



Pilot Cutters Under Sail

**Pilots and Pilotage in Britain
and Northern Europe**

Tom Cunliffe

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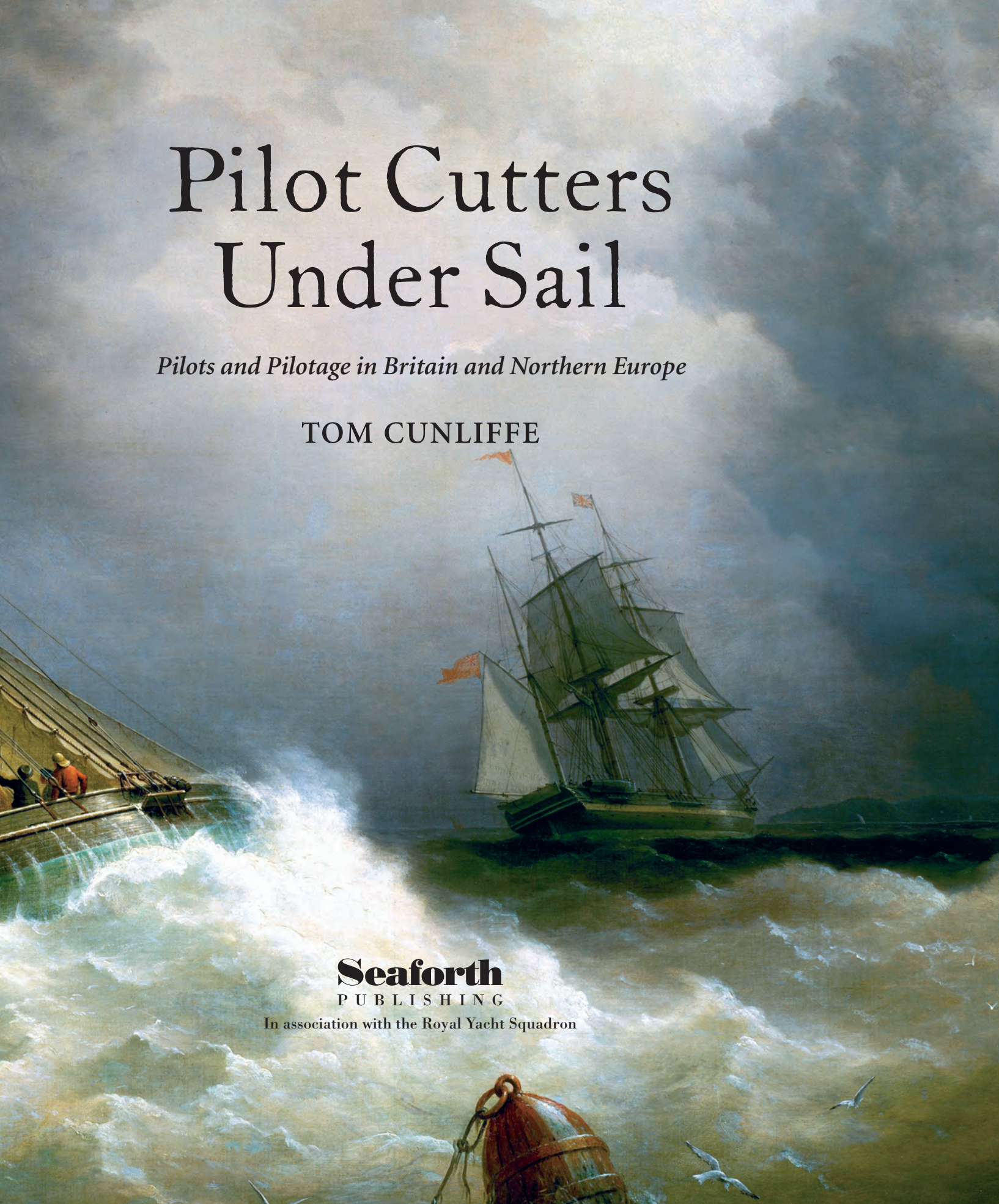
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TOM CUNLIFFE

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For Bernard and Michèle Cadoret

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Drawings in Chapter 13 *Pilot Cutter Seamanship* by Martyn Mackrill
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Competition in the early days

In this dramatic work by Admiral Richard Brydges Beechey entitled 'First Come, First Served' and painted in 1883, three pilot cutters are racing hell-for-leather to board an Indiaman which has hove to in heavy weather to await the winner. The scene is somewhat stylised, but it encapsulates the spirit of this book.

(© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK)

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Preface



IN THE LATE 1990S I was engaged by the French journal *Le Chasse-Marée* to produce a work on sailing pilots and their vessels. The book rapidly spiralled in scope and in 2001 two definitive volumes were published. These covered schooners in Europe and North America, as well as such diverse sideshows as the mighty pilot brigs of the Hooghly in Imperial India and the open-boat hobbler of Dublin Bay. A third volume was planned which would include the famous cutters of northern Europe but, as a result of restructuring in the publishing house, it was never written. Wishing in my heart to see this important material on the bookshelves, not only for myself and all those seafaring people who love a pilot cutter, but also for Bernard and Michèle Cadoret, without whose initiative and tireless creative work inside and outside the magazine office the project would never have begun, I sought another publisher. Over a decade later, backed by my shipmate Ian Laing of the Royal Yacht Squadron, I made contact with Julian Mannering of Seaforth Publishing who had been involved as a co-publisher with the original books. He proved an enthusiastic supporter and so, at last, *Pilot Cutters Under Sail* sees the light of a new dawn.

Whilst the book is based on solid research by myself, my wife Ros and others, the flavour derives from the years I have spent at sea in pilot cutters. As far back as the mid 1970s, Ros and I sailed from England to Brazil aboard a 13-ton Colin Archer called *Saari*, said to have been built for a pilot in the Gulf of Bothnia in 1920. Homeward bound we took the long route via the Caribbean, the US and the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. The extreme weather we experienced in the late-season North Atlantic convinced us that, for serious seafaring, these boats had few equals.

Saari's engine rarely functioned so we sailed largely without auxiliary power, learning the hard way how to handle a gaff cutter in fair weather and foul, in tight confines and hove to out on the broad ocean. *Saari* was followed in the 1980s by the 35-ton 1911 Barry pilot cutter, *Hirta*. Unrestored and unsullied by yachtsmen who imagined they knew better than the pilots, *Hirta* was a glory. Complete with original mast, boom and cockpit, she came to us so untouched that she was still without electric navigation lights. Like *Saari* before her, she spread a big mainsail of flax canvas. With her, we sailed to Greenland, America, Scandinavia and Soviet Russia. She made many memorable passages, including the long beat to Newfoundland from Iceland, a four-day run to the West Solent from Norway and



a traverse from North Carolina to the West Indies during which she weathered Hurricane Klaus, hove to in shocking seas on the edge of the Gulf Stream. As if this did not distinguish her enough, she also relished being short-tacked up the narrow, mooring-studded Beaulieu River sailed by a man, a woman and a teenage girl. She was an extraordinary sailing boat with the best manners I have ever experienced.

Following *Hirta* was a tough call, but the brand-new, wood-epoxy *Westernman* did us proud. Designed by Nigel Irens and built to our commission in North America, this 20-tonner, whose lines were inspired by the pilots of the Bristol Channel, ranted home across the North Atlantic in a highly respectable time, then carried on the good work by sailing to Arctic Norway, the heat of North Africa, and many a port in between. In all, we owned and cruised these cutters for over thirty years. Those decades formed us as individuals. Pilot cutters have a proud and charismatic history. They stir the souls of all who sail them, and attract the respect of people of the sea who have yet to do so. For me, this book represents something of a personal pilgrimage. Being given the opportunity to write it has been a privilege.

Hirta

Bristol Channel pilot cutter *Hirta*
in mid Atlantic, 1983.
(Martyn Mackrill)

TOM CUNLIFFE, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Pilots, Cutters and Administration



PILOT BOATS have always been found wherever ships seek a safe haven. Europe has been no exception and many were the ports whose cutters did grand work. Readers from Scotland and Finland, to name but two countries, may scan the chapter list of this book in vain for coverage of their cutters, but space and time cannot permit a totally comprehensive account. The doors had to close somewhere, so the ports and sea areas included were chosen on the basis of importance and the availability of material.

The pilot cutters which operated around northern Europe under sail until the time of World War I possessed a magic equalled by few other working craft. Built with performance in mind by and for men who knew what a boat was supposed to look like, they had to match speed with seaworthiness in all weathers. The position was clear. If they failed to board their pilot, they made no money, so any that ran for home as soon as it came on to blow saw their owners rapidly 'going on the parish'. While some of the more prosaic pilot vessels

Trinity House on Tower Hill

The headquarters of the Corporation of Trinity House were new at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, following the move from Deptford to Trinity Square on London's Tower Hill. The foundation stone was laid by no less a worthy than William Pitt, who was Master of the Corporation. The building was badly damaged during the Second World War and today's headquarters were rebuilt behind the original 1796 façade, which somehow survived the attentions of the Luftwaffe. (© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK)



were owned by corporations or cruised under other non-competitive circumstances, most vied one with another for the best jobs, and all had an overwhelming advantage over fishing and cargo vessels: in addition to a small crew, their only payload was one man or, at most, a few colleagues. So modest a burden meant that, like yachts, they would always sail to the same waterline. This gave builders a free hand to create the best possible forms, unhindered by the demand to perform adequately, whether drawing five feet of water or eight.

