The Tamar Barge Fleet in the 1920s: Decline or Survival?

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Within the rich maritime history of the South West, the Tamar barges were a distinctive and significant fleet.[1] An *a priori* popular assumption, possibly simplistic, is that this once very numerous type of vessel dwindled and largely disappeared by the First World War, with few surviving into the 1920s. However, this article attempts to show that the picture was rather more complex. Closer examination of past research on the topic shows that, although the fleet and the variety of its trades undeniably diminished from the 19th century heyday, a surprising number of Tamar barges continued to work through the decade, both locally and elsewhere.

This focus on the Tamar inevitably underlines how the river long acted as a 'unifier' rather than a dividing frontier. The story embraces both Devon and Cornwall; both sides of the river have much in common in many respects (and still do, arguably). Another 'qualifier' at the outset is that this review is not the fruit of extensive original research. Rather, it draws on and synthesises, with gratitude, the work of researchers who are sadly no longer with us. Especially notable in this respect are Ian Merry,[2] Gary Hicks,[3] Frank Booker[4] and Basil Greenhill[5]. Their outstanding scholarship and knowledge deserves to be revisited and celebrated, although the present article draws on only a fraction of their output. In addition, more recent research is recognised, notably the findings of the SHIPS Project, which has unearthed, often literally, the many wrecks around the waters of Plymouth.[6]

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[1] 'Tamar' and 'Tamar barge' are used here as shorthand terms that represent the complex tidal waterway system and its vessels of the Tamar Estuary. Besides the main river, there are, of course, important tributaries (Tavy, Lynher/St. Germans River, Plym and Yealm) and smaller 'sideshoots' (such as Kingsmill Lake and Tamerton Lake).

[2] Ian Merry, *The Shipping and Trade of the River Tamar, Parts 1 and 2*, Maritime Monographs and Reports, No. 46 (National Maritime Museum, 1980). An indispensable resource – the result of exhaustive research and thorough insight into the history of the Tamar barges. Also, Ian Merry, *The Westcotts and Their Times,* Maritime Monographs and Reports, No. 25 (National Maritime Museum, 1977).

[3] Gary Hicks, *Plymouth's Other Fleet, version 2* (Gary Hicks, published as a CD, 2020). I am especially grateful to the family of my late friend Gary Hicks for allowing me to draw from his remarkable, meticulous research of the many aspects of Plymouth's commercial shipping and shipbuilding history. Gary's family has generously put 'Plymouth's Other Fleet' on the web, with all the material downloadable as pdf files, from www.plymouthmerchantships.info

[4] Frank Booker*, Industrial Archaeology of the Tamar Valley* (David & Charles, 1967). The seminal work on the industrial heritage and maritime past of the Tamar Valley.

[5] Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners* (Conway Maritime Press, 1988 edition). Also, W J Slade and Basil Greenhill, *Westcountry Coasting Ketches* (Conway Maritime Press, 1974).

[6] Pete Holt and C. John Cotton, *Historic Ships on the Foreshore in and around Plymouth Sound National Marine Park* (SHIPS Project CIC, 2023).

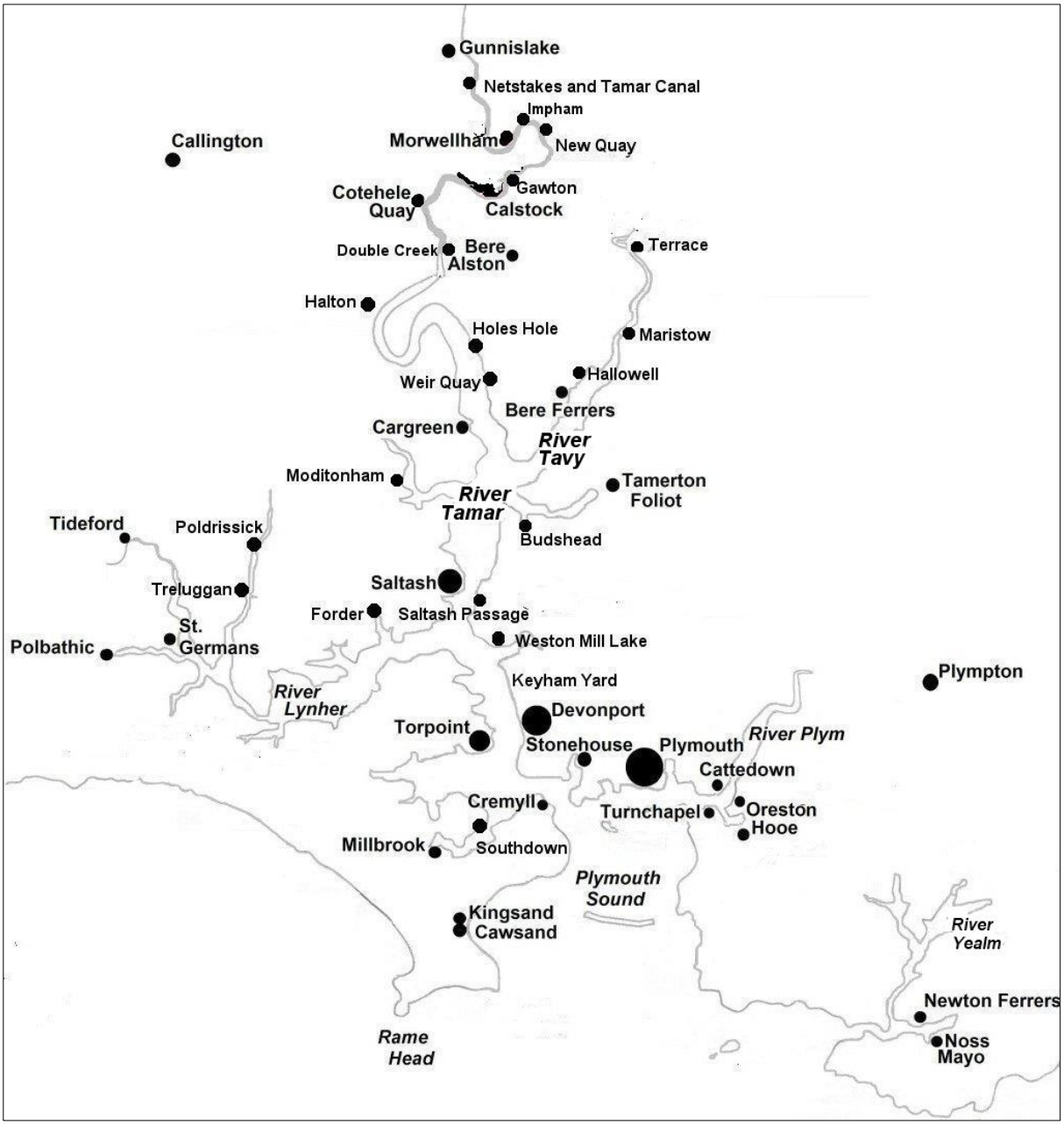

Figure 1: The Tamar Estuary system, with ports and quays served by Tamar barges. There were many other small quays and hards on the tidal Tamar system, which were used occasionally – typically to serve one or two farms. Callington, Bere Alston and Plympton were obviously not ports. (Map by author, with thanks to the late Gary Hicks for an earlier version.)

The Tamar barge

The Tamar and its tributaries must have been navigated for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. Over the centuries, the craft employed would have been fairly basic, but with the intensification of demand for transport from the later 18th century, a 'model' gradually emerged of a practical cargo vessel that was closely adapted to the distinctive nature of the tidal Tamar system. By the late 19th century, certain key characteristics of the classic 'Tamar barge' had developed, albeit with some diversity. Distinctive features included:

- Small, relatively simple and cheap to build, robust wooden cargo vessels, typically able to carry 30–70 tonnes of cargo.
- Most carried a single mast and had fairly simple sail plans and rigging (gaff-rigged cutters and smacks, with two or more headsails and usually a bowsprit). However, some were rigged as ketches (i.e. two masts), as represented by *Shamrock*, based at Cotehele Quay, and one of the two surviving Tamar barges.
- Barges were normally flat-bottomed, with shallow drafts, but were relatively broad to enhance capacity. They were therefore well-adapted to the many tidal berths, quays and 'hards'[7] along the Tamar system, and could 'take the ground' at low tide, even when fully loaded.[8] They were normally fitted with transom sterns (i.e. 'flat' and 'square'), and their rudders hung outside the stern and were steered by a tiller bar (rather than a wheel).
- They were *relatively* easy to operate, by small crews (often only two). Nevertheless, navigating the tricky meandering channels of the Tamar demanded considerable skill and ingenuity, based on long experience handed down over generations.
- Barges were moved by combinations of sailing; the use of long 'quant poles' for manoeuvring, especially in narrower and shallower channels; long 'sweep oars' for deeper water;[9] towing from the bank on some stretches of the Tamar proper; towing by a barge's own rowing boat; or by the early 20th century, towage by steam tug. The tide could play a role, although measures had to be taken to ensure steerage way (e.g. by slowing the vessel with a chain). Judging what to use when and where demanded sound local knowledge.

