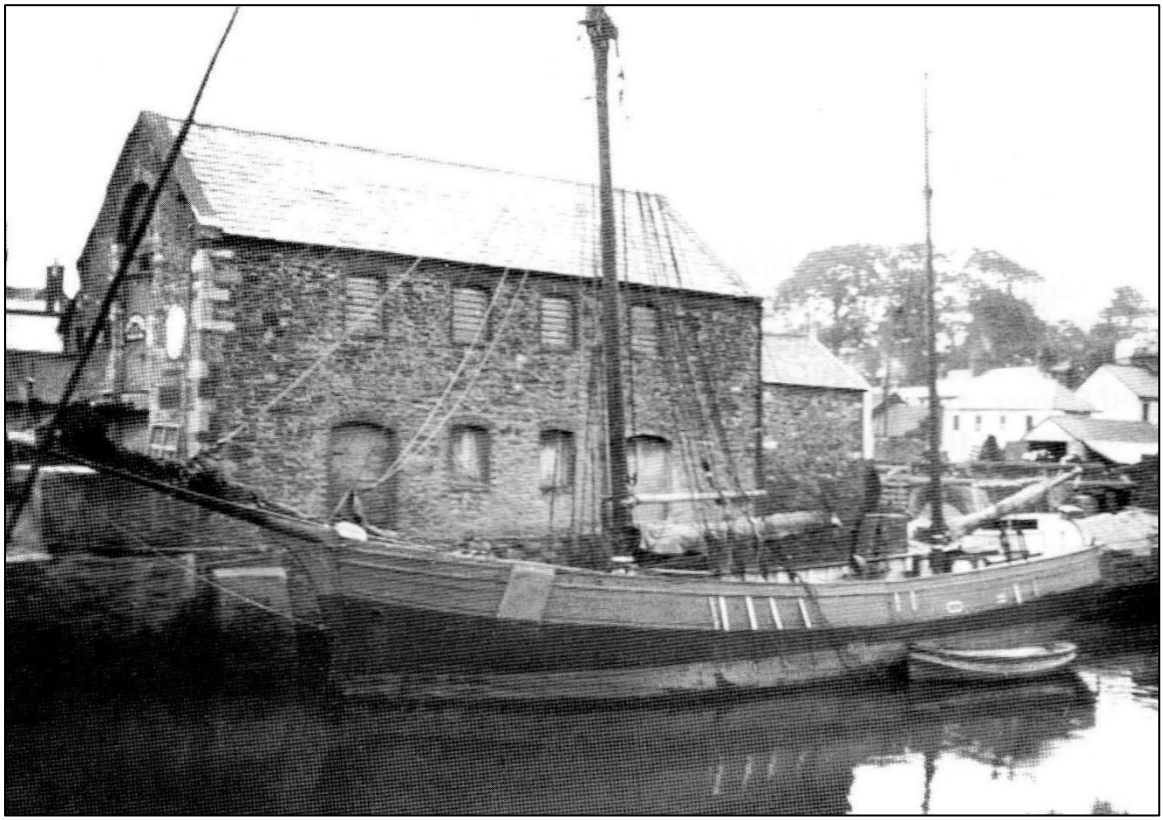

**Figure 9:** The *Lewisman* alongside Brunswick Wharf, Barnstaple
(Braunton Museum collection)

The 44-tonne ketch, *Bessie Clark* was of interest in being one of the few vessels in North Devon in the 1920s to have been both locally built and locally owned her entire life. She was built by H.M. Restarick at Bideford in 1881 and was one of the last trading ketches built there before Restarick focused on fishing vessels. She went new to Captain George Clark of Braunton and remained in the Clark family until she was broken up in 1946, after wartime service as a barrage balloon tether, which was to be the ruin of almost all the North Devon vessels requisitioned. Another point of interest is that in 1909, she was the first North Devon vessel to have an auxiliary motor fitted, and among the first anywhere in Britain to be so modified. Figure 10 shows her in Braunton Pill.

