



Bridgwater Town Council
Blake Museum

Gallant Little Ships of the Past The Bridgwater Coasters By W. A. Sharman, Bristol.

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The *Irene* – a painting by Capt. Chidgey in the Museum's collection

Bridgwater, my native town, was once a busy little port, but now, like many other of the smaller ports, has fallen on slack times. Years ago it was the home port of a fleet of fine little ketches and schooners, and as these have now almost all disappeared, from wrecks, war losses and breaking up, it may be of interest to mention a few of the gallant little ships of the past.

Irene. The ketch *Irene* was the last vessel of many to be built at Bridgwater. She was launched on 29th May, 1907, and is a smart vessel. I am glad to say she is still afloat and owned by her original owners. Among her runs were: Teignmouth to Glasgow, 600 miles, five days; Bridgwater to Rotterdam, 6 days.

Duke of Wellington. This old ketch was built at Stourport in 1840, and was sailing for about 85 years, being converted into a lighter in Bristol a few years ago. She had very bluff bows and a square stern, and once, when my father sailed her to Glasgow, on mooring at Greenock, a wag on the wharf, after looking at her box-like stern and peering down the river, called up to father, "Hi,

skipper, when's the other half coming?"

With bows so blunt it was surprising she would move through the water at all, but on one voyage I made in her with father she surpassed herself. We sailed from St. Ives Bay at 4 o'clock one afternoon, and running before a strong breeze all night, carrying away our gaff topsail, we anchored in Oxwich Bay, near Swansea, at half-past six next morning, a run of 120 miles in 14 ½ hours.

Florrie. This was another smart ketch, built at Bridgwater in 1892, of 78 tons. A sample year of her work, 1913, was: Bridgwater to Dublin, Dublin to Bridgwater, Bridgwater to Glasgow, Glasgow to Dublin, Dublin to Newport, Newport to Bridgwater, Bridgwater to Porthleven, Newlyn to Bridgwater, Bridgwater to Limerick, Limerick to Llanelly, Llanelly to Guernsey, Guernsey to Bridgwater, Bridgwater to Rotterdam, Rotterdam to Caen, to Alderney, and from there to Southampton. This fine ketch was wrecked in July, 1918. She struck on the Crow Rock, off Milford, and sank.

Leader. The *Leader* was a fore and aft schooner, built at Burton Stather, on the Humber, in 1874, of 77 tons. She was at one time owned by Spillers & Bakers. In June, 1909, while on a voyage from Pentewan, in Cornwall, to Glasgow with a cargo of china clay, she sprang a leak off Corsewall Point. The water gained, and later the port pump broke, and after a short time she was abandoned and sank. The weather became rougher, and the boat made for Corsewall Point Lighthouse, but when they arrived off there, the sea was breaking so heavily it was impossible to land, and they had to pull out to sea again. The crew were rowing in the boat for eight hours in a heavy sea, when at last they reached Stranraer utterly exhausted.

R.K.P. This was a smart little Cornish-built schooner, built at Feock in 1870, 67 tons. She was mostly engaged in the longer coasting voyages, such as the Glasgow trade. She eventually went missing with all hands. She loaded at Sharpness in 1909 for a port in the south of Ireland, and after sheltering in Penarth Roads, sailed from there and was never again seen or heard of.

Annie Christian. The ketch *Annie Christian* was built at Barnstaple in 1881, 69 tons. During the war she was fitted with a gun for defence against submarines. She was sold some years ago to Bideford and renamed **Ade**, and I believe is still afloat. Her one-time skipper, Jim Brightwell sailed with my father for many years, and previous to that was on a Bluenoser, the **Norwood**, and he told me that on one voyage they were 96 days

from Pensacola to the Channel.

Hilda. The *Hilda* was a fine schooner, built at Connah's Quay in 1893, of 91 tons. She, however, was a "wet" ship, inclined to dive bows under, and her foremast was taken out and stepped a couple of feet further aft, which made her easier. She often made voyages to the Continent, and on one occasion took a cargo of dynamite from Rotterdam to Goole. She was sold to Swansea owners in 1918.