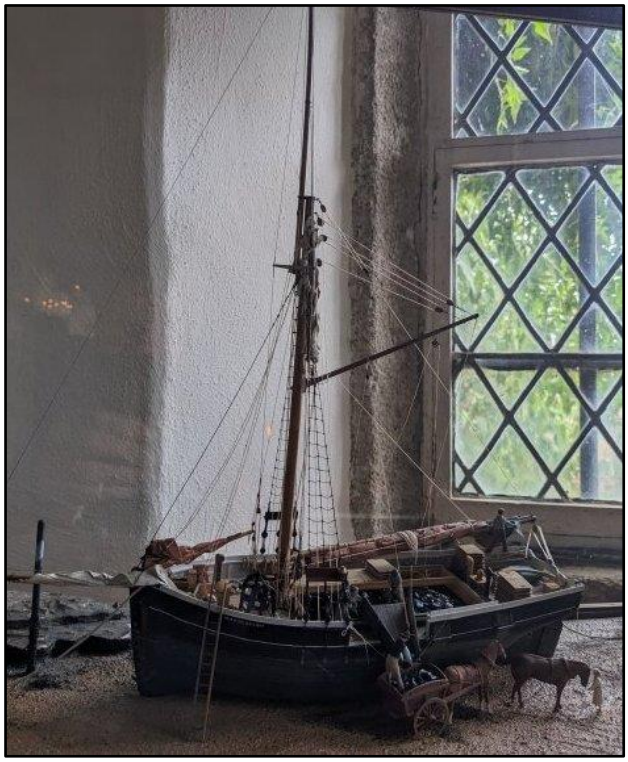

Figure 2: Model of barge *Mayblossom*, Cotehele House. (Author's photo.)

[7] 'Hards' were simply sections of the river alongside a convenient, accessible section of riverbank on which vessels could be rested. They might often be reinforced with stone chippings to ensure a firm surface from which the vessels could rise as the tide flowed.

[8] Holt and Cotton, *Historic Ships on the Foreshore*, p. 15.

[9] Both quant poles and sweep oars could be 18–20 feet long.

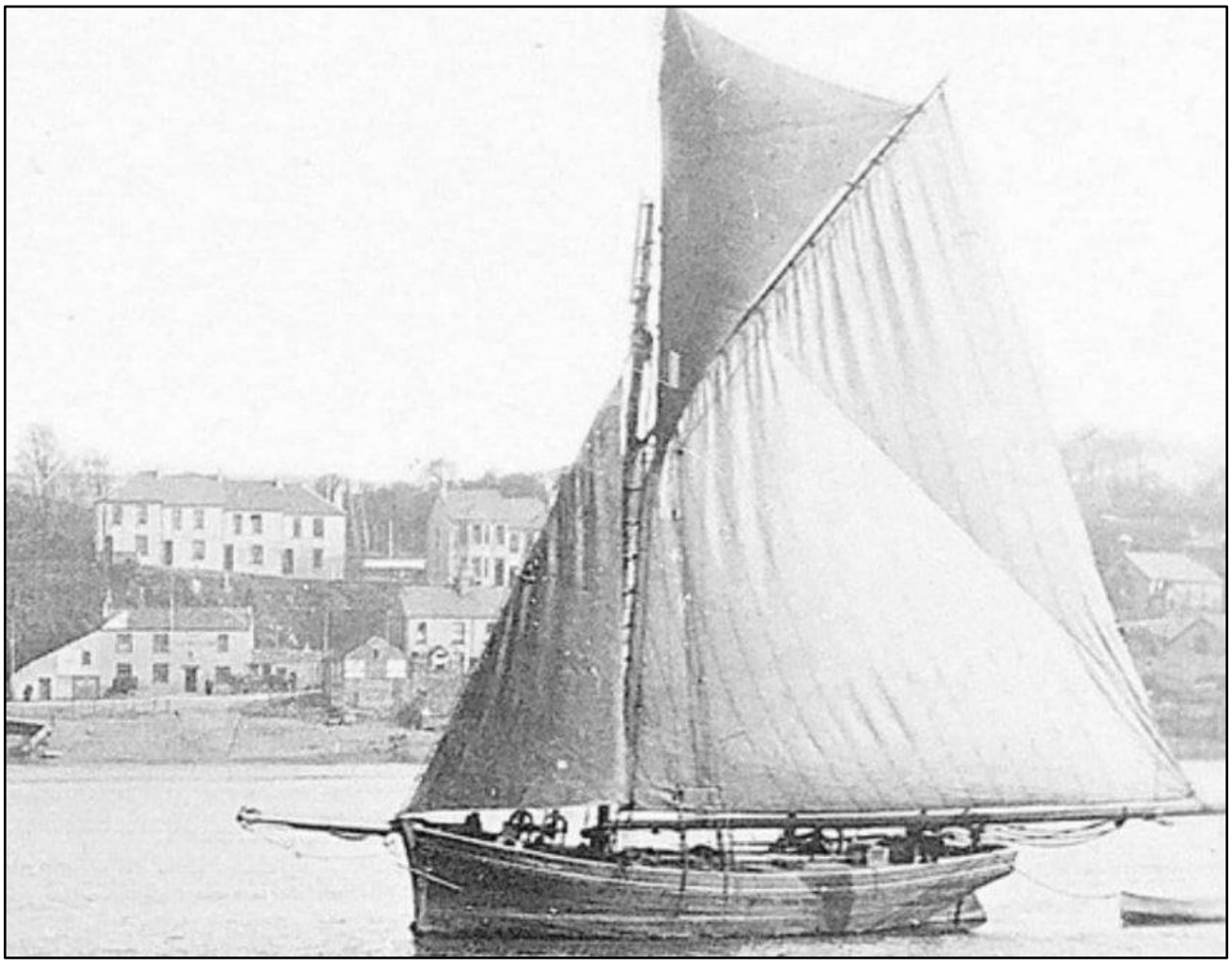

Figure 3: Tamar barge *Flora May* passing Saltash under sail.[10]

The barges were often differentiated between those that were 'outside' barges and those that were regarded as 'inside' vessels. Outside vessels were capable of making coastal voyages and were registered as such, whereas 'inside' craft normally strayed no further than Plymouth Sound and might not be registered.[11] By the 20th century (and especially the 1920s), many Tamar barges operated 'outside', and found work some way beyond their namesake river, although most were confined to the south coasts of Devon and Cornwall.

By the late 19th century, most barges were built by a handful of relatively large shipyards (although they were small by national standards), whereas in earlier periods, some vessels were constructed on simpler, smaller scale sites. Notable examples of firms operating in the later 19th and early 20th centuries were the yards of Frederick Hawke in Stonehouse Creek, Plymouth,[12] David Banks at the

[10] *Wikipedia*, 'Tamar barge', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamar_barge. Accessed 20 November 2024.
[11] That some 'inside' barges were unregistered could mean that even meticulous researchers Ian Merry and Gary Hicks recognised that some vessels may have escaped their scrutiny.
[12] Builder of *Shamrock*.

Queen Anne's Battery Yard, Plymouth, and the legendary James Goss at Calstock Passage,[13] opposite Calstock (therefore in Bere Ferrers parish, Devon).[14]

Operation and trades of Tamar barges

Ownership and control of Tamar barges was often very complex and fluid. As was traditional elsewhere in the days of coastal commercial sailing ships, ownership was normally based on '64th shares'. While all sixty-four shares might be owned by a single individual, sometimes the shares were divided between groups of relatives or business partners. For example (not the most extreme), sixteen individuals were registered as owners of the *Mayblossom* between 1890 and 1923.[15] Shares were frequently sold or inherited.

Certain extended families were especially prominent within the barge-owning community of the Tamar system and were often interrelated through marriage. Examples included the Cudlipps, Doidges, Hoopers (all of Bere Ferrers), Hamleys, Adams, Rooses, Jeffords and Westcotts. Such kin groups often made up the crews of the vessels in which they had a financial stake. As Ian Merry described: 'The barge fraternity were a happy, hard-working community, respected and respectable, devoted to their profession, and usually to each other. A network of family connections extended over time. The shareholders in these robust little vessels represented every walk of life.'[16] Greenhill also claimed that the Tamar Valley communities:

> "provide an example of rural ship owning and seafaring of a type common in the Baltic region, but rare in Britain. The pattern was one of the farmer / market gardener / seafarer with a family working a small farm or garden also owning shares in a coasting smack and sailing her in season."[17]

Water transport on the tidal Tamar was a logical response to the distinctive and challenging local geography. The complex river system, some of it embedded in steep-sided valleys, was (and remains) a major constraint on land travel. Growing demand for the resource base of the area was a great stimulus to water-borne commercial transport. The landscape of steep-sided valleys and ridges (still!) makes land travel slow, circuitous and costly. Travel by water had been an alternative over many centuries, and probably millennia.