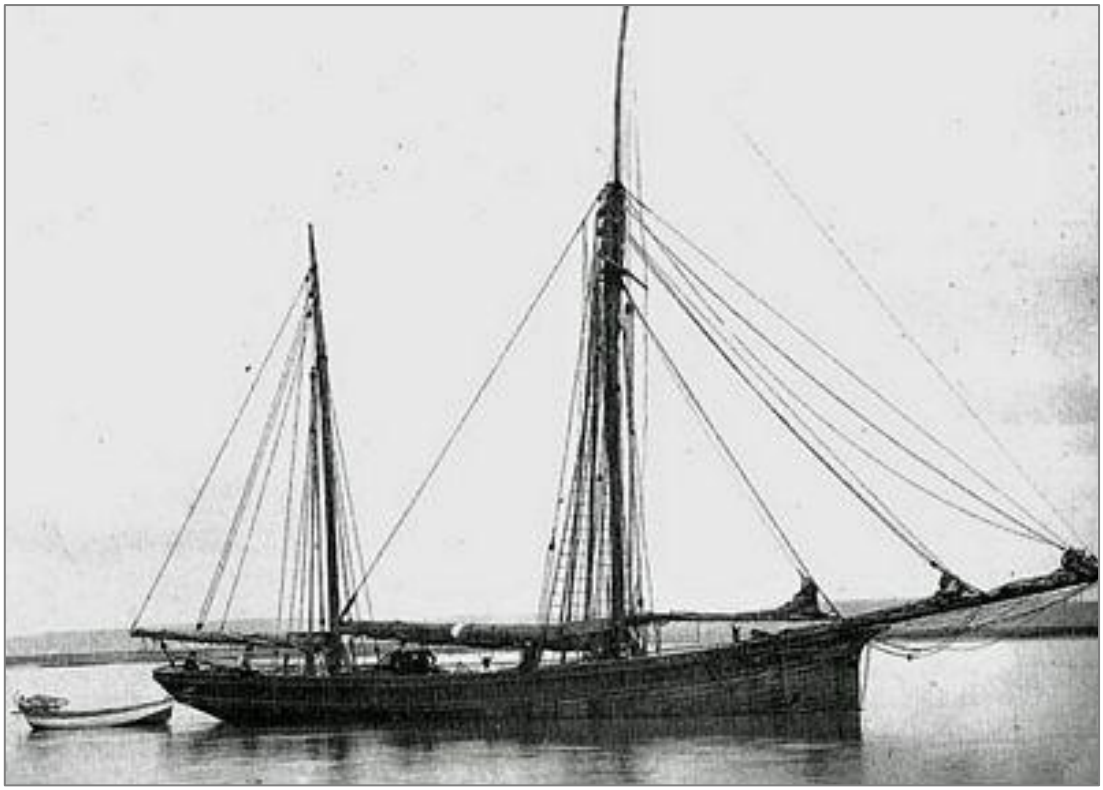

**Figure 10:** The *Bessie Clark* in Braunton Pill (Braunton Museum collection)

The ketch, the *Progress,* was one of the last vessels to engage in the Newfoundland trade, carrying salt cod from there to the Mediterranean. She had been built in 1884 by William Date at Kingsbridge for this trade and made her last voyage in the Newfoundland trade in 1908. The Slade family had great respect for vessels used in the Newfoundland trade and would eventually own five of them. Thomas Slade, another younger brother of W.K. Slade, purchased her in 1912 and, no doubt aided by a sharp rise in freight rates during the First World War, had an auxiliary motor fitted in 1918.

Captain W.J. Slade noted that the *Progress* was one of the last ketches to put on to the beach at Glenthorne, on the Devon–Somerset border, into the 1920s, to deliver coal to the house there.[13] Figure 11 shows her at Lydney loading coal, probably for Ireland. She also saw service in the Second World War as a barrage balloon tether. The Slades sold her to P.K. Harris of Appledore on her return, who partly restored her before selling her on. Subsequent owners had grand plans for the vessel, but she ended her days at Angle Bay off Milford Haven.

[13] W.J. Slade and Basil Greenhill, *West Country Coasting Ketches* (Conway Maritime Press, 1974), p. 24.

**Figure 11:** The *Progress* loading coal at Lydney, 1937 (Basil Greenhill)

Figure 12 shows her in 1967, still recognisably a sailing vessel, but in the years since she has been reduced to little more than a skeleton.

**Figure 12:** The *Progress* beached at Angle Bay, Milford Haven in September 1967

One of the more modern ketches in the North Devon fleet of the 1920s was the 48-tonne *Democrat*, built at Castle Pill, just to the east of Milford Haven town, in 1909. She was built for a Braunton consortium, headed by Captain Henry Clark, but including his uncle George and his cousins, Thomas Welch and James Welch. She had an auxiliary motor fitted in 1912 and remained active in the coastal trade until 1954. Figure 13 shows her at a busy Rolle Quay in Barnstaple, with five further ketches, all locally owned, lined up astern.