It has often been said that a boat which looks right on a mooring will be fine at sea, and few sailors would argue with the proposition. In the case of pilot boats, however, it rather puts the cart before the horse. Pilots were usually hard-bitten businessmen as well as thorough-going seamen. Their prime motivation was to serve their calling and earn a good living, so the way a boat functioned was a lot higher up their list of priorities than whether she was admired for a smart sheer-line. With a few notable exceptions, no yacht designer with an artist's flair laid pen on paper to create a sailing pilot cutter. They were built in the vernacular by men who left school early, if they went at all, and served long apprenticeships. The fact that many of the boats achieved an enduring loveliness says more than words ever could about a race of men who, without the benefits of formal education, were taught by time and experience to work successfully with nature.

Even in today's world of almost total electronic navigational knowledge, captains of ships coming into a strange port from seawards feel the need of someone with local knowledge to pilot them in. In the days before reliable, updated charts and position-fixing assisted by accurate chronometers, the requirement was fundamental. For centuries, pilotage was a casual service offered by anyone out in a boat who knew his way around his local waters. Fishermen were the classic operators. Seeing a ship approaching, they would offer their services, perhaps presenting a letter of approval from some previously satisfied customer, and strike a deal if they were accepted. No licensing framework existed, but in due course, as trade increased, local and national authorities realised that examining and licensing pilots made a lot of sense. It wasn't a big

leap from there to dedicated pilots operating in purpose-built craft.

Inshore pilots and longshoremen doubling up to make an extra shilling or two generally worked from open boats, many of which developed from simple fishing craft into fast, multi-purpose craft such as the Deal galley punt or the great beach yawls of East Anglia. One day a man might be driving hell-for-leather to board a ship, the following night the same character, wearing a different hat altogether, could well be using the pilot boat to race seawards to salvage a wreck before his competitors could get a line onboard, saving life while he made a profit.



While many of these interesting and exciting craft never gave up right until the end, it was the far-ranging, dedicated pilot cutters that sailed into popular legend. *Jolie Brise* and *Marie-Fernand* of Havre, *Kindly Light*, *Mischief* and *Marguerite* from the Bristol Channel, and the outrageously lovely cutters from Norway out of the yard of Colin Archer – even today, these are as famous as any racing yacht. All were either privately owned or run by small co-operative units, competing with their fellows for the best jobs. They were obliged to move easily in the lightest breath of air on the long summer days when high pressure dominates and no gradient wind stirs the Atlantic, yet, like

Hot competition in the Bristol Channel

Three Bristol Channel pilot cutters head seawards, some time after 1911. The middle boat with the white boot top is *Kindly Light*, the legendary cutter of Lewis Alexander, said to be the fastest pilot boat on the Channel at that time. Unlike the others, she is seen here unreefed and carrying a topsail. She is heeling accordingly, but no doubt is about to show the others her shapely stern. The boat survives to the present day and, after a long, lively history, is fully restored.

(Author's collection)

Masefield's clipper ships, 'their tests were tempests and the sea that drowns.' No prisoners were taken, and there was no room for muddled thinking. In common with all working boats, 'seeking' pilot cutters were as honest as an archangel. Many sailed like witches and were surprisingly easy on the eye. 'Station boats' operated by corporations and amalgamated pilot services were very different. Prioritising ease of motion, dryness and safety, none are believed to have survived, few photographs were taken of them and there is a dearth of fine art representation. Only a handful of specialists can remember their names. Given time, and there has

now been a century or so, the sea has a way of sorting such matters out.

Life below decks generally improved as the nineteenth century went on, but this was not always the case. Station vessels were often respectably appointed, but many self-employed pilots saw no reason to rough it more than was inevitable either. All decked boats were heated, typically by a permanently lighted solid-fuel galley stove burning coal or wood. Bunks were well boxed in for security, and most boats of any size featured a saloon of some sort where a pilot or his men could relax out of the weather. The exception, before Archer and

A seeking pilot cutter at sea

Much of this book is about specific cutters from many areas and ports. Here, the artist Martyn Mackrill has captured the spirit of them all in his depiction of a generic cutter cracking on far out at sea.