[13] The story of the life and times of James Goss is thoroughly told in R. T. Paige, *The Tamar Valley at Work: James Goss – a century of shipbuilding and life in the Tamar Valley* (Dartington Amenity Research Trust, 1978).
[14] James Goss took over the yard from Edward Brooming, who also produced numerous barges.
[15] Gary Hicks, *Plymouth's Other Fleet – Mayblossom* entry.
[16] Ian Merry, *The Westcotts and Their Times*, p. 57.
[17] Basil Greenhill, The *Merchant Schooners*, p. 234.

Figure 4: Ketch-rigged barge in Tamar below Morwell Rocks, being towed upstream by the vessel's boat – just visible on right. (Early 20th-century postcard, with thanks to Nigel Overton.)

However, with the diversification and intensification of economic activity from the later 18th century, which intensified in the 19th, the demand for water transport became especially strong.[18] Natural resources available in the Tamar Valley were exported both to markets well beyond the South West (output from the many metalliferous mines and granite, especially) and to Plymouth and its adjacent naval base at Devonport[19] (bricks, tiles, stone, sand, agricultural produce and more). The rapid growth of the nearby conurbation and the water-accessible resources it demanded expanded the market for barge operations.

Trade also flowed the other way in response to demand for materials not available locally. Notable inbound cargoes were coal, timber and machinery for mines and other industries, which were imported from more distant suppliers. Other vital supplies were conveyed by barge from more proximate sources. Large quantities of Devonian limestone, cut from quarries in the Plymouth area, fed the many limekilns on the banks of the rivers to produce lime for agriculture and horticulture, as well as for use on local buildings. Another colourful 'export' from Plymouth and Devonport was the notorious 'Dock dung'; the strongly odiferous but fertile street sweepings and other 'wastes', which was used to fertilise the fields of the Tamar Valley.[20]

[18] Frank Booker's *Industrial Archaeology in the Tamar Valley* provides much detail about the area's economy and trades.
[19] 'Plymouth Dock' until granted the name 'Devonport' in 1824.
[20] The term refers to (Plymouth) 'Dock' as the origin of much of the material – hence the capitalisation used here. As recorded by Ian Merry in *The Shipping and Trade on the River Tamar, Part 2*, p. 11, the barge *Indus* took fifty-two cargoes of Dock dung over her 20 years of service; the last one 'a £5 load' in October 1922 to Gnatham Quay on the

In fact, the list of cargoes carried on the rivers in the 'barge heyday' of the late 19th century was a long one. Some were infrequent and very small scale, such as 'furze', ferns, bean poles or oak bark. Ian Merry gained access to a 'log' from the Bere Ferrers-based barge, the *Indus*.[21] Just one page reveals a fascinating miscellany, including: gravel, sand, coir wire, coal, 'dung', wood, 'rubble' and 'points stuff'.[22] Some of the *Indus*'s jobs were undertaken for individual landowners and tenant farmers, while other work was for 'the Government'.

Some barges were used to extract sand for the building trade from sandbanks in the rivers. This activity was arduous and probably offered poor returns; sand was shovelled aboard from the riverbed at low tide, with the vessel temporarily aground.

Just as the cargoes carried on the barges were varied, so too were their loading and unloading points. Such busy river ports as Calstock, Morwellham and Weir Quay (on the Bere Peninsula) were especially important, but there were many lesser quays (Millbrook and South Down on Millbrook Lake, Cargreen, New Quay, Bere Ferrers, Tamerton Foliot, and Forder, Treluggan, Poldrissick and St. Germans off the Lynher river) as well as very small quays and hards (e.g. Butspill and North Hooe on the Bere Peninsula, Lopwell and Terrace Meadow up the Tavy, and Moditonham on Kingsmill Lake).

Figure 5: Barge approaching the quay at Bere Ferrers on the Tavy estuary, early 20th century. (Author's collection.)

Tavy. 'They used to spread that all down over the garden and let it wash out among their strawberries, rotted down o' course. Used to be steaming when us be unloading, you could 'ardly see for steam. A filthy job that'.

[21] Ian Merry, *Shipping and Trade on the River Tamar, Part 2*, p. 13.

[22] 'Points stuff' was typically a mix of seaweed and other organic material swept down by the rivers and deposited in particular waterside spots. Like Dock dung, it was rotted down and used as fertiliser.

Basil Greenhill left an evocative summary of the Tamar barges:[23]

> … they were local ships, redolent of manure and oil cake, carrying grain for local mills, roadstone from local quarries to council dumps, hay for farmers and lumber for local timber merchants. They worked the quiet wharves of wooded inland creeks and the small granite harbours of the coast. The rivers in which they sailed are among the most beautiful in Britain … There were scores of these barges of several different sub-types and well maintained. Although the work was often hard, life on board them was healthy and the men were able to be frequently at home. They were as much a part of the life on the banks of the Tamar … as the farm wagons and the carriers' wagons and the horses to which they were complementary.[24]

The barges were not alone on the river…

Although the Tamar barges are the core topic in this article, it is essential to recognise that they were not the only type of vessel that plied the rivers. Larger quays received many larger seagoing ships from more distant British ports and abroad. Principally ketches and schooners,[25] they typically brought such cargoes as coal, timber and fertiliser, and took away copper ore and granite.[26] The Tamar scene was also enlivened by the fleet of paddle steamers, especially bringing day trippers upriver from Plymouth and also carrying Tamar Valley residents and their produce to market in Devonport.[27] Many more humble craft also worked on the river – smaller boats that have scarcely been recorded or photographed, powered by sail or oar, and by internal combustion engines by the 1920s – the decade to which this account must now turn.

Tamar barges and the 1920s – decline or survival?

How valid is the commonly held notion that the era of the Tamar barge essentially came to an end with the First World War? Certainly, there is evidence of a significant decline in some trades and the number of river 'ports' served, as well as a fall in the number of active barges by the start of the 1920s. Although this descent was well underway before the First World War, the turbulent years from 1914–18 must have further disturbed the patterns of Tamar trade, via requisitioning of some vessels, a fall in demand for some cargoes (but a rising demand for others), and diversion of many men employed on the rivers into the armed forces or dockyard work. However, a surprising number of barges not only entered the 1920s but survived right through the decade.

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[23] Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners*, pp. 230–31

[24] This rosy vision might understate the hard work and low returns often associated with the barge trade.

[25] From around 1900 into the 1930s, steam and motor ships were not unusual on the main rivers on the Tamar and Lynher.

[26] One of the last cargoes of coal unloaded on the Tamar itself was brought up to Cargreen by William Slade's well-known Plymouth-built ketch, *Haldon.*

[27] See especially Alan Kittridge's excellent masterwork, *Steamers & Ferries of the River Tamar & Three Towns District* (Twelveheads Press, 2003).

The following review is based around three 'inventories' of Tamar barges:

1. Vessels that met their demise within the 1920s – i.e. evidence of a 'decline' during the decade (see Table 1).
2. Vessels that were based within the Tamar system, including Plymouth, and survived through the 1920s (see Table 2).
3. Vessels with Tamar origins, but sold away prior to the 1920s, that survived elsewhere through the 1920s (see Table 3).

The data is based principally on the meticulous research of Ian Merry[28] (in the 1970s) and Gary Hicks,[29] with additions from other sources, including Basil Greenhill. The lists are unlikely to be comprehensive or wholly accurate. Both key source authors emphasised the limitations of the remaining records of Tamar barges. Among the challenges is that 'inside' barges were not required to register. If they spent their entire lives within the Tamar estuary, their very existence might be hidden, as well as any details of their character and operation. For example, Gary Hicks notes in a short article how the 'inside' barge *Elizabeth Jane* was able to take cargoes far up shallow tidal waters to such destinations as Tideford[30] – but surprisingly, she does not feature in his extensive record of 'Plymouth ships', probably because there is no registration record. Nevertheless, Elizabeth Jane is among the fleet of 1920s survivors – lasting until 1952.