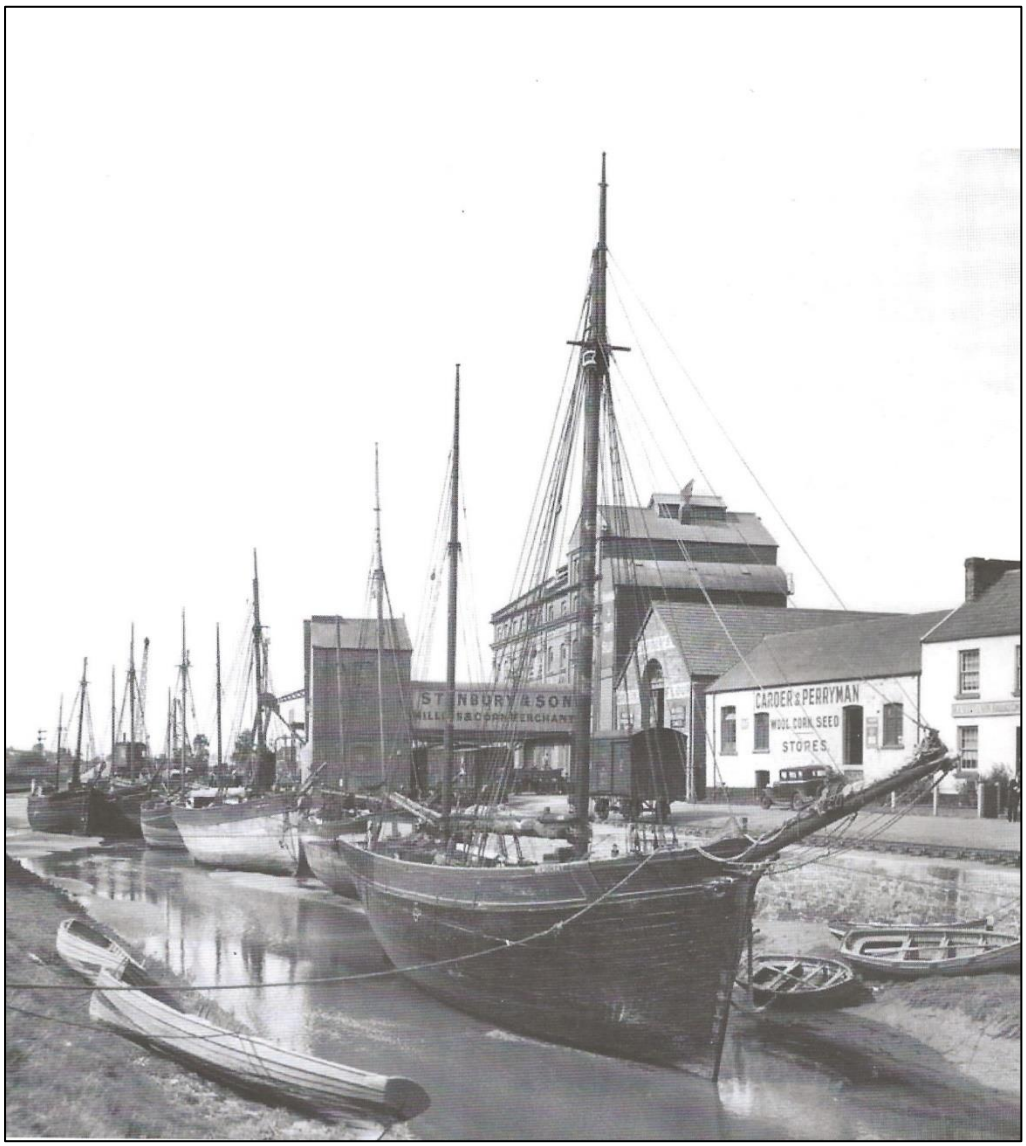


**Figure 13:** The *Democrat* (foreground) and five other ketches at Rolle Quay, Barnstaple (Braunton Museum Collection)

The most modern sailing vessel in the North Devon fleet at this time was the *Dido C*, a ketch of 41 tonnes, built at Lysekil Sweden, about 75 kilometres NNW of Goteborg. She was initially called the *Jule Claes* and had been built with an auxiliary engine to demonstrate the products of the Skandia Engine Company.[14] She was later offered for sale and in 1924

[14] Charmian Astbury, *The Story of the Dido C: The Last of the Westcountry Ketches* (Sappho Publications, 2002), p. 20.

Captain Steve Chugg of Braunton purchased her and brought her home to be re-registered at Barnstaple. He named her after his daughter's nickname.

The *Dido C*'s principal claim to fame was her very lucky escape from grounding on the Morte Stone in September 1936 as she was bound in ballast for Lydney to load coal for the Isles of Scilly. She was not seriously damaged and, with the Ilfracombe lifeboat in attendance, she was floated off at the next tide and taken to Appledore for a thorough inspection and repairs. Figure 14 shows her high and dry on the Morte Stone. In 1942, she was sold to John Lee of Belfast.

**Figure 14:** The *Dido C* aground on the Morte Stone (Braunton Museum collection)

The small ketch, the *Lily*, is of interest on two counts. She had been built at Penryn in Cornwall in 1897, bought by Alfred Oxenham of Lynmouth in 1916 and re-registered in Barnstaple. She was thus one of only a handful of North Devon vessels not owned on the Taw and Torridge. She was Lynmouth's regular supply vessel bringing principally coal, as even in the 1920s descending Lynmouth Hill with laden lorries or carts would have been a fraught process. In 1927, she was purchased by Lieutenant-Colonel H.F. Stephens for the Weston, Clevedon and Portishead Light Railway, of which he was owner. Colonel Stephens has legendary status among railway enthusiasts as the 'Light Railway King' with the Weston Clevedon & Portishead Light Railway (WCPLR) just one of many impecunious lines he ran. It is tempting to think that the colonel may have seen the *Lily* a few years earlier, as he was a consulting engineer when the former narrow-gauge Torrington and Marland Railway was regauged as part of the new North Devon and Cornwall Junction Railway, linking Torrington with Halwill. The colonel seems to have hoped that the little Wick Wharf on the Congresbury Yeo between Weston-super-Mare and Clevedon might develop traffic that could be carried on by the railway. In the event, only coal for railway's own locomotives seems to have been carried, and the *Lily* herself foundered off the mouth of the Usk carrying coal from

Newport in June 1929, with the crew having a lucky escape. Figure 15 shows her at Wick Wharf.[15]