(Courtesy Martyn Mackrill)





Taking a pilot

An unknown brig takes her pilot in the late eighteenth century. Inbound to an unspecified port with her fore-topmast housed, probably as a leftover from some recent heavy weather, she is shortening down to lose way in the following wind. Her spanker-sheet has been let fly for brailing up and her main topsail yard is lowered. The hands are aloft and stowing almost before the sail is clewed up. Meanwhile, the pilot cutter has secured a painter and what looks like a negotiation is under way between a pilot in jaunty headgear and the brig's quarterdeck. The pilot boat herself is of no recognisable type. Indeed, while the brig is beautifully painted with useful detail, the small craft seems only roughly delineated. Never mind, the rapport between the two vessels is what this image is all about.

(Peabody Museum, Salem)

others transformed their lives, were the Scandinavians. One can only envisage the lot of the solo Norwegian apprentice, left on board after boarding his pilot, hove to out in the endless winter night, huddling over a makeshift open fireplace with no headroom, and nothing to sleep on but a palliasse stuffed with seaweed.

In addition to speed, seaworthiness and beauty, another requirement of the pilot cutter was a minimal number of crew. Once the pilot or pilots had boarded, a 50-ton cutter would be brought home by as few as two men. Bristol Channel boats of 35 tons were regularly sailed home single-handed, sometimes by a lad in his teens. These cutters had no winches and in order to ghost in light airs they were obliged to carry huge sails that were extraordinarily heavy by today's standards, yet the crew had to sail her into a tight harbour every week,

bringing up quietly and without mayhem. The men, of course, were very good at their job, but they could only do it given a well-balanced hull form and a fully developed rig with no bad habits.

Of such stuff were the pilot cutters of northern Europe.

Administration of pilotage

It is impossible to understand pilot cutters or the men who sailed them without at least a nodding acquaintance with the rules and authorities which bound them increasingly tightly as the decades rolled by. In the special conditions of Norway, these were often as concerned with the safety of the pilots as they were with maintaining a reliable service. In Britain and France, things were more formalised. As the chapters of this book march forward, much of this interesting tale will unfold from port to port. French pilots tended to come under the control of local authorities. In Britain, the situation was less obvious and it is impossible to follow the story of UK pilot governance without knowing something of the activities of Trinity House.

It says much about the development of home-waters trade in the Middle Ages that the merchants and shipowners of the Hanseatic League were well ahead of their British counterparts when it came to safeguarding shipping. In London, these men of substance did their business at the Steelyard, a narrow passage now lying beneath Cannon Street Station. They were known as 'Osterlings' and left the British a legacy in the form of the latter part of their nickname. The word 'sterling' entered the English language to describe reliable silver currency, where it remains to this day, with the 'pound sterling' ironically putting up a manful fight against the marauding hordes of Euroland.

Among the home waters of the Osterlings were the German rivers Weser and Elbe, where they had already set up withies, beacons and navigation buoys to mark the ever shifting sands and channels. No evidence has come to light suggesting that they took it upon themselves to do the same in the equally challenging waters of the outer Thames, but it seems likely that their initiative shamed the new corporation of Trinity House, founded in 1514 by Royal Charter of Henry VIII to secure the safety of shipping and the well-being of seafarers. The

corporation operated for many years under the grand title of ‘The Master, Wardens, and Assistants of the Guild, Fraternity, or Brotherhood of the most glorious and undivided Trinity, and of St Clement in the Parish of Deptford-Stroond in the County of Kent’. The first Master in overall charge happened to be the captain of Henry’s famously ill-fated *Mary Rose*, one Thomas Spert.

Captain Spert and his comrades must have been influenced by the men from the Steelyard, because Trinity House was soon following similar guidelines regarding its responsibilities. Like the Hanseatic League, the corporation founded its regulations and recommendations on the Laws of Oléron which went back to the times of the Crusades and had been drafted in the French Biscayan island of the same name. Most maritime law has its foundations sunk deep into these rules, which originated around AD500 with the great Roman lawmaker, the Emperor Justinian. He, in his turn, referred to regulations framed in the trading hotspot of Rhodes an astounding 1,400 years earlier. Most of ‘Oléron’ is concerned with responsibility for lost cargoes and other commercial considerations, but pilotage receives its due share of regulation. The brethren of Trinity House modified the rules to the needs of northern waters and it is interesting to note that from early times they required masters to employ pilots for English ports such as Boston, King’s Lynn, Great Yarmouth and London.