The case for decline in the 1920s: vessels that met their demise within the decade

Table 1: Tamar Barges operating on Tamar system but out of service in 1920s decade

Name	Builder	Launch	Notes	Fate
Bertie	David Banks, Plymouth	1883	Initially built for Westcotts, then sold to J T Daymond, Wearde Point 1883. Acquired F J Moore, quarry owner, Cattedown 1921.	Abandoned in Hooe Lake 1928?
Britannia	James Goss, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1890	Owned Calstock. Traded to Netstakes with coal, bringing back bricks. Also in coastal trade from Lynher quarries, trading to Fowey and Falmouth.	Could have survived into 1920s?
Edith	David Banks, Plymouth QAB	1877	Built for John Westcott, also Perry & Spear and others. Also later owned Morwellham, Calstock.	Carried bricks from Westlake brickworks. Became hulk by 1924.
Edward & Sarah	Edward Brooming, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1844	Built for Lowry, Kelly Bray, then to Joel Down, Calstock builder. Ran regularly to Gawton.	Sank and 'lost', March 1926.
Edwin	Richard Hill, Plymouth	1880	Built for Edwin Willis, lime merchant, then sold to Lewis Sparrow, Cattedown 1894, then Frederick Moore of Prince Rock Quarries, still in limestone trade.	SHIPS project states 'abandoned in Pomphlett Creek in 1924'.
Eleanor	Edward Brooming, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1875	Operated by Thomas Westlake, brickworks owner. Converted to ketch 1901.	Became coal hulk 1926 and register closed.
Flora May	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1897	Built for Capt. Daymond of St. Budeaux, but later sold to Roose family. Traded bricks to Camels Head, grain/flour to Budshead mill, and in Lynher stone trade.	Acquired by shipping controller for naval service 1918. Deregistered 1920 – but stayed in naval service.

[28] Ian Merry, *The Shipping and Trade of the River Tamar, Part 2*, p. vii.
[29] Gary Hicks, *Plymouth's Other Fleet, Plymouth Ships.*
[30] Ibid., *The Barges of the Four Rivers*.

Flossie	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1896	Built for Hosking of St. Germans – worked on Lynher and Tamar as far as Weir Head.	Sold Plymouth interests but register closed September 1927, when vessel used as water barge for harbour work only.
Martin	James Goss?	?	Run by Martins and then Studden family.	Commandeered in the First World War but left to rot in Devonport – so missed 1920s.
Minnie	E Damerell, Devonport	1892	Owned at Cargreen and Calstock, then J N Roose, Plymouth.	Taken over by Admiralty by 1918 and registered closed end 1920.
Phoenix	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1900	Plymouth-owned initially, 1908 bought by F J Moore Cattedown and Prince Rock quarries.	Moore owned several barges relatively late – used in stone trade. Engine fitted 1921. Broken up 1926.
Silver Spray	C F Williams, Stonehouse	1880	Built for Roose family, then sold in 1882 to Calstock owners, and later to Richard Bates of Stonehouse. Visited many small farm 'hards' and quays – especially with 'Dock dung'.	Broken up in 1929.
Success	David Banks, Plymouth	1875	Cutter. Built for Westcotts, with Perry and Spear and others as shareholders. Worked as ammunition barge, but also Tamar trade, including bricks to Plymouth. May have been last barge call at Morwellham, and last to carry Dock dung. Regularly repaired at Goss yard.	Broken up 1929.
Volunteer	Unknown, but at Plymouth	1864	Various shareholders in Plymouth area, including Cargreen.	Broken up 1926.
William and Fred	James Goss, Calstock Passage	1900	Owned by Sowdens of Calstock. Then by Westcotts. Varied trades on Tamar.	Became ammunition store in the First World War. Probably lasted into early 1920s, possibly at Millbrook.

Of the Tamar forty-six barges that were evidently afloat and in use in the Tamar system in 1920, fifteen failed to survive. In most cases, they were abandoned as hulks or dismantled for their timber – the fate of countless other vessels in earlier decades. Examples that met this customary fate include *Edwin*, the brick carrier *Edith*, *Eleanor* and *Volunteer*. *Silver Spray* and *Success*[31] almost made it onto the list of survivors but both were broken up late in 1929. Several of this group had been taken into dockyard service, but never returned to civilian use (*Flora May*, *Martin* and *Minnie*). Only one barge is recorded as having sunk – the *Edward & Sarah.* There are no details of what transpired with this vessel, although as she was no less than 82 years old in 1926, it is possible that the end came simply through sinking at a mooring rather than a more threatening incident.

[31] *Success* was 54 years old when she finally expired, after a very varied career carrying many cargoes, including bricks, Dock dung and ammunition during the First World War.

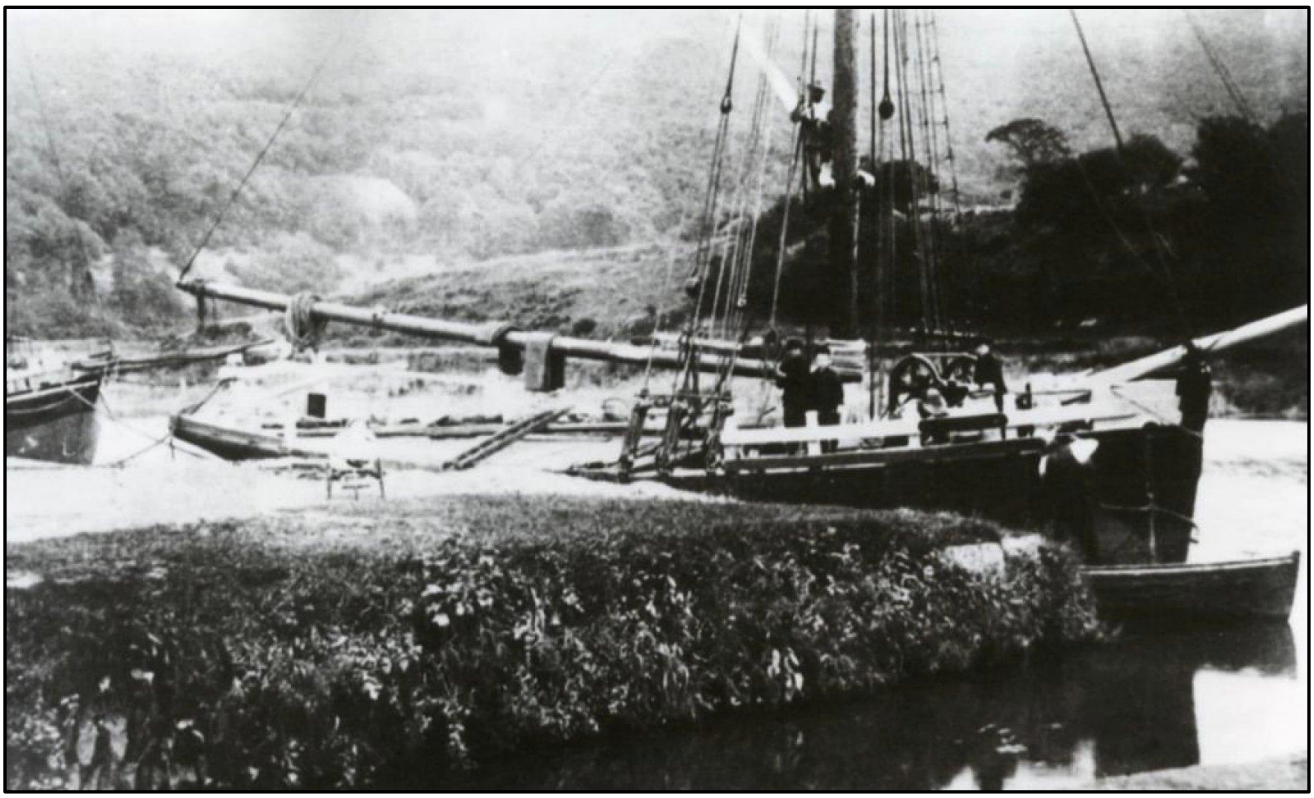

Figure 6: Barge *Edith* at Morwellham, early 20th century. The vessel became a hulk by 1924.[32]

Although far from the full story, the Tamar barge fleet undeniably waned through the 1920s, if not as drastically as might be expected. Various influences can be suggested for this steady demise:

- Some formerly important trades on the river had ended even before the First World War.[33] There were no limekilns still operating along the shores of the Tamar system by 1920, so the once-frequent cargoes of limestone from Plymouth quarries had vanished. The 'Dock dung' trade had also virtually ceased around the time of the First World War, not least because of concern about the noxious quality of the material. It is thought that the last load was taken to the small quay at Gnatham on the Tavy estuary in 1922. With increasing motorisation, urban horse transport decreased, reducing the supply of the horse manure that was such a vital ingredient in Dock dung. It is likely that the increasing availability of artificial fertilisers also undermined demand for the material, as well as for limestone shipments.
- Some barge trades faced a rapid increase in competition from commercial lorries in the wake of the First World War, the difficult topography of the Tamar Valley notwithstanding. Even 'early' motor trucks tended to be faster, more flexible, and offered 'point-to-point' service. Water transport was relatively slow and subject to the vagaries of wind and tide. It also often required transshipment to road vehicles before and after the voyage, adding to costs and delays.