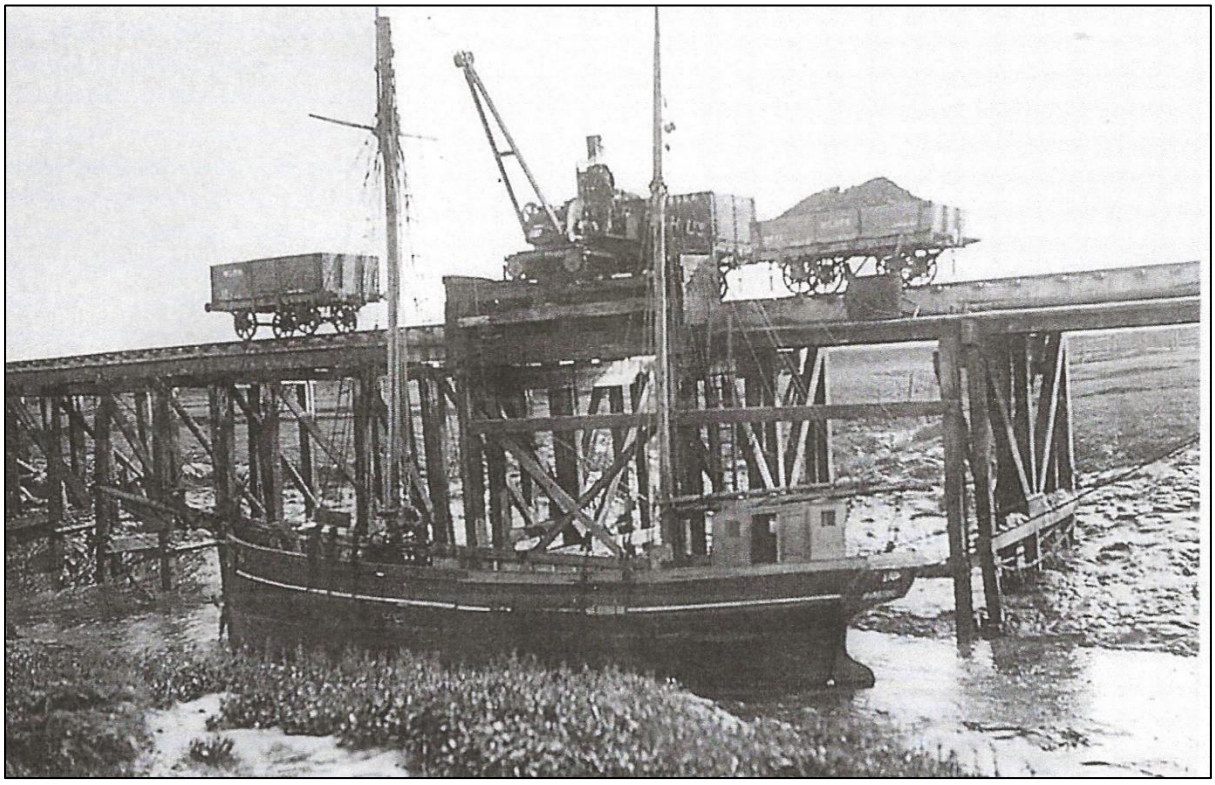

**Figure 15:** The *Lily* at Wick Wharf on the WCPLR (Colonel Stephens archive)

The *Advance* – or to use the name in the MNL, the *D.T.Advance* – was a small barge of 20 tonnes gross, built by P.K. Harris and Sons at Appledore for the Devon Trading Company. She was employed to dig gravel from the Taw and Torridge estuary, principally the foreshore by Crow Point, and bring it up to Barnstaple and Bideford. Devon Trading Company was a builders' merchant company; much of the interwar housing in Barnstaple and Bideford had its sand and gravel locally supplied. There were several barges engaged in the sand and gravel trade and traffic was to last into the 1970s. The barges used to sail up the estuary with only the smallest amount of gunwale above the water line.

The *Advance* had her moment in the spotlight in 1960 when she became wedged under the railway swing bridge at the entrance to Rolle Quay and caused the cessation of railway services to and from Ilfracombe for the day while she was extricated. Figure 16 shows this work in progress. She was saved from being broken up but lies at Annery Sea Locks waiting possible restoration, as seen in Figure 17.

[15] Geoff Wheat, 'The Colonel's Maritime Venture at Wick Wharf' *The Tenterden Terrier* (Newsletter of the Kent and East Sussex Railway Preservation Society) 70, Summer 1996, pp. 24–28.

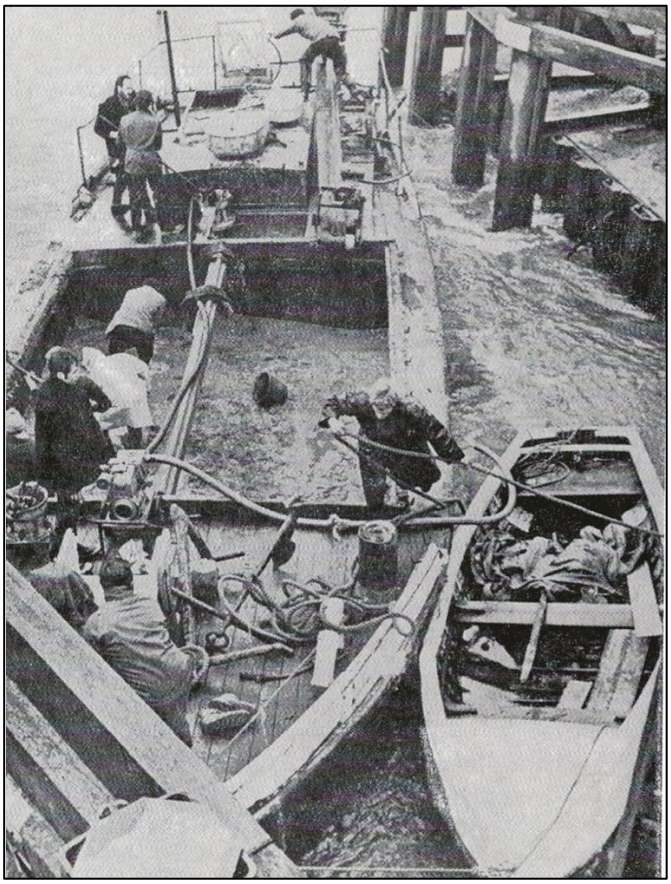

**Figure 16:** The *Advance* stuck under the railway swing bridge at the entrance to Rolle Quay, 1960 (photograph by R. Gayton)

**Figure 17:** The *Advance* at Annery Locks, July 2014.

## Owners and Masters

With the exceptions of just the Bideford registered Reardon-Smith steamers, the *Devonia*, and the barges owned by the Devon Trading Company, the North Devon merchant fleet of the 1920s was still owned by the sixty-fourths system, as vessels had been during the nineteenth century. This system – which predated the Merchant Shipping Act of 1824 and gave legal recognition to it – made provision for ownership to be by a sixty-fourth share in the vessel.

By the 1920s, it had become fairly usual for there to be only four, five or six owners at the most, but in the preceding century the range of owners often was from two to twenty, and occasionally more. In the 1920s, most vessels were owned by an extended family and the involvement of friends and other community members, such as shipwrights, ship chandlers and merchants, which had been such a feature of nineteenth century, was now rare. It was usual for vessels in multiple ownership to have a managing owner, whose name alone would appear against the entry in the MNL. In some cases, the managing owner was a woman, such as Mrs Bessie Chichester in Braunton, and Mrs Josephine Hobbs and Mrs Emily Scilly at Appledore, but in many other cases the managing owner was the vessel's master. Basil Greenhill notes that whereas in North Devon, masters tended to be major owners of their vessels, in South Devon far more vessels had their managing owner, with a majority shareholding, ashore and the master had just a minority holding. This, he felt, gave the North Devon vessels an advantage with greater incentives for the master to show enterprise in his dealings, and was a factor in the survival of small sailing vessels on the north coast. He also commented that the success of both individual voyages and of year's trading depended on the master, both his skills of seamanship and knowledge of local tides and currents but also in his ability to turn his hand to anything.[16] Captain W.J. Slade also commented on the number of times that he had become mechanic to get the often temperamental and unreliable engines working.