Some of the rules laid down at Oléron would deter any but the most self-confident of mariners from putting themselves forward as pilots. The levels of retribution promised for poor performance must have concentrated many an unfortunate pilot’s mind as an unkind wind shift set him firmly on a lee shore in a ship whose performance to windward resembled nothing so much as a haystack.

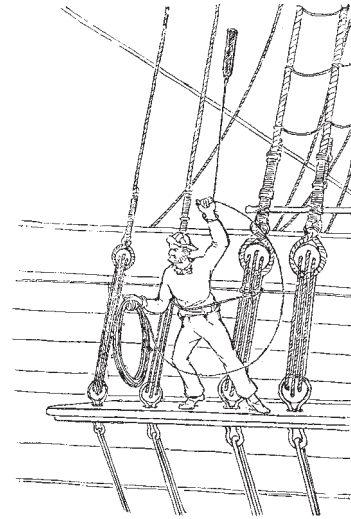
The judgement is that they ought to suffer a most rigorous and unpleasant death; for there ought to be very high gibbets erected for them in the very same place, or as nigh as conveniently may be, where they so guided and brought the said ship or vessel to ruin as aforesaid, and thereon these accursed pilots are with ignominy and most shamefully to end their days; which gibbets are to be made substantially strong, to the intent that they may abide and remain

to succeeding ages, as a visible caution to other ships that shall afterwards sail thereby.

Lest the reader may find this incredible and cast it aside as an anomaly, summary justice was also required by a law from Barcelona in 1494: ‘if a pilot bring a ship into a haven and she is cast ashore by his lack of skill, the crew shall lead him to the hatchway and there strike off his head.’ This last jewel of data was given to the author by Pilot David Barnicoat of Falmouth, Cornwall, who was quick to point out that, after 1667, pilots who fell short of the ideal were at least given a fair hearing. This, he suspects, was because of thinning ranks in the service.

At this time, the term ‘lodeman’, or ‘lodesman’, was generally applied to an inshore pilot. It seems reasonable to assume that the term derives from the Hanseatic ‘loot’, or lead. The word ‘lead’, ‘lode’ or a number of other derivatives appears again and again in connection with piloting in many languages, and from here, it is but a short step to the English ‘pilot’, since the word ‘peil’ has its roots in the sounding of depth, perhaps originally with a long stick. Hence, ‘peil loot’, or ‘pilot’.

From snippets discovered by Trinity House, it is clear that pilots were operating between Britain and the Low Countries before the brotherhood was incorporated. From 1514 to 1808, despite the nature of King Henry’s charter which, by implication, must surely have included pilotage and seamarks at least in the approaches to Britain’s capital and main port, Trinity House had been mainly concerned with London and the inner River Thames. However, no responsible body could long ignore the ships lost in great numbers in the shoals of the wide estuary. Of these, the rich East Indiamen, both inward and outward bound, prompted the review of a situation which could not be allowed to continue unregulated. Many of the Elder Brethren had close connections with the management of the ‘Honourable John Company’, as the East India Company was known. Hit in their own wallets by disasters to these commercially important vessels, they shook themselves out of the general lethargy that had done nothing for the reputation of Trinity House in the early eighteenth century. The process took time but, as it gathered momentum, it went beyond providing beacons, buoys and lighthouses.



The origins of the word ‘pilot’

In the centuries before our own very recent era of certain position, the lead was critical when approaching harbours, especially in reduced visibility. In ancient times, when the word for the ‘sea guide’ was being coined, the terms ‘peil’ and ‘lood’, ‘lode’ and ‘los’ were all in use for the sounding weight. It seems likely that a combination has led to the English ‘pilot’.

(Author’s collection)

A succession of Acts was passed relating to Trinity House in London and the pilots' 'Court of Lodesmanage' in Dover. The first came into force in 1717 and was a shoddy affair. The badly drafted bill granted powers to the so-called Dover 'Trinity House', establishing the requirement for all ships navigating between Dover, Deal or the Isle of Thanet (the Margate area east of North Foreland) and any places in the rivers Thames and Medway to employ Cinque Ports pilots. A parliamentary inquiry into pilotage in 1732 was followed by an Act which confirmed these provisions. It also defined the jurisdictions of the several Trinity Houses by then in existence, but the first statute imposing compulsory pilotage nationally did not receive the Royal Assent until 1808.