[32] *Wikipedia*, 'Tamar barge', https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamar_barge. Accessed 20 November 2024.
[33] Most mining activity in the Tamar Valley, once so significant, had ceased by 1880 – four decades before the period in focus here.

- During the First World War, petrol-engined vehicles developed rapidly and the armed forces trained a large number of mechanics and drivers.[34] Although specific evidence is scarce, some of the lighter and smaller scale cargoes that had been carried by barge, such as farm produce and supplies and groceries will have been increasingly delivered via the local road network, fostered by vehicle development, 'road transport skills' and the paving of roads.
- It could be assumed that competition from the railways also impinged on barge traffic, although the rail network had developed well before the 1920s. The opening of the railway from Bere Alston to Kelly Bray in 1908, across the Calstock Viaduct, gradually undermined trade from that part of the Tamar Valley.
- Although hard to exemplify, developments in the national industrial economy must have strengthened competition from beyond the Tamar, from larger scale and more modern producers of items such as fertiliser, flour and sawn timber. Given lower cost transport into the area by sea, rail and road, the barges' markets were further weakened.
- There was also a modest degree of competition from other forms of local water transport; by the 1920s, motorboats and smaller sailing craft were used to carry loads such as timber, seaweed and flour.[35]
- The barge fleet was ageing by 1920, with the great majority of vessels over 20 years old, and some double that age. Such elderly wooden craft would have presented increasing maintenance challenges and problems of unreliability. Specialist ship-repair facilities disappeared; the once-busy yard of Frederick Hawke in Stonehouse Pool, Plymouth, closed in 1917. With diminishing trade opportunities, barge operators' incomes were low and unreliable – a downward spiral of diminishing returns in the face of a need for investment.
- Access to sufficient crew for the barges was also falling. It is unclear precisely what impact the First World War had on the barge fleet labour force – probably a negative one, with many men lost in the war, and others 're-oriented' to alternative post-war employment sectors such as construction and engineering. Work on the barges may have had its pleasures, but it was undeniably laborious, and wages were low and intermittent – working in a factory may have been an appealing alternative. The specialised knowledge and experience that underpinned barge operation and maintenance was also ebbing away. It must have been increasingly difficult to recruit younger men, even within the long-standing barge families.

Falling utilisation of vessels, sporadic cargoes, low freight rates, general economic depression, and precarious incomes for the barge-owning families resulted in frequent sale of barges, and for some of them, final abandonment.

[34] *International Good Guys*, 'Road Traffic – Steam, Motor and Electric Commercial Vehicles', www.igg.org.uk/gansg/00-app1/rt-combk.htm. Accessed 20 November 2024.

[35] For example, flour was delivered by motor vessel to Bere Ferrers and Cargreen from the Doney-owned tide mill at Budshead on Tamerton Lake near Plymouth. However, there is surprisingly little information on this category of water transport in the area.

The case for survival in the 1920s: vessels that operated on the Tamar system throughout the decade

Table 2: Tamar Barges operating on Tamar system throughout the 1920s

Name	**Builder**	**Launch date**	**Notes**	**Fate**
Alice Maud	James Goss?	?	Carew family. Sold to Crossleys of Antony Passage 1900. Engine from 1927, and substantially repaired by Goss yard.	Sold Appledore 1937 as gravel barge.
Annie	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1899	Henry Baker, Elizabeth Hoskin, Albert Taylor, Calstock. Sold 1920 to Plymouth stevedore, Joseph Haskell. Engine fitted.	Possibly into 1930s in Exe gravel trade. Possibly hulked Hooe Lake by 1930s.
Eclipse	John Rapson, Penryn	1892	Ketch, shared ownership, mainly Plymouth. Trade along coast as well as along Tamar.	Sold Falmouth 1931. Broken up 1938.
Elizabeth Jane	?	?	'Inside' barge, so not registered. Owned by Steed brothers. Based at St. Germans and could reach Tideford.	Sold for £60 to Crossleys in 1950, for carrying wood for dockyard, but became derelict c.1954.
E.M.M.	Thomas Jefford, Saltash	1883	Often traded to Torpoint, also worked in stone trade and later, sand dredging. Engine fitted 1926 by F J Moore, Cattedown quarry owner.	Not broken up until 1950 in Cattewater.
Eve	Shilston, Plymouth	1899	Probably an 'inside' barge at first, but later coastal voyages, including bricks from Tamar.	Sold 1926 to Albert Westcott. Lost en route to Penryn with bricks 1930 – never found.
G.W.B.	Scoble & Davies, Malpas	1894	Owned in Plymouth from 1902. 1911 owned by Capt Daymond, St. Budeaux, then in 1918, Plymouth Co-operative Society – served Halton Quay.	Appears to have worked right through 1920s. Engine fitted 1934 – then in Lynher stone trade for some years.
Gwendoline	David Banks, Plymouth	1894	Built for Westcotts of Plymouth, but had various shareholders. 'Outside' barge – traded Penryn, Salcombe, Mevagissey and more with diverse cargoes.	Continued in Westcott service until 1936. Sold Kingsbridge – and lost 1937.
Indus	James Goss, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1901	Owned by Hamley and Doidge Brothers, Bere Ferrers. Sold 1920 to Calstock, and later, Millbrook owners? Became an 'outside' barge, trading to Cornish ports.	'Closure' date unknown, but probably worked through 1920s.
Industry	Edward Brooming, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1880	Steered with wheel. Mainly owned at Calstock. 'Outside' barge – traded to Cornish ports e.g. Gweek, Truro and Falmouth.	By 1924, owned half by Albert Westcott and Capt. Hickman. Continued in service through 1920s. 1936 sold to Samuel Worth of Anderton, Millbrook. Broken up 1939.
J.N.R.	William Date, Kingsbridge	1893	Built for John Nicholas Roose 'Outside' ketch-rigged barge, but also traded on Tamar, e.g. bricks to Cotehele, 1920s. Long and varied career. Engine fitted 1926.	Moored at Weir Quay as houseboat into 1980s, but then broken up. *Might have become a third surviving Tamar barge?*
Kate	Francis Hawke, Stonehouse	1895	Initially Ball family of Plymouth. Sold to South Western Brick Co	Survived through 1920s. Requisitioned in the Second World War – hit by

			1905, then to Western Counties Brick Co.	bomb and sank 1941 and not salvaged.
Lillie	James Goss, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1899	Owned by Thomas Westlake and Richard Cocks of Calstock. Carried limestone and general cargo to Halton Quay. Bought by Jeffords of Saltash (quarry owners). Engine installed in 1920s.	Continued in use through 1920s and 1930s. By 1946 in gravel trade on Exe, Topsham.
Little Fred	C F Williams, Stonehouse	1908	Owned Harvey and Son, Devonport 1908–16. Sold to Matter of Devonport. Carried limestone and later stone from Lynher/Forder.	Continued through 1920s to 1930 when deregistered.
Lynher	James Goss, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1896	Calstock owned at first. Could reach Tideford. Sold 1924 to Sammy Daymond Saltash.	Owned until 1939. Worked in Treluggan and Poldrissick quarries stone trade, probably until 1952. Became a derelict hulk, until dramatic rescue and restoration to current full sailing condition.
Macadam	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1894	Had pointed rather than square transom 'to facilitate sand dredging'. But converted back to square stern. Various owners including in 1918 W A Lucas of Oreston.	Taken over by J N Roose, 1919. Continued into 1940s, when being used for sand dredging.
Mayblossom	David Banks, Plymouth	1889		1924 engine installed. Sold 1933 to Looe. Still working in 1930s – to Pont Pill off Fowey estuary, in stone trade on Lynher. Survived until 1952, when became hulk at Falmouth.
Minnie	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1882	Owned Thomas Wood Piper, Devonport, builder. Served Halton Quay.	Appears to have survived through 1920s. Broken up 1933.
Mizpah	J N Roose, Plymouth	1902	Used for sand dredging, so had 'pointed' stern for a time. But also operated at 'outside' barge, with square transom refitted – visited Jersey. Also in stone trade on Lynher.	Sold at bankruptcy sale 1929. Bought by Albert Westcott. Broken up in 1930s.
M.M.R.	J N Roose, Plymouth	1909	Operated on Tamar by Roose family.	Sold 1929 to Plymouth Co-operative Society, Sank in Plymouth Sound in 1936, with loss of life.
Myrtle	Robert May, Danescombe Creek, Calstock	1896	Owned Bill Martin, Boetherick. Traded around coast. Grain, groceries to Calstock for Callington grocer. Also carried timber from Cotehele. Engine installed 1926.	Commandeered in the Second World War but destroyed off Bull Point in Blitz, 1941.
Pearl	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1896	Various owners. Bought by Jeffords of Saltash, quarry owners 1914, In Lynher stone trade.	Still working into 1940s – Bergius petrol/paraffin engine fitted in 1942.
P.H.E.	William Shilston, Plymouth	1900	Bought by F J Moore Cattedown 1918 – worked in stone trade. Engine fitted 1921.	Worked through 1920s into 1930s.
Saltash	Unknown	1864	Ketch. Much altered during long career. Sailed on Tamar from	Worked through 1920s and beyond. Became