Basil Greenhill wrote: 'There were no big fleets in Appledore and every skipper had his own small vessel… or least had shares in her.'[17] This was as true of Braunton, and while the owner families of the two ports had few marriage ties to each other, ownership in each port was concentrated into a few families who were often related by marriage. At Braunton, there were nine families with controlling interests involved in 1929, with the Clarks and the Chuggs having just over half of the port's vessels and six families with a single vessel. The Welch family, who were to be the last owners of a Braunton vessel, did not at this stage have any outright ownership. It was similar at Appledore, where ten families were principal owners, although the Harris family with three members as owners, were also the owners of the shipyard and had controlling interest in five vessels. The Slade family had controlling interests in three vessels and the other families had a single vessel.

An important aspect of the maritime community in North Devon in the first half of the twentieth century was the Braunton Shipowners Mutual Marine Association (BSMMA), which insured the sailing vessels – and at a time when insurance underwriters in London were becoming far less familiar with sail. It was established by the leading Braunton shipping families in 1899, and in 1901 the first Appledore-owned vessels were covered, with a member of each of the Slade and Quance families of Appledore joining the Management

[16] Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners,* 4th edition (Conway Maritime Press, 1988), p. 193.
[17] Ibid., p. 167.

Committee in 1903. By 1910, the association had thirty-nine vessels on its books and even as late as 1929, there were thirty-eight: twenty-five from Braunton and thirteen from Appledore.[18] The BSMMA operated on an insurance value of half of the purchase price and members entering a ship paid a one-off premium of 2% – and later 3% – of the insurance value. While a higher level of cover may have been obtainable at Lloyds, this would have attracted far higher annual premiums. The BSMMA had minimal overheads and ensured that funds would remain in North Devon.[19] The BSMMA was wound up at the end of the 1958–59 financial year.

Stan Rogers and David Clement think that a total of sixty-four families was involved with shipping at Braunton from c.1850–1950.[20] Most of the families saw at least two generations going to sea in locally owned vessels. Samuel Ellacott's listing of the masters of Braunton vessels over the same period has twenty-five of these families.[21] Similar listings have not been published of Appledore, although the picture appears to have been much the same.

In both ports, men often had varied and complex careers, as the life of Thomas Slee (1890–1970) of Braunton demonstrates. He served as an AB (able seaman) on the *Clara May*, a Braunton-owned ketch, then moved to the schooner, the *Result*, and then served on three further Braunton ketches before a spell on a London-based steamer in 1914. By 1918, he was back on a Braunton vessel, this time the *Bessie Clark*, as her mate and then as mate on the *Kitty Ann*, another Braunton ketch, with owner-master Ernest Chugg. Late in 1922, he purchased half ownership in the *Ann*, a 47-tonne ketch built in 1889 at Kingsbridge and assumed command. The other owner was Captain Claude Chugg, and in 1929 Thomas Slee bought him out. He sailed with her for another year and then retired from the sea, becoming a local coal merchant, but retaining ownership of the *Ann*, with Captain Bob Parkhouse as master.

Along with many of Braunton's mariners of this period, Thomas Slee lived in South Street.[22] Braunton's master-mariners did not live exclusively in South Street; for instance, Reuben Chichester lived in Church Street, Stephen Chugg lived in Down Lane, and the Drake and the Clark families lived closer to Velator in Wrafton. In any case, unlike Appledore, Braunton was a settlement where the mariners were just one community among many.

In Appledore, almost everyone was associated in some way with the sea, either as mariners, shipyard workers, or in ancillary trades and crafts like chandlery or boat building. Basil Greenhill implied that in Appledore there was a form of vertical segregation, in that the master-mariners tended to live higher up the hill, the mates further down and the seamen right at the bottom by the quay.[23] An examination of the addresses of the owners in the MNL for

[18] P. Thomson 'Braunton: The Home of the Last Fleet of Sailing Coasters' in Robert d'Arcy Andrews (ed.), *Braunton: Home of the Last Sailing Coasters* (Braunton Museum), pp. 2–6.

[19] Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant* Schooners, 4th edition (Conway Maritime Press, 1988), p. 205.

[20] Stan Rogers and David Clement, 'Mariners of Braunton' in Robert d'Arcy Andrews (ed.) *Braunton: Home of the Last Sailing Coasters* (Braunton Museum, 2007), pp. 83–84.

[21] Samuel E. Ellacott, *Braunton Ships and Seamen* (Quest Western Publications, 1980) pp. 4–5.

[22] Michael Bouquet, 'The Papers of a North Devon Mariner (Thomas Slee)', *The Devon Historian* 16 (1978), pp. 7–13.

[23] Basil Greenhill, 'Aspects of Late Nineteenth Century Rural Ship Owning in South Western Britain' in K. Matthews and G.E. Panting (eds.), *Ship and Shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region* (Maritime History Group, Memorial University, 1978), p. 166.

the 1920s suggests that the situation then was more complex, with owners and masters living across Appledore. In 1923, William Kingdon Slade built houses for himself and his five surviving children, including Captain W.J. Slade, in Myrtle Street, on the middle tier as it were of Basil Greenhill's stratification.[24]

By the 1920s, the Slade family had become established as one of Appledore's principal shipowners. The patriarch was William Kingdon Slade (1865–1942), who owed much to the efforts of his elder sister, Mary Ann, who had married another Appledore mariner, George Quance. Mary Ann was a remarkable woman and by 1888 had saved enough to buy the *Nouvelle Marie*, a small French-built ketch, and gave command to her husband George. By 1909, the Quances had four ketches, in addition to the *Nouvelle Marie*, which was lost that year. However, within two years both George and Mary Ann were dead, and without children of their own their interests had been bequeathed to the Slade family. William Kingdon Slade inherited shares in the four vessels and soon put his son, W.J. Slade, in command of the *Elizabeth Jane.* The family then purchased the *Millom Castle*, which was to be under Captain W.J. Slade's command until the purchase in 1922 of the *Haldon,* with which he remained throughout the 1920s.