The 1808 Pilotage Act handed Trinity House the responsibility for controlling pilotage in all coastal areas of England and Wales not governed by any existing authority. As well as the so-called Cinque Ports pilots of the Kentish shores, this meant that Bristol, Liverpool, the Humber and the Tyne maintained their independence from London, although the last two fell under the Trinity Houses of Kingston upon Hull and Newcastle upon Tyne respectively. Elsewhere, Trinity House passed on this new local authority to sub-commissioners of pilotage appointed from among local worthies in the same manner

as magistrates. The commissioners did not employ the pilots as such, they merely oversaw their administration and activities. The pilots remained self-employed and hung onto their ancient independence, either individually or in groups. However, their licences now came from the overarching authority of Trinity House. Not everyone liked this arrangement, but earlier heavy-handed attempts by the corporation to bring discipline to the London pilots from the North Sea and the English Channel had been far from happy, so for many it represented a marked improvement.

Pilots' liabilities

It would be shirking a vital issue not to discuss here the extent to which a pilot who had boarded via a cruising cutter was liable for damage to or loss of a ship under his pilotage.

The essential proposition has generally been that the master remains in command at all times, while the pilot is there to advise him. This was all very well, except where a ship's master was obliged to take a pilot he might neither want nor need, because of the requirement for compulsory pilotage. Among any other items, the Merchant Shipping Act of 1854 permitted Trinity House pilots to post a hefty bond of £100, plus the pilotage rates of the job in question, as the totality of their individual liability in the case of 'proved fault or inadequacy' in the conduct of a vessel. The Act also raised the recurring question of compulsory pilotage, whereby a ship-owner could absolve himself of liability for collision, damage to a berth, etc, by claiming that his vessel was under the 'command' of a licensed and compulsory pilot. In law, this was the so-called 'Defence of Compulsory Pilotage'.

The defence flew in the face of long-established tradition typified by the controversial case of the China clipper *Spindrift* in 1869. *Spindrift* was lost inside the London pilotage district outward bound for Shanghai with a valuable mixed cargo. The evidence, when examined with a seaman's eye, cannot be reconciled – the pilot being accused of drunkenness while protesting that a main witness to his condition, the steward, was also 'three sheets to the wind'. In the end, the Elder Brethren of Trinity House suspended the pilot for six months, creating the potential precedent that,

in well conducted ships the masters regard the presence of a duly licensed pilot in compulsory pilotage waters as freeing them from every obligation to attend to the safety of the vessel, but are of the opinion that while the master sees that his officers and crew duly attend to the pilot's orders, he himself is bound to keep a vigilant eye on the navigation of the vessel, and when exceptional circumstances exist not only to urge upon the pilot to use every precaution, but to insist on such being taken ...

It was pointed out that this view represented



A Cinque Ports pilot

The Cinque Ports pilot William Marsh, painted in 1875, in his best rig. He is posed formally with his spyglass in front of Dover Castle, wearing the watch and chain which would certainly have accompanied him on even the most frantic boarding of a ship. Pilot Marsh was involved in three shipwrecks during his apprenticeship. Originally from Deal, he moved to Dover with his family around 1859. Twenty years later he drowned when the pilot cutter *Edinburgh* was run down by a mail steamer off Dungeness. (Dover Museum)

custom rather than law, but it left captains in no doubt as to how much sympathy they would receive if they relied unreasonably on the compulsory pilotage defence.

This essentially unsatisfactory situation dragged on until the notion of a pilot being in effective command in pilotage waters was reinforced by the Merchant Shipping Act of 1894. In 1895 Lord Esher stated that:

This doctrine of compulsory pilotage is an enacted doctrine no doubt. It was not enacted for the protection only of ships; it was enacted for the protection of ports; of commercial ports in particular because if a vessel is wrecked and lost and sunk near to the entrance, or within the entrance to a commercial port, she is not only lost

herself, but she is a great danger and obstruction to the port and other vessels, and would interfere with the commercial business of the port.

Thus, the Defence of Compulsory Pilotage made the pilot responsible for any damage ensuing from the ship's movements under his direction. A good deal of injustice was caused, and the resulting remedy adjudicated by the courts was frequently unsatisfactory because a pilot, having been judged liable, typically had nothing like the means at his disposal to make full compensation. Under a non-compulsory system it was argued that the pilot was the servant of the shipowner for the term of his hire, giving 'advice' to the master, allowing the shipowner to insure against any act of his temporary employee.

This situation, unsatisfactory to the pilots,



Steam and sail in the Dover Strait

The superb image sums up the changes brought to sailing pilotage by the arrival of steam merchant vessels. The handsome, clipper-stemmed *Pinta* was built in Port Glasgow in 1898 for Robert MacAndrew & Co of London which had been trading with Spain, primarily in the importation of fruit, since the late 1830s. Not only could a steamer proceed into the eye of any reasonable wind, her tracks to her chosen harbour were relatively predictable and it was this assurance which sounded the knell of the seeking cutter. As this ship steams away to windward down-Channel from Dover, the backdrop is a menagerie of sailing vessels.