Rosevean. The *Rosevean* was a smart little fore-and-aft schooner, built in the Scilly Isles in 1847, of 70 tons. In her early days she was engaged in the orange trade from the Western Islands, and many a hard race was sailed by the West Country fruiterers to get the first oranges home. She was broken up in 1906.

Swan. The *Swan* was a fine ketch, built at Bridgwater in 1884, of 68 tons. She did good work round the coasts, sometimes going as far as Aberdeen, a voyage of two thousand miles there and back.

On 11th May, 1910, when bound from London to Barnstaple, she was sailing down the Thames, and at about 4 o'clock in the morning drifted against an anchored dredger, and received such extensive damage that she sank almost immediately. The captain and crew, who lost all their belongings, were picked up by the crew of the dredger.

New Design. The *New Design* was built at Bridgwater as a fore-and-aft schooner in 1871, of 50 tons. She was so called because she was built to the design of William Symons, one of the leading shipowners of the port. His idea was to build her by placing the ribs twice the usual distance apart, but double the thickness, giving a greater air space between the inner and outer planking, which he considered would give her greater lifting power. Old Mr. Symons used to take a great interest in his ships, which were all painted black with a broad green belt round them. The bulwarks were panelled in cream and lined out with gilt, and the Bridgwater coat-of-arms was painted in colours on the stern.

This little vessel could sail very well at times, and on one occasion sailed from Hayle, near St. Ives, at high water on the morning of August 1st, 1907, and arrived at Burnham, Bridgwater River, [the Parrett] at high water the same evening, a distance of 130 miles. This vessel is still afloat, although unfortunately, laid up, and has never left

her original owners. Another time, in March, 1908, her captain told me that when outward bound from Bridgwater to Dublin, he had a lot of wind at S.E., and under standing jib and five-roll reefed mainsail he ran from the Smalls to Dublin Bay 110 miles, in 10 hours.

Young Fox. The *Young Fox* was a fine able ketch built at Goole in 1893, of 78 tons. She was originally owned there and in 1910 arrived at Bristol from Newfoundland with salt fish. She was then sold to Bridgwater, and loaded there for Leith, a trip of 1,800 or 1,900 miles there and back. On one occasion she and the *Irene*, mentioned previously, sailed from Bridgwater together, the *Young Fox* for Tralee, on the West Coast of Ireland, and the *Irene* for Limerick. They sailed neck and neck down Channel to beyond Lundy, and the *Young Fox* set a straight course for Cape Clear, whilst the *Irene* bore away more to the northward, and they soon lost sight of one another.

Next day, on the *Young Fox* making the Irish land, who should they sight but the *Irene* reaching down from the nor'ard! They rounded Cape Clear abreast, the *Young Fox* to windward by four miles. The wind now freshened and the *Irene* to leeward drew away, and by nightfall was seven miles ahead and was not seen again by the other vessel.

The *Young Fox* came home from Tralee in ballast with a fair wind and made a good run, sailing from the Fastnet to Lundy, 210 miles in 23 hours. She was sold to Scottish owners after the War, and was lost with all hands in 1928, on a voyage from Sunderland to Portmahonnack. After sheltering in Peterhead Bay in December of that year she sailed and was never again seen or heard of.

New Design No. 2. This vessel was built at Bridgwater in 1874, three years after the first *New Design*, and was a bit larger, being 66 tons. She also was built as a fore-and-aft schooner and was a handsome vessel. She was, like her smaller sister, built for the Hull and Aberdeen trade, but she made two voyages out to New York and back.

What a contrast between this little 66-ton schooner, with her crew of five, and the modern 50,000-ton floating towns, with crew and passengers of 3,000. It shows that the West Country seamen were not wanting in enterprise and daring. My father was in her for a short time and made one decent run from Bridgwater to Galway in six days, and home in the same time. He told me that on that trip, after passing Cape

Clear, he did not see a single sailing vessel all up the west coast to Galway. The **No 2**, as we all knew her, was sunk by a German submarine in the Irish Sea on 5th May, 1917, on a voyage from Bridgwater to Dublin. The crew were put adrift in the boat and some hours later were picked up by an American steamer and landed at Fishguard.