Most of the Appledore and Braunton vessels had a crew of two, three or four, in addition to the master. There would always be a mate, who probably entertained hopes of his own command in another vessel and may have had some shares in the vessel on which he served. There was at least one AB and often a junior member of the master's or mate's family would be an ordinary seaman (OS) and double as cook. The master had the responsibly to supply the food on board, but when in the home port the crew were expected to fend for themselves. In the days before the fitting of auxiliary motors, the master had his own quarters in the aft of the vessel and the crew theirs in the fo'c'sle. In most cases, when the motor was fitted, it occupied space that had been the master's quarters and the master had to moved forward with the crew. While there was a clear seniority to master and mate, in communities such as Appledore and Braunton, the crew were often relations of theirs and the coastal ketches lacked the strong hierarchy that characterised larger cargo ships and naval vessels.

It was not an easy life and undoubtedly a factor behind the final decline of the sailing coasters after the Second World War was that older men knew no other life, but their sons had had other experiences during war service or in the merchant navy. While a number of Appledore and Braunton men born after the Second World War did go to sea, not even the two sons of Captain Peter Welch of the *Result* decided to follow him and both served in larger motor ships.[25]

## Cargoes

Surviving cargo books from North Devon vessels suggest that there was no major change in the commodities carried over the period 1880–1930. The vessels bringing cargoes to North Devon – except for timber – tended to be locally owned. Cargoes being exported tended to be either sand and gravel, which was almost always carried in locally owned vessels, or ball clay

[24] David Carter, *Illustrated History of Appledore,* 3rd edition (Privately published, 2006), p. 169.

[25] Samuel E. Ellacott, *Braunton Ships and Seamen.* (Quest Western Publications, 1980), p. 63. The elder, another Peter, was a contemporary of mine at Barnstaple Grammar School in the 1960s.

from the Marland basin, which was shared between local sailing vessels and steamers from other British and European ports. The distinction that North Devon men had long made between 'Down-Homers' and other vessels still applied in the 1920s. 'Down-Homers' were smaller vessels that only rarely went beyond the confines of the Bristol Channel. They got their name from the habit of men – when held in ports along the Channel because of bad weather – frequently heading to the nearest railway station to 'go down home' to Appledore or Braunton.

The other vessels, while frequently trading in the Bristol Channel, would also go further afield, especially to the south and west coast of Ireland and to France and the Low Countries as well as to Liverpool and London, usually with cargoes of clay. Indeed, by the end of the decade, some North Devon vessels only rarely saw their home ports, instead carrying cargoes wherever they could be found and perhaps returning only when a cargo of coal or fertiliser could be obtained for carriage to North Devon.

The cargo books for the *Haldon*, under her master Captain W.J. Slade, have been transcribed by his great-nephew, David Carter. The cargoes and voyages of the first half of 2023 are shown in Table 6. The year commenced with the *Haldon* weather-bound at Ballycotton, about 35 kilometres east of Cork. The table shows voyages across the Celtic Sea, around Land's End and along the English south coast to London.[26] The cargoes of coal, clay (both ball clay and china clay), stone, cement and cereals were typical of the relatively low-value, high-bulk commodities that did not deteriorate at sea, which the sailing coasters typically carried.

**Table 6:** The voyages and cargoes of the *Haldon*, January–July 1923

| Dates | Passage | Cargo |
|---|---|---|
| **22–26 Jan** | Ballycotton–Newport | In ballast |
| **27 Jan–8 Mar** | Newport–Glandore (Co Cork) | 170 tonnes coal |
| **15–21 Mar** | Glandore–Bideford | In ballast |
| **5–16 Apr** | Bideford–London | 179 tonnes ball clay |
| **21 Apr** | London | Vessel inspected |
| **24 Apr–3 May** | London–Truro | 1,492 bags of maize meal |
| **11–12 May** | Truro–Par | Stone |
| **15–20 May** | Par–Penarth | China clay |
| **24 May** | Penarth–Avonmouth | In ballast |
| **29–31 May** | Avonmouth–Truro | Barley |
| **5–8 Jun** | Truro–London | Stone |
| **14 Jun–5 Jul** | London–Bridgwater | Cement |

It is hard to remember how dependent communities like those in North Devon in the 1920s were on coal. All local industries relied on coal for steam power, and homes were almost entirely heated by coal. North Devon's larger settlements all had gas works and electricity generating stations, with an annual consumption of a few thousand tonnes. The railways were also considerable users of coal, and although the Great Western Railway tended to favour Welsh steam coal from a select band of collieries and delivered by rail, the Southern Railway

[26] Transcription of the cargo book for the *Haldon*, January–July 1920, by David Carter, *Haldon Log-Book* 1920–1942 (2020) <www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/Northam/Haldon1920> [accessed March 2023].

had no lines serving collieries, other than a few in Kent, and it chose instead to bring coal into Fremington Quay, which it owned, and then distribute coal by rail to its stations and locomotive depots in Devon and Somerset. Thus, Fremington Quay was the second-busiest port in Devon, after Plymouth, thanks to both its coal imports, which reached 28,600 tonnes in 1928, and its ball clay exports which were almost as great.[27]

As Table 6 shows, coal to Irish ports around the south and west coast was another staple freight for North Devon vessels. The total annual consumption of many of these communities could be met by one or two cargoes delivered by sea and the small ports were often difficult of access and had limited facilities for even small steamers. One also imagines that the War of Independence and then the Irish Civil War at the start of the decade made many shipping companies wary of using Irish ports, many of whose communities had been Republicans opposed to the treaty establishing the Irish Free State.