From the humble coasting schooners to the majestic gypsy of the Horn at the extreme left, cracking on to catch her tide and her London tug, all were joined by the thread of uncertainty which had fed the hunger of the cruising pilot for centuries. The ketch-rigged pilot boat seen here is a 'station boat', built for comfort, not for speed. She is a classic example of the Trinity House ketches which replaced the older cutters in a number of areas, including Dover.

(*The British Mercantile Collection*)

pertained for some time and was further confused by anomalies caused by Local Acts which appeared to override general legislation until the abolition of the Defence of Compulsory Pilotage, in the years leading up to World War I, echoed the Antwerp Convention of 1910. This made a pilot the temporary servant of the shipowner as in the non-compulsory ports. It gave him the 'conduct' of a vessel – ie, the control of the navigation and manoeuvring of the vessel – assisted fully by the master and his crew, to whom the pilot tendered his professional opinion. Thus, the vessel proceeded under her master's orders and the advice of the pilot. This laid the balance of responsibility, both morally and legally, firmly on the master as the shipowner's representative, and the last of the sailing pilots doubtless slept more easily behind their high leeboards.

The coming of steam

Planning an ocean voyage or even a coastal passage under sail is very different from the same operation under power or steam. In the old *Ocean Passages for the World*, published by the British Hydrographic Office, three routes were generally given between distant ports. The first was the 'full-powered steamer route', such as might be chosen by ocean liners and other well-endowed ships that could steam into strong winds if they had to. Unless compromised by shoals or the likelihood of sea ice, this track followed the Great Circle route, or shortest distance between two points on a sphere. The second option was the 'low-powered steamer route'. This added distance by avoiding areas where strong adverse winds were likely to be encountered, for the simple reason that such vessels were seriously compromised by them. The 'sailing ship route' could well stray so far from the Great Circle as to be barely recognisable. This track was not merely trying to avoid too much unpleasantness, it actually had to go looking for fair winds, because the average merchant square-rigger would make little ground in anything else.

In a sense, these three route systems sum up the reasons why cruising pilotage under sail died out by the time of World War I. In the far-off days of pure sail, a Bristol Channel pilot, for example, might board a paying ship anywhere across the wide

approaches to his domain. A ship inbound from Spain could have been fighting northeasterly winds and found herself far out in the Atlantic before tacking and hoping to lay her course straight in. Her position would be, at best, calculated to within a few miles, but if the sky were overcast, it might easily be fifty miles adrift from reality. To imagine that she would steer for some pilot station, knowing a cutter would be there waiting for her, is fantasy. She might never make such a rendezvous. The reality of passage-making under sail meant that the needs of shipping were in many ways better served by a multitude of cutters and pilots, well spread out, each motivated to find ships at all costs by the harsh economics of his trade.

This situation began to change with the advent of effective steamers in the mid nineteenth century, but it was a further fifty years before ships were arriving and leaving on something approaching a modern-style schedule. The author can testify from his own experience that, even in the 1970s, a typical coaster could make little or no headway into a full gale. Back in 1900, many a full-sized ship was similarly compromised. Thus, while pilot stations were useful, there was still room for cruising men seeking windjammers and steamers driven from the most direct route. The cream of such pilots would sail away from their home ports, often seeking far out to sea a ship which they knew to be due, and hoping to board her before she arrived in more densely served water closer to home. As late as 1911 in the Bristol Channel, and in 1913 at Le Havre, powerful new first-class cutters were still being launched for private owners. Such boats were fully developed and were among the finest sailing craft ever built, but as steam continued to improve and the wind-driven merchant fleet was increasingly eclipsed, the writing was on the wall.

By now it was obvious that the future lay in amalgamated pilot services, boarding at clearly defined stations from vessels supplied by the local pilotage authority, or Trinity House in certain areas of the UK. In the beginning, many such craft operated under sail, but they soon acquired auxiliary power. From there, it was a short step to steam or motor and so, by the time the great armies began marching, the final flowering of the cruising pilot cutter was over.

The Channel Pilots



WHEN A SAILING SHIP came into the English Channel, her captain's first priority, if bound for an English port or further afield through the Dover Straits, was generally to take on a Channel pilot. If she were bound for Le Havre or one of the other major French ports, a seeking Le Havre cutter would supply the captain's needs. In today's world of certainty about a ship's position, electronic charts and the motor ship's ability to steam in whatever direction seizes her navigator's

fancy, it may seem superfluous to pay a pilot in waters that start out over a hundred miles wide. This was not the case in times past.