Kings Oak. The **Kings Oak** was the last fore-and-after owned in the port by Watchet owners. She was built at Yarmouth in 1884, of 58 tons. She was, I believe, originally a fishing vessel, and was lengthened at Bridgwater. During the War, in 1918, owing to the shortage of hands, she was converted into a ketch. In 1916 she sailed from Waterford to Bridgwater, over 250 miles, in 30 hours. In January, 1921, while on a voyage from Liverpool to Bridgwater, she had terrific weather in the Irish Sea, and two of her crew of four were washed overboard and drowned. Her last voyage was in June, 1928, when she left Cardiff for New Boss, Ireland, but owing to heavy weather she had to put into Swansea for shelter. She grounded just inside the piers, strained, and filled on the rising tide. She was condemned, and later towed to Appledore, where she was broken up.

Good Templar. The ketch **Good Templar** was built at Goole in 1881, of 63 tons, and was engaged mostly in the Liverpool trade with scouring bricks, and she was lost on a voyage from that port to Bridgwater in November, 1911. She had got down off the Anglesey coast during a gale, and a heavy sea broke aboard, and the captain, George Creemer, was washed overboard. The mate, named Champion, was further aft and saw the captain washed over the side. With great promptitude and pluck he swung himself over the side of the ship and seized the captain by a leg as he was being swept past. With great difficulty, in the heavy sea and the pitching of the vessel, Champion held on and eventually pulled the captain on board. The mate was a finely-built young fellow, and it was undoubtedly due to his great strength that he was able to save the captain in so extraordinary a way. The ship then put back to Holyhead, and sailing again later, again ran into bad weather. The seas were such that two men, the captain and the mate, were needed at the wheel.

When off the North Bishop at half-past eleven at night a tremendous sea broke aboard the little vessel, carried away the wheel-house and the wheel, and with it went Champion into the angry sea. Captain Creemer managed to grasp the bulwarks and was thus saved from following the unfortunate mate. The shouts of Champion could

be heard, but owing to the pitch darkness he could not be seen, and to have launched a boat in such a sea would have meant its instant smashing. With the steering gone the vessel drifted at the mercy of the sea. The bulwarks on one side were ripped away and the boat smashed to pieces. After some hours a trawler came in sight, having seen the distress rockets. After splendid manoeuvring by the trawler, she launched a boat, and after a dangerous journey to the sinking ketch the crew were taken off. Soon after the **Good Templar** sank, and the trawler proceeded to St. Tudwal where she landed the exhausted survivors.

Ermenilda. The **Ermenilda** was built at Milford in 1874 as a two-masted schooner, and was lengthened at Bridgwater and converted into a three-master, and was the last of that rig belonging to the port. In January, 1912, she did a smart bit of work. She arrived at Bridgwater from Bantry in ballast on a Sunday, discharged her ballast Monday, and commenced loading, and by Tuesday had taken in 300,000 scouring bricks. Sailed Wednesday, and arrived Liverpool Friday. The same week another Bridgwater vessel, the **Sunshine**, which I shall mention later, arrived there on the Saturday from London, discharged her cargo of oilcake, and by Wednesday loaded nearly 300,000 scouring bricks, sailed on Thursday, and arrived at Liverpool mid-day Saturday.

The same wind which took these vessels north was keeping several others windbound for long periods. The **New Design** had been three months away, and leaving Crookhaven for Penzance, got within eight miles of the Land's End when the wind flew back to the old quarter, east and south-east, and she was driven back to Kinsale—500 miles for nothing. The **Ermenilda** was largely in the Glasgow trade, and often took gunpowder from Kames, in the Isle of Bute, to London. She was sunk by a German submarine on 4th August, 1916, off the Casquets on a voyage from Guernsey to Poole, the crew being given five minutes to leave the ship before she was blown up by a bomb placed in the fo'c'sle. They got away safely in the boat and were picked up some hours later by a Russian steamer and landed at Weymouth.