In addition to timber brought to Barnstaple for its timber and builders' merchants, the port also had a more specialist import trade for the Raleigh Cabinet Works of Shapland and Petter on the west bank of the River Taw. Although the works still manufactured high-quality furniture, it had begun to specialise in wooden panelling and fittings for staterooms on liners. Much of this timber came from around the Baltic, and in December 1927, Castle Quay saw two topsail schooners and a barquentine, all owned in Marstal in southern Denmark, alongside having brought timber from Scandinavia. Figure 18 shows them, with the locally owned ketch the *Clara May*, moored aft of the Danish trio.

**Figure 18:** Castle Quay, Barnstaple, December 1927, with right to left: *Fuglen*, *Hans*, *Niels* and *Clara May* (R.L. Knight collection)

Marstal was a small community, about the size of Appledore and Braunton, and like them it was the home to a significant fleet of sailing vessels in the 1920s. It was unusual to have three vessels simultaneously at Barnstaple with timber from the Baltic and Scandinavia, but in most years single vessels would arrive two or three times a year. It was this that inspired Henry Williamson's last work, the novella *The Scandaroon,* about an exotic racing pigeon that arrived in Barnstaple aboard a 'Danziger' barquentine, as he described it.[28]

[27] John Nicholas and George Reeve, *Line to Torrington* (The Irwell Press, 2014), p. 35.
[28] Henry Williamson, *The Scandaroon* (Macdonald, 1972).

## Why Did North Devon Survive as the Last Home of Sailing Coasters?

A corollary to this question is why did other significant late nineteenth-century ports with fleets of schooners and ketches not adapt successfully to conditions after the First World War? No direct attempt will be made here to answer this corollary, although in explaining why North Devon – uniquely in Britain and Ireland – did retain its fleet, albeit on a reduced scale from the late nineteenth century, the implication must be that while these other ports experienced most of the same forces at work, there was something distinctive about North Devon that enabled its mariners to keep going while others gave up. Also, in ports such as Marstal in Denmark or those in Normandy and Brittany in France, extensive sailing fleets survived the 1920s, and in all these cases, the vessels were both larger and far more modern than those in North Devon.[29]

Basil Greenhill suggests a number of reasons why small sailing vessels were able to make a living in the years immediately after the First World War. There had been substantial losses of shipping to enemy action in the war and while there was a post-war surge in shipbuilding, these vessels were not immediately available. Freight rates never returned to pre-war levels. It became usual now for freights to be paid prior to passage and thus aided the cash flow for owners and masters. Higher freight rates also encouraged the refitting of vessels and made installation of semi-diesel auxiliary engines a less risky expenditure. Without the engines, it is almost certain the solely sail-driven ketch and schooner would not have survived as long as they did.

Local conditions also played a part, within most ports there were few alternative opportunities for investment other than ships and enough men still willing to go to sea. Continued family ownership of vessels with most masters being majority shareholders was another significant factor. The presence of local shipyards with workers skilled in the repair of wooden sailing vessels was also a factor, although there is a certain circularity in argument, as without the yards the vessels would have lacked local maintenance facilities, and without locally owned ships finding customers for the yards would have been a challenge.[30]

Greenhill also adds a further reason why there should be so many small sailing vessels in North Devon, as most of the factors behind survival could have applied equally to the ports of Cardigan Bay or English south coast ports such as Littlehampton or Rye. The Bristol Channel, he argues, offered particular niches for small sailing vessels that were less clear for the other ports. He notes that trade between North Devon and South Wales was almost as fast by sea as it was by road, with the distance from Ilfracombe to Swansea of 390 kilometres, taking a lorry perhaps a day, and a good passage by sail would be hardly any longer. North Devon was also better placed to engage in trade to the Irish ports along the south and west

[29] Lloyds Register of Shipping shows that the Breton and Norman fleets were typically of 200–350 tonnes and very few of these larger schooners were more than 20 years old. In 1924, at Granville, the mean age of ten vessels of more than 100 tonnes was 7.4 years, and at Paimpol, the figure for seventeen vessels was 17.2 years. Of course, here almost all of the schooners were engaged in the Grand Banks fishery off Newfoundland, which the North Devon ports had given up some 170 years previously.

[30] Basil Greenhill 'The Merchant Sailing Vessels in the Twentieth Century', in Basil Greenhill (ed.) *Sail's Last Century: The Merchant Sailing Ship 1830–1930* (Conway Maritime Press), pp. 102–3.

coast, which in any case had a long history dating back to the sixteenth century, if not further.[31]

A good way to explain the survival in North Devon of a fleet of small merchant sailing vessels in the 1920s is to invoke the concepts of structure and agency, but in ways that do not accord a supremacy to either. The principal structural elements are geographical, environmental, economic and social. As already noted, the Bristol Channel forms a relatively separate entity, although with maritime linkages to the Celtic Sea and beyond. Within the Bristol Channel, North Devon has always been subservient to Bristol and then Cardiff and Swansea. Bristol, as a major British port, always had cargoes for onward transport to smaller ports, such as those in North Devon, while in the heyday that Cardiff and Swansea saw such traffic – principally coal exports from Cardiff and Swansea and imports of copper and tin ores to Swansea – there was no significant local development of shipbuilding and ship repair. Thus, North Devon found a niche in complementing the shipping of the great Bristol Channel.

The French geographer, M. Roux, writing of marine leisure activities in Brittany, drew a distinction between the north and south coasts, with the former described as 'spartan' and the latter as 'hedonistic'. He had in mind contrasts in aspect, sea temperatures, tidal range and tidal currents that made the north coast a more challenging environment and one where the inexperienced mariner was in real peril.[32] This too could be applied to the north coasts of Devon and Cornwall, and this surely is one reason why yachting and most water sports (other than surfing) are far less developed and popular on the north coast.