			Calstock, Captain Taylor. Engine fitted, 1922. New keel fitted at Goss yard 1928/29. Worked in Lynher stone trade and made coastal voyages.	'houseboat' in Tamerton Creek, used by Boy Scouts. Became hulk and rotted.
Shamrock	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1899	Built for Williams Bros, lightermen, of Torpoint. Ketch-rigged for part of career. Altered 1919, engine fitted 1919. Had twin keels for a time. Many alterations, owners and trades, including stone and salvage. Very varied career.	Worked well into 1960s, albeit much altered and motorised. Rescued from Hooe Lake in early 1970s and restored at Cotehele with National Trust. Undergoing further long-term restoration.
Tavy	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1889	Several owners, including at Bere Ferrers, the Hoopers and Doidges. Then William Henry Ball of Plymouth, and later, the Western Counties Brick Co, 1913.	WCBC kept Tavy until 1948 – when Tavy 'derelict and incapable of navigation'. Hulk decayed in Sutton Pool.
Triumph	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1898	Built for Willie Hele, Albaston – with various share owners. Regular cargo – Dock dung to Okel Torquay. Also sailed coastwise – Truro, Exmouth, Pont, Lerryn, Bridport. Bought by Veale brothers, Saltash 1913, and later, Roose family, then F J Moore of Cattedown. Operated in stone trade. Engine fitted 1927.	Worked through 1920s and 1930s. Commandeered as barrage balloon vessel in the Second World War. Probably abandoned in Lynher.
Viper	C F Williams, Stonehouse	1880	Built for William Adams, Plymouth. Various owners, based in Plymouth.	Existed until 1941, when lost to enemy action in Plym. Register closed 1944.
William	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1881	Built for Roose family, Plymouth, then Jeffords of Saltash. Used in stone trade from Forder quarries.	Worked through 1920s – but sold to Westcotts 1929. Lasted until at least 1933.
Winifred	C Burt, Falmouth	1897	Registered to Doney, timber merchant – owner of Budshead Mill. Others had shares. Operated in 1920s with Captain Thomas Davey. Cargoes included bricks from Steer Point.	Sold 1936. Engine fitted 1939 – probably 'last barge to work on the Tamar under sail alone' (Merry). In the Second World War commandeered as barrage balloon vessel in Sound. Fate unknown but probably abandoned late 1940s.
Yealm	David Banks, Plymouth	1878	Built for Westcotts – owned by them for 56 years. Traded to Halton Quay, but also a coasting barge – Fowey etc. Sold 1934 to Falmouth, then to Kingswear as 'Yealm Nautical School'. Register closed 1937 as 'no longer seaworthy'.	Westcotts kept Yealm through 1920s.

The picture of decline presented above must be set against the surprising number of barges that endured throughout the 1920s, while still based on the Tamar system. As indicated previously, the data is tentative and likely not to be perfectly accurate. On the one hand, there may have been some 'inside' barges that were not listed, while on the other, there is no clear picture of how intensively each vessel was used across the 10 years in question.

The list assembled features thirty-one such survivors. Only outline notes are included in the table, but there is hopefully enough to suggest a pattern of variety and change in the late careers of these vessels. By 1929, the youngest was 20 years old (*M.M.R.*)[36] and the oldest had spent 65 years in service (*Saltash*).

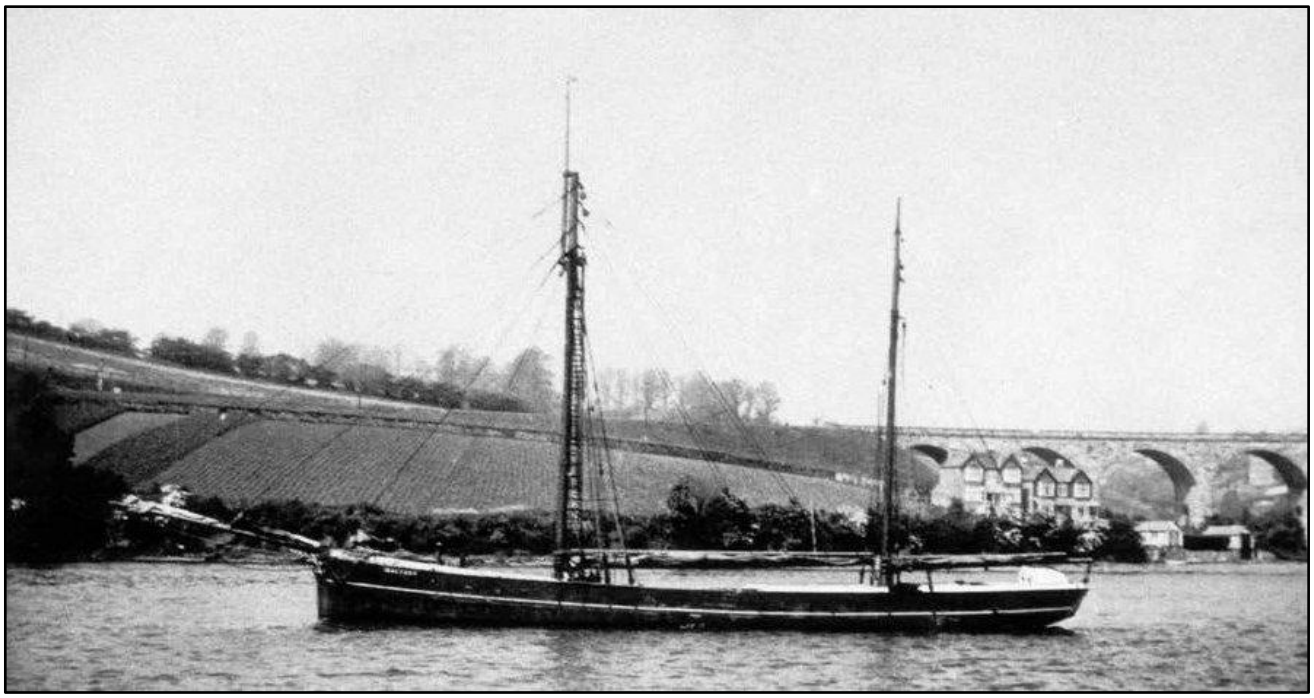

Figure 7: Ketch-rigged barge *Saltash*, near Forder railway viaduct, Saltash. Survived the 1920s, before eventually becoming a hulk at Tamerton Foliot. (With thanks to the late Gary Hicks.)

Influences that helped sustain this group of barges include the following:

- Some important technological innovations were applied to most of the surviving barges. Especially helpful was the installation of engines, particularly purpose-built marine petrol/paraffin and diesel motors produced by specialist firms such as Atlantic of Wishaw and Bergius of Glasgow.[37] At least twenty-five barges on the list were fitted with engines (probably more in reality), which would obviously have required capital and the acquisition of new skills. The investment would have favoured larger and stronger barges, with space available for the engine while preserving an adequate cargo capacity. Motors increased flexibility and ease of navigation and also gave the potential for faster voyages and therefore better utilisation.

[36] *M.M.R*. was lost in a tragic accident in 1936, when the barge was swamped near the Narrows at Devil's Point, Stonehouse, while bound for Cremyll with 38 tonnes of coal transshipped from Millbay Docks. Despite this being such a short distance, two men lost their lives in what were atrocious sea conditions. The only other fatal incident involving the '1920s cohort' of Tamar barges also fell in the following decade. The barge *Eve* was lost without trace while en route from Plymouth to Penryn with a cargo of bricks.

[37] The Bergius company became the enduring Kelvin Diesels company, which is still a leading producer of marine engines.

Figure 8: Barge *Myrtle* motoring up the stretch of the Tamar known as the 'Lifter', below Pentillie. She is loaded with sacks, probably for Morden Mill at Cotehele. (Postcard, thanks to Helen Wilson.)