C. and F. Nurse. The fine topsail schooner **C. and F. Nurse** was built of iron at Falmouth in 1900, of 119 tons. She is a smart able vessel and belonged to a well-known seafaring family, the Nurses, who expected their ships to make good passages. The same easterly wind which took the

vessels previously mentioned to Liverpool in good time brought the **C. and F. Nurse** from Rotterdam to Cork in four days. I have heard that this vessel once made the voyage from London to Bridgwater in 58 hours, a distance of 500 miles, and had her boat smashed on deck by the heavy seas. She is still afloat, and is the last schooner belonging to the port, but unluckily has been laid up for over two years idle.

Sunshine. This very fine ketch was owned by the same owner as the **C. and F. Nurse**, and was for many years captained by her owner, Lewis Nurse, who used to keep her in splendid order and would drive her through anything. She also was built at Falmouth in 1900 and was of 78 tons. She was a very successful ship and made many good voyages. On one occasion, in November, 1912, she arrived at Bridgwater on a Sunday, and Captain Nurse said he had never seen such heavy seas in the Channel before. He was from London, and lay-to in Cowes Roads a short time without bringing up and later proceeded, and from the time of leaving there until he arrived off Ilfracombe he did not see a single sailing vessel. He said he had never rounded the Land in such seas before.

Conquest. The ketch **Conquest** was a Cornish-built vessel. She was built as a fore-and-aft schooner at New Quay in 1871, of 68 tons, and was lost in October, 1908. Towing out of Poole Harbour during a strong breeze, bound for Cardiff, she broke from the tug and drove ashore and became a wreck, the crew being taken off in the lifeboat.

Sarah Jane. The **Sarah Jane** was a pretty little schooner built at Bangor in 1871, of 78 tons. In 1911 she sailed from Bridgwater for London, then to Ipswich, where she left on Christmas Day for Waterford. She put into Newlyn some time later for shelter and after leaving there for the Irish port she was never heard of and was posted missing with all hands.

Charles. The **Charles** was a Bridgwater-built topsail schooner, built in 1857, of 56 tons. She did useful work for 61 years, until the 18th December, 1917, when she was sunk by a torpedo in the English Channel by a German submarine. The captain was taken prisoner, and one of the crew was unfortunately killed. Among her runs were: Padstow to Cork, two days; Swansea to Waterford, 3 days; Bridgwater to Liverpool, 4 days.

Sunrise. The **Sunrise** was a fine ketch, built at Bridgwater in 1899, of 71 tons. Under the command of her owner, Captain Rudge, she made some good passages, such as Saundersfoot to Ipswich, 4 days, Kildonan, in the Arran Islands, to London 6 days. In 1914, on a voyage from Limerick to Portsmouth, the captain's son was washed overboard and drowned, and she put into Falmouth. Another good run was Bridgwater to Belfast, 3 days. She was sold to London in 1916, and still skippered by a Bridgwater man, was wrecked in February, 1918. During a gale in the Downs, on a voyage from Charlestown to Gravesend, she parted her cable, struck a sunken wreck and sank. The crew were picked up by a patrol boat and landed at Sheerness.

During the War, owing to so many local seamen being called up in the Naval Reserve Volunteers, it was impossible to get crews, and the **Sunrise** sailed from Bridgwater to Glasgow and other voyages with the captain and one man. Many other coasters were, of course, in the same plight. Naturally, the sailing coasters, from the nature of their trade, going all directions round about these islands, often were held up by head winds, and I have notes in 1912 that there was a succession of gales, and many were windbound in different harbours: the **Meridian** was 34 days from Plymouth to Liverpool; the schooner **Industry** 52 days from Bridgwater to Padstow; **Ermenilda** 40 days Liverpool to Bridgwater; **Charles** 50 days Bridgwater to Penzance; **New Design** 100 days Clonakilty to Plymouth, during which time she was driven right up the Bristol Channel to Burnham, where she arrived with gaff broken, sails blown away, and decks swept. After the weather quietened down, the **Meridian** went to Liverpool in 4 days, **Industry** to Manchester in 4 days, and **Ermenilda** to Glasgow in 5 days.

Out of 30 coasters owned at Bridgwater in 1913, three went missing with all hands, four were sunk by German submarines, ten were wrecked, three broken up, two were sunk by collision, three or four were sold, and there are now only four left, two of which have been tied up for over two years.