One further consequence is that men with skills in wooden shipbuilding would find alternative employment in yards building yachts and dinghies along the south coast, which simply did not flourish on the north. Thus, the wooden shipbuilding traditions of, for instance, the Solent harbours, Littlehampton and Rye faded as local ketches and schooners disappeared and men gravitated to boat building. The economic structures and conditions are those that Greenhill identified and were common to all British ports that had once been home to fleets of wooden sailing vessels. Perhaps an important factor in the decline of the Cardigan Bay fleets, was the collapse in the export trade of slate, in which most of its vessels had been engaged. North Devon's primary export, ball clay, was far less affected.

North Devon also retained the practice of vessels being owed by sixty-fourth shares that were held by family members. Corporate ownership of the type that came to characterise steamers never took root. Within Appledore and Braunton, there emerged distinct seafaring communities, which through marriage ties and family tradition kept them apart from others and engendered a sense that it was a normal thing for boys to follow their fathers and uncles to sea and for women to marry mariners. By the 1920s, the significant mariner communities within Barnstaple and Bideford had more or less dissolved and men from these towns, if they went to sea, would do so on Appledore- or Braunton-owned vessels.

Undoubtedly, men with the energy and skill of the Appledore and Braunton master-mariners were to be found in other ports in Britain but the local conditions here enabled them to undertake maritime activities in ways that simply were not possible elsewhere. In one sense,

[31] Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners*, 4th edition (Conway Maritime Press, 1988), pp. 255–56.
[32] M. Roux, 'Imaginaire, practique sportive, valeur d'espace: la plaisance sur la côte atlantique française', *Norois* (1994), vol. 163, pp. 419–28.

the distinctiveness of men such as Captain W.J. Slade of Appledore or Captains Steve Chugg and George Clark of Braunton lay not in their personal qualities but in the fact that Appledore and Braunton allowed them to be successful and among the last of the long line of master-mariners and owners from the days of sail. As Captain Slade put it: 'When we stepped aboard our vessels from the shore, we moved from the early twentieth century to the late eighteenth.'[33]

Another important aspect of human agency in the survival of the North Devon merchant sailing fleet through the 1920s was the determination of the Harris family to keep the Appledore shipyard going. Most of its work was repair and inspection of steel steamers, and later of motor vessels, but the yards continued to train men in the traditional skills of wooden shipbuilding and to carry stocks of timber to allow extensive repairs to be carried out. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s, when wooden vessels were required for film work or replicas of historic ships were to be built, Appledore was virtually the only place in Britain with the capability to be able to modify or build wooden sailing ships. However, it is unlikely that this could now be done as the chain of transmission of craft skills and knowledge has been severed.

## Conclusion

The 1920s are in some ways likely to be rather overlooked in any maritime history of North Devon. The fleet of small merchant sailing vessels was much reduced in size from its peak in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, but it was not such an anachronism as the handful of survivors clearly were in the 1950s. For many men and women in the 1920s, especially in Appledore and Braunton, it was a perfectly natural experience to see ketches and schooners alongside the quays, and to know their crews, if not actually being related to them. Barnstaple and Bideford also saw the comings and goings of vessels on almost every tide and the local economy was underpinned by imports of coal, flour, fertiliser and timber. Thanks to imports of coal and exports of ball clay, Fremington Quay was the busiest port on the English side of the Bristol Channel, west of Avonmouth. There was also a sense of continuity in that Appledore's most famous son, Sir William Reardon-Smith, now based in Cardiff, chose to register most of his fleet of steamers at Bideford, where indeed just one of the steamers had a net tonnage roughly the same as all the sailing vessels in North Devon combined.

The fleet of merchant sailing vessels in North Devon in the 1920s was significantly older than it had been a half century previously, although by shrewd purchases, the owners were able to maintain a fleet of roughly the same average age through the decade. Another major contrast with the later nineteenth century was the fact that only a very small number of vessels had been built in North Devon, and all four of the home nations had built at least one of North Devon's vessels. However, the Appledore shipyard was still able to do extensive work of wooden sailing vessels and played an important part in the longevity of the North Devon fleet.

As already established, the advent of the semi-diesel marine engine gave the surviving ketches and schooners extra flexibility and made them more confident to be able to catch the tide. North Devon's location proved to be ideal, with regular cargoes of low-value but high-bulk commodities to be carried within the Bristol Channel and to ports along the southern and

[33] W.J. Slade writing in W.J. Slade and Basil Greenhill, *West Country Coasting Ketches* (Conway Maritime Press, 1974), p. 33.

western coasts of Ireland. Unlike at many ports on the English south coast, there were no yacht building yards to draw away the shipwrights nor opportunities for men to work on the large racing yachts.

The Second World War effectively marked a final turning point and ensured that the traditions maintained throughout the 1920s would finally peter out. Some vessels were requisitioned for service as barrage balloon tethers and virtually none were returned in a fit state to continue after the war. The Irish Free State remained neutral and found itself with no significant merchant fleet of its own, and strenuous efforts were made to acquire ships, which after the war were able to continue to carry cargoes to Ireland. Owner-masters like Captain Slade of Appledore and Captain Welch of Braunton were also reaching the end of their active seagoing lives, and their male relatives were not inclined to follow in their footsteps.

Thanks to many photographs, there is still a way to see what the ports of North Devon were like in the 1920s, and the stories of some of the men who sailed on these vessels are preserved in autobiographical accounts. My father, who witnessed this period as an office boy and clerk for Shapland and Petter and then the Barnstaple Gas Company – both major users of shipping – told me his stories of seeing the ships in Barnstaple, but relaying these stories to my grandchildren probably leaves the 1920s as a distant part of North Devon's past and on a par with voyages to Newfoundland or imports of tobacco from Maryland and Virginia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.