- Other technologies supported the persistence of barges, including mechanised winches, and devices such as loading belts. The spread of telephone systems played a minor role in passing information about the approach of a vessel to a quay for unloading or receipt of orders.[38]
- Many of the vessels in the '1920s group' voyaged beyond the Tamar to other coastal ports. Most such trips were along the south coast of Devon and Cornwall to ports such as Salcombe, Fowey, Mevagissey, Falmouth and Penryn, although some ventured across the Channel. Coastal work thus widened market opportunities for those barges able to go 'offshore'. The installation of engines would have been an advantage, while some barges in the coast trades were rigged as ketches, their two masts giving great sail power to complement their engines.[39] Barges with deeper hulls were better suited to coastal work, while some had keels; *Shamrock*[40] was fitted, unusually, with a pair of drop keels.
- The persistence of a limited number of trades on the Tamar system gave employment to many of the remaining barges, in the 1920s and beyond. Bricks and tiles were still carried to Plymouth and sometimes out to other coastal ports. Other business came from goods transhipped from seagoing ships in Plymouth, including coal and timber. It is likely that sand collection from riverbed deposits was a source of income for some of the remaining barge operators, especially when other business was slack.[41]
- However, the outstanding river trade after the First World War was the transport of stone, especially from quarries accessed from the Lynher/St. Germans River, notably Burraton

[38] An example is given in Basil Greenhill, *The Westcott and Their Times*: 'The telephone installation at the factory' (one of Mr. Westlake's three riverside brickworks) 'was a magic innovation to the men of 60 years ago. For example, the foreman at Rumleigh could actually receive instructions to get a load ready for the Edith's arrival from a clerk in the office of Calstock' factory through a little wire.'

[39] Ketch-rigged vessels included *Eclipse*, *J.N.R.*, *Saltash* and *Shamrock* – one of the two Tamar barges still in existence (along with *Lynher*).

[40] Shamrock's survival reflects its suitability for work at sea: an enlarged ketch rig, keels and an engine. The vessel had a varied career, including carrying stone, offshore tin prospecting, and acting as a salvage vessel and diving tender (by which time her masts had been removed). Her story is well known, as in: National Trust, *Shamrock*, www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/348277.1, and Joe Lawrence, 'Shamrock – a brief history', *Tamar – Journal of Friends of the Tamar Valley*, No. 38 (2016), pp. 53–56.

[41] Holt and Cotton, Historic *Ships on the Foreshore*, p. 15, confirm how sand was brought into Sutton Harbour in Plymouth by barges with material that had been from the bed of the Plym estuary, 'a time-consuming and back-breaking practice which carried on till the 1920s'.

Coombe (connected by mechanised tramway to quays on Forder Lake)[42], Poldrissick, Treluggan and Cumbletor. At least eighteen of the barges listed are known to have worked in the stone trade. These quarries produced what was popularly known as 'blue elvan', a hard but breakable volcanic stone in great demand for road building and maintenance.[43] Demand for the material came from well beyond the Tamar, so the Lynher river also saw regular arrivals of larger, seagoing ships – ketches, schooners and also motor coasters, even into the early 1950s.[44] Among the barges that eked out a living in this stone trade was the *Lynher*, which is the other surviving Tamar barge, along with the *Shamrock*. There is no attempt here to retell the inspiring story of her excavation, in a ruinous condition, from the mud of her namesake river by the former quarries at Poldrissick, and the painstaking restoration to her current fine sailing condition.[45]

Figure 9: *Lynher* passing her birthplace, the site of the former James Goss shipyard – now Ferry Farm, – opposite Calstock on the Tamar, July 2019. (Author's photo.)

[42] The petrol-powered locomotives (typically made by the Simplex company) that served on the quarry tramway were another facet of new technology supporting the barge trade. See also: Bruce Hunt, 'The Tramway at Forder', https://brucehunt.co.uk/saltash%20history%20/forder%20tramway.html. Accessed 20 November 2024.

[43] It is perhaps ironic that the barges in the elvan trade were carrying raw materials that fed the expansion of the road network that became such a formidable competitor.

[44] The Lynher/St. Germans River stone trade is covered in much more detail in Ian Merry, *Shipping and Trade of the River Tamar*, Chapter VI: 'The last bastion falls: The St. Germans River stone trade', and Gary Hicks, *Plymouth's Other Fleet* – 'Bricks and Stone – the last trades under sail on the Four Rivers'.

[45] There are several good online sources that detail *Lynher's* story, including: 'Tamar Barge Lynher 1896', https://tamarbarge.org.uk/lynhers-story and 'Tamar Barge: The "Lynher" History', http://tamarbarge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Heritage-by-Jan-Carpenter-.pdf . Also, National Historic Ships UK, 'Lynher', www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1137/lynher and SHIPS Project, 'Lynher', http://www.shipsproject.org/Wrecks/Wk_Lynher.html. Accessed 20 November 2024.

Figure 10: *Shamrock* at Cotehele Quay, early 21st century. (Author's photo.)

The case for survival in the 1920s: vessels that had been sold for service beyond the Tamar, and survived through the decade elsewhere

Table 3: Tamar Barges sold away before 1920, but survived the decade elsewhere

Name	Builder		Notes	Fate
Borderer	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1897	Owned by London interests. Sold to Penryn 1910, then to London merchant 1926, and finally to Cardiff in 1928.	Broken up 1952.
C.F.H	James Goss, Calstock Passage, Bere Ferrers	1892	Owned William Hamley of Bere Alston and Robert Doidge, Bere Ferrers. Ketch. Sold to France 1911, then back to Braunton in 1914. Engine fitted 1915. Sent to Scapa Flow for naval service, but returned to North Devon through 1920s. Used on Gloucester Canal for stone carrying, 1950s.	Became houseboat on Severn, but was a rotting hulk by 2000.
Commerce	Edward Demerel, Richmond Walk, Devonport	1881	Perry and Spear, sold to Roose, Daymond, Doidge 1913. Later in Lynher stone trade.	Sold to Eastern Telegraph Co, London 1922, then to Cable and Wireless 1936. Broken up 1939 – but register not closed until 1972!
Cornish Lass	John Rapson, Penryn	1900	Owned by Daymond, Saltash, then various owners, including at Oreston, Plymouth.	Sold to 'clerk in holy orders' of Caldey Island Pembrokeshire, 1912, then Milford Haven, Pembrokeshire, 1922. 'Complete wreck by 1947.'

Dorothy	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1896	Built for Charles Langsford, Cotehele miller. Worked to Halton and Gawton.	Sold to Cornwall 1904. Register closed 1940, 'vessel dismantled'.
Dream	W H Lean, Falmouth	1899	Built for Saltash merchants, later others acquired shares.	Sold to Portsmouth c.1918, the went into Exe gravel trade until at least 1936.
Emma	C.F. Williams, Plymouth	1878	Initially owned by Roose family but sold to various owners from 1896. Sold to Penryn 1911. Engine fitted 1927.	Still in existence in 1940s.
Eva	Richard Date, Kingsbridge	1902	Owned by Roose family while in Tamar.	Sold to Limerick 1905 – lasted until at least 1952.
Good Intent	Plymouth, builder unknown	1790	Owned by interests in the Tamar Valley and Plymouth until 1872, when sold to a Bridgwater owner. Transferred to Bristol in 1920. Fitted as a ketch for most of working life, so used as 'outside' barge.	Vessel officially 'broken up' late in 1926, but probably survived longer as a 'dumb lighter', when at least 136 years old.
Matilda	J N Roose, Plymouth	1870	Became ketch. Owned by Roose family until 1905, when sold to Flushing, Cornwall.	Sold to owner in Barbados, 1932.
Olive	T G Gray, Falmouth	1890	Owned at Cargreen, Richards family and others. Sold to St. Austell owners 1914	Broken up in 1930s.
Princess May	Fredrick Hawke, Stonehouse	1893	Owned by Cudlips, Hoopers and Doidges of Bere Ferrers. Served on Tavy River, to Lopwell and Gnatham and also up Tamar as far as Weir Head.	Sold to Arbroath, but returned to Appledore – in gravel trade until 1950s.
Sweet May	Frederick Hawke, Stonehouse	1898	Sloop. First owned by Macfarlanes of Plympton, then sold Roose family. Sold to Helston quarry owner 1914.	Lost off Porthoustock, 1927.
The Sirdar	Richard Date, Kingsbridge	1899	Had rudder inside transom, unlike most Tamar barges. Built for Westcotts, with various shareholders, including Adams, Spear and Smale. Made coastal voyages – Falmouth, Dartmouth, Salcombe and Southampton.	Worked through 1920s. Sold to Looe interests, 1926. Engine fitted, 1927. In the Second World War commandeered as barrage balloon vessel. Sold abroad 1947 – sailed to Lisbon but 'sank off French coast' not long after sale.

The total of Tamar barges still in existence at the close of the 1920s can be supplemented by at least twelve vessels that originated in the Tamar system but had been 'sold away' for operation elsewhere. This group had varied and sometimes colourful careers, and several lasted beyond the Second World War. Illustrative examples include the following:

- *C.F.H.*:[46] Built opposite Calstock in the James Goss yard for owners on the adjacent Bere Peninsula, the barge spent time in France, Scapa Flow (in the First World War), and for many years, working in the gravel trade in that other enduring haven for commercial sailing ships, the Taw-Torridge Estuary in North Devon. The vessel evidently survived as a rotting houseboat on the Severn until around 2000.

