

## SHIPBUILDING IN PILTON AND POTTINGTON

It is difficult to believe, given how narrow the River Yeo is today, that there was once a thriving shipbuilding industry in Pilton dating back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and lasting beyond the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Those who have had the privilege of hearing Peter Ferguson talk on the subject will know that he has unearthed an enormous amount of fascinating information about those involved – the Thorne, Chappell, Goss, Sommerwill and Bailment families in particular. Here The Pilton Story has sought to summarise those exciting times.

Records show that Richard Thorne was building wooden ships (small smacks, sailing barges and schooners) in Pilton in 1790, in a business started by his father in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. These vessels were usually built on behalf of consortia of mariners, business men and local worthies and plied their trade principally up and down the Bristol Channel or across to Ireland carrying all manner of goods and materials. In those days transporting materials like coal, limestone or animal feeds by sea was much easier than trying to use the unmetalled roads which connected the south-west with the rest of the United Kingdom at the time.



So good a shipbuilder was Richard Thorne that in 1804 one of his full rigged ships, the Wenbury, was bought by the Navy and fitted out as a warship at Deptford becoming HMS Espiegle. Richard Thorne went on to build two even larger warships for the Navy, HMS Delight and HMS Ranger, but they were built at Fremington on land owned by the family because his slipways at Pilton Quay were already occupied by merchant vessels under construction.

The wonderful watercolour (above) by Peter Ferguson shows a view of Pilton in about 1800 from a point on the bank above what is now the Fair View Car Park. It is based on considerable research of

maps, newspaper reports and records of the time including surveys carried out by the Admiralty Hydrographic Department in 1850. In the centre can be seen Richard Thorne's shipyard on land which is now occupied by Kirkham's Tyres. It also shows important buildings in Pilton including St Mary's Church, Pilton House and Pilton Abbey. Bridge House, which is now Charter Vets, is close to Pilton Bridge at the right-hand end.

Richard Thorne, who is buried in Pilton Churchyard, retired in 1820 and the yard passed to his nephew John Chappell who kept it going until 1830 but it did not prosper. Unfortunately, John Chappell went bankrupt, bringing to an end shipbuilding in Pilton itself. At this point the Goss family becomes involved. The Goss family came from Combe Martin with the marriage of Joseph Goss to Elizabeth Pugsley in 1759. Their second son, George, married a girl from Goodleigh. Their grandson, also George and born in 1794, became a shipwright in Pilton and served an apprenticeship with John Chappell. George's Uncle John was also a master shipbuilder in Pilton for many years, although he eventually moved to Gunnislake on the River Tamar to build ships.

After Chappell's yard had closed in 1830, George Goss (the one born in 1794) is next reported building an 89 ton schooner 'Susan' at the premises of John Sommerwill, the Pilton lime burner, at Pottington Point in 1834. That vessel was named after Sommerwill's youngest sister, Susan, which set a precedent for other craft that were to follow, as they were all named after family members. The Sommerwills were a large family who moved to Pottington from Landkey. This George Goss died in 1836, aged only 42 and is buried in Pilton Churchyard.

A second George Goss, the great-grandson to Joseph Goss and born in 1813, was also a shipwright. It was reported at the time that he was working for the Sommerwills in 1840 as a carpenter. The Sommerwills' last craft built at Pottington Point, the 93 ton schooner 'John', was built in 1843 after which John Sommerwill moved to Wales to continue lime burning there, although he is later reported as back in North Devon lime burning again.

The shipyard part of the Sommerwills' business was eventually let to John Verney Saunders and John Goss, the latter born in Goodleigh in 1804 and second cousin to George. John Goss turns up in 1833, three years after Pilton had closed, and he then moved to Combe Martin as a master shipwright. However, when shipbuilding ceased in Combe Martin in 1843, John Goss was back in Barnstaple building ships for Hugh Bailment at the end of Rolles Quay at Pottington. The 104 ton schooner 'Bee' was the first vessel ever constructed on Rolles Quay. John Goss and his family moved again, this time to Ilfracombe after the launch of the 'Bee'. Back in Pottington, a George

Geen was completing the 43 ton smack 'Swift' his first venture in shipbuilding, although it seems likely that the shipwright who actually built the craft was James Goss, the father of George.

In 1852, when John Goss returned to Pilton to resume control of the Pottington yard, George Geen, in partnership with John Verney Saunders, commissioned him to build the 36 ton smack 'Dispatch'. This photograph is thought to be John Goss and his wife Ann in about 1845-50. Throughout the 1850s a steady business in ship repairing and lengthening was built up at Pottington under



John Goss's control but no new vessels launched until 1861 when he built the 49 ton smack 'Village Belle'. One of the last jobs that John Goss did at his Pottington shipyard was the lengthening and rebuilding of the Barnstaple schooner 'Henrietta' in 1863 although she was washed off the stocks by a violent storm, fortunately when the work was almost complete. The last recorded launch of a vessel at Pottington is a small steam yacht in July 1866, the first and only steamer, possibly named the 'Coey', almost certainly built by George Goss who had then acquired the Pottington yard. George Goss died in 1881 by which time wooden shipbuilding was definitely drawing to a close.

Looking at the Pilton Yeo today, it is difficult to imagine how craft of any size could ever have been constructed along its banks. The old Chappell Yard, started by the Thorne family in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, became Berry's Stores and was used as a coal yard and for animal foodstuffs. It is currently occupied by Kirkham's Tyres. The site of Hugh Bailment's Yard at the very end of Rolle Quay is also very much altered by the 20<sup>th</sup> century confinement of the river and the completion of the Barnstaple to Ilfracombe railway in 1874.

*Martin Haddrill*

This summary owes an enormous debt to the considerable research and writing of Peter Ferguson, particularly recorded in The Journal of the South West Maritime History Society (No.17) of 2004 'The Goss Family – North Devon Shipwrights'. Peter was interviewed at length by the author in September 2019.