[46] C.F.H. was named after a member of the original owning family, Charles Francis Hamley.

- *Cornish Lass*: Operated in the Tamar stone trade until 1912, when she was sold to a 'clerk in holy orders' at the abbey on Caldey Island off the Pembrokeshire coast (possibly making the name of the vessel somewhat perplexing…). Later, she worked from Milford Haven, before becoming a 'wreck' around 1947.
- *The Sirdar*: Built beyond the Tamar, at the well-known shipyard of Richard Date at Kingsbridge. She was operated by the Westcott family of Plymouth, with various other shareholders. However, being well suited to coastal trading, she was sold to Looe in 1926 and finally sold in Portugal.[47]
- *Good Intent*: Possibly the most remarkable 'survivor' among all the vessels that spent time as a Tamar-based barge. She was launched as far back as 1790 from an unknown Plymouth shipyard and was owned until 1872 by a miscellany of owners based in Plymouth, Tavistock and the Bere Peninsula. At some point, she was rigged as a ketch and became an 'outside' barge used in the coastal trade as well as the Tamar. After another 50 years' work in the Bristol Channel, she was moved to Bristol, where she appears to have ended her days as a 'dumb lighter', over 136 years old.[48]

Figure 11: The ancient *Good Intent*, launched in 1790 and based in Plymouth for many years, but worked later in the Bristol Channel. Photographed at Bristol in the early 1920s. (From the collection of the late Gary Hicks.)

[47] Ian Merry, *The Westcotts and Their Times*, pp. 71–73.

[48] Gary Hicks, 'The Long Life of the "Good Intent"', *Tamar – Journal of Friends of the Tamar Valley*, No. 39 (2017), pp. 50–55. Near the end of her long career, the *Good Intent* caught the eye of that remarkable chronicler and poet of ships and seamen, Cicely Fox-Smith. She was clearly aware of the old vessel's provenance, long career and significance. Her poem celebrating the vessel appeared in her '*Sea Songs and Ballads*', published in 1923, and available at www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-good-intent. Accessed 20 November 2024.

Conclusion

Several comments and questions remain, although no attempt is made to develop them in detail here.

The trajectory of the Tamar barges in the 1920s might be compared with other fleets based in the South West:

- Sailing barges were owned and operated on other estuaries, especially the Fal, Salcombe and Kingsbridge, and also the Exe, where several former Tamar-based vessels entered the local gravel trade in the 1920s.
- Throughout the 1920s, the waters of the South Devon coast (and well beyond) were adorned by the tanned sails of many fishing vessels, especially the trawler fleets of Brixham and Plymouth. The final Brixham sailing trawlers were launched in 1926 (the *Vigilance* and *Encourage*),[49] so members of this distinctive fleet clearly survived through the 1920s.
- The South West also hosted in the 1920s some of the final representatives of what had been a very large fleet of coastal cargo schooners and ketches. Especially distinguished were the ships based at Appledore and Braunton, which traded in the Bristol Channel and well beyond. Their fascinating story parallels that of the Tamar barges through the 1920s, albeit with differences as well as similarities with respect to their vessels, operations, survival strategies and challenges and fates beyond 1929. The North Devon-based sail traders and their adventures have been well documented[50] (although they also deserve revisiting and further celebration). Also notable are the vessels of the Westcott family; based in Plymouth, in company with barges included in the lists above.
- The Tamar estuary was plied by fleets of paddle steamers that had been popular for excursions on the rivers and along the coast from the mid-19th century (as were the Dart and Fal). Although such steamers persisted on the Dart into the post-Second World War period,[51] the Tamar fleet disappeared by around 1927, being replaced by diesel-engined vessels.[52]

Many questions might be posed with respect to the Tamar barge fleet in the 1920s. They include:

- What was the experience of those barges that remained on the register and ostensibly in service throughout the 1920s with respect to their utilisation, maintenance and condition? Although many of them remained in fairly regular use, including on coastal journeys, it is likely that some were increasingly neglected and perhaps used only intermittently, with the owners no longer strongly committed to them as major sources of income. Despite being classed as 'survivors' in Table 2, some vessels were probably in poor condition, on a gradual descent into final dereliction in the 1930s, or in the case of the unfortunate *M.M.R.*, poorly

[49] *South West Maritime History Society*, 'Brixham Trawlers', www.swmaritime.org.uk/working-boats/brixham-trawlers; *Classic Sailing*, 'Brixham and her maritime history, https://classic-sailing.com/article/brixham-and-her-maritime-history. Accessed 20 November 2024.

[50] Key sources include the classic text by W. J. Slade, *Out of Appledore* (Conway Maritime Press, revised edition, 1972); Edmund Eglinton, edited by Basil Greenhill, *The Mary Fletcher – Seven Days in the Life of a Westcountry Coasting Ketch* (University of Exeter Press, 1990); Robert D'Arcy Andrew, *Braunton -– Home of the Last Sailing Coasters* (Braunton and District Museum, 2007); Jenny Jenkins (ed.), *Braunton's Twentieth Century Mariners* (Braunton and District Museum, 2002); S. J. Ellacott, *Braunton Ships and Seamen* (Braunton and District Museum, 2001). Also, vital sources, as cited above: Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners*, and W. J. Slade and Basil Greenhill, *Westcountry Coasting Ketches*.

[51] The *Kingswear Castle* is still very much in service on the Dart – see www.kingswearcastle.org. Accessed 20 November 2024.

[52] The full, fascinating story of the Tamar paddle steamers is superbly told by Alan Kittridge, *Steamers & Ferries of the River Tamar* (already cited).

maintained and managed enough to sink, with loss of two crew in 1936.[53] Barge operators may not have differed greatly from the Sidmouth fishermen, recorded as telling an interviewer that 'when gear grows old, they had always rather make shift than get new'. [54] How often one is told on remarking that a rope or strake, or a spar ought to be replaced: 'Ah, let it bide, let it break.'

- What more is known, or could be discovered, about the lingering impact of the First World War on the barges in the 1920s? What were the implications for the vessels, their trades, crews and owners during the war period? There would have been accelerated demand for some cargoes, especially feeding the demands of the Naval Dockyard at Devonport for commodities including timber, bricks and aggregates. Some barges were requisitioned or sold into dockyard service and were retained (such as the *Flora May*), thus reducing the number of vessels available in the post-war period. More influential, however, might have been the impact on the local maritime labour force, by reducing the 'pool' of men available, due to death or incapacitation, or by revealing alternative opportunities in other sectors. Did any women work on barges during – and possibly after – the First World War? Also, the war accelerated the evolution of road transport and possibly other technologies (electrification?), with indirect consequences for barge operation in the years that followed.
- Did the industrial unrest at the time of the General Strike of 1926 have any impact on the barge trade? Presumably, those working on the barges were not unionised. Devon was not known for labour militancy, especially in more rural areas.[55] Possibly some of those working on the rivers might have volunteered during the strike period. Coal supplies might have been temporarily impeded, although much local coal imports were carried by larger seagoing vessels.
- In what ways does this singular focus on the Tamar barges mesh with some of the many other strands in the broad picture of Devon in the 1920s? In what ways is it distinctive? To what extent are there parallels with other sectors of the county's economy and society, and places in the decade?

Despite the 'popular' image of the 'collapse' of the Tamar barge fleet in the 1920s, it is clear that the reality was more nuanced. Many trades on the rivers had indeed disappeared by 1920, or soon did so. However, the size of the fleet of barges remained surprisingly high, both in the Tamar shore and beyond, due to the persistence of some trades, diversification into coastal voyaging and technological innovation, especially motorisation. A claim might even be made that the 1920s was a period of relative 'stasis', at least as regards the survival of a fair part of the fleet that entered the decade. The Tamar barge fleet and trades did eventually vanish, but perhaps not quite as rapidly as has sometimes been imagined. And at least one of the trades once carried by barges still persists at Plymouth – albeit in a radically different form and scale.[56]

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[53] As revealed in the inquest on the disaster, Gary Hicks, *Plymouth's Other Fleet*, Plymouth Ships, 'M.M.R'.

[54] W J Slade and Basil Greenhill, *Westcountry Coasting Ketches*, p. 20.

[55] There were vigorous street protests in Plymouth, including the 'tram riots', but they probably had little impact on maritime activities: J. H. Porter, 'Devon and the General Strike', *International Review of Social History*, 1978, Vol. 23, No.3, pp. 333–56.

[56] Devonian limestone from Moorcroft Quarry, Elburton, is still exported to destinations including Cowes, Alderney and Belfast. Volcanic roadstone, akin to the 'blue elvan' formerly produced from the Lynher quarries, is imported from Belfast, while limestone in the form of cement arrives regularly from Santander in Spain. Loads can be around 3,000 tonnes, rather than the 70 tonnes carried in Tamar barges.