Channel tides can run at over 3kts in areas where neither coastline is visible, even in clear weather. A sailing ship beating her way in or out would sometimes find herself in tight quarters at the end of a tack, yet still be outside the pilotage area of any particular port. Even if she were not, it was perfectly possible that she would have missed the local pilot



Illustrated London News

In 1885 the popular *London Illustrated News* published this beautiful double-page spread of piloting activities. It is a spectacular achievement, showing at centre a cutter hove to in what might pass for the lee of an early steamship, launching her punt in a shocking sea so that the pilot can be rowed or sculled across. On the left, the pilot is burning his night-flare; at bottom right, the punt is away, and at top right, the pilot is boarding a windjammer in very much better conditions than the rest of the montage suggests. (Author's collection)

cutter and hence have no pilot when she desperately needed one. Finding his ship embayed on a strange coast in thick weather, a master would have given a month's wages for the services of a competent expert who could recognise a misty glimpse of coast at a glance, or deduce his position from the depth and nature of the bottom as brought up by the armed leadline. Even today large ships, whose draught becomes a serious factor for safe navigation as the sea shoals towards Dover, take on Channel pilots as far west as Brixham, Devon.

In the case of British pilots who boarded in the Western Approaches, the term 'Channel' generally referred to all the channels between the islands of Britain as well as those separating them from the continent. Thus, a Channel pilot would be just at home taking a ship up to Greenock in Scotland as he would to the 'Downs' anchorage off east Kent, where ships bound to and from London waited for fair winds, or the approaches to Le Havre and Dunkirk. Even the Elbe in faraway Germany fell into his area of expertise. A Channel pilot boarding further up the English Channel itself, perhaps off Plymouth or certainly the Isle of Wight, was usually just what the term implied – a guide up the English Channel to the desired port pilot station. Once his ship arrived in the offing, the average Channel pilot would be content to hand over to the local man. Indeed, in later years he was obliged to do so by regulations. For London, this handover theoretically

took place at Dungeness where a licensed Trinity House pilot would come aboard, but things didn't always work out as the Elder Brethren of that redoubtable authority would have liked.

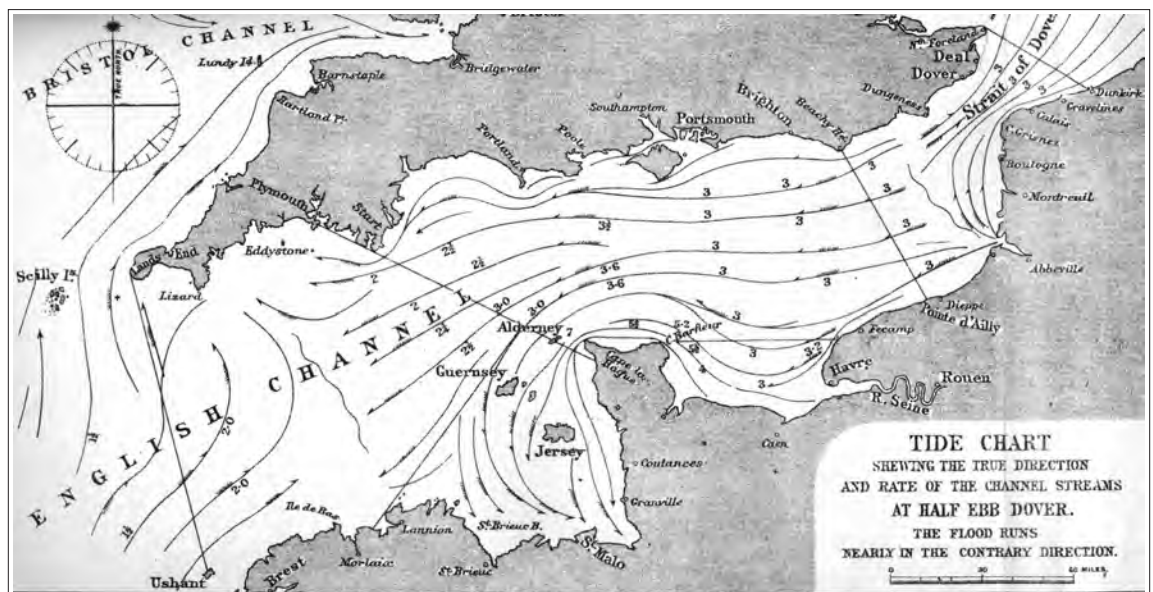
An outward-bound Channel pilot stranded far from home would be delighted to take a ship down to his local waters once more, thus securing a fee as well as a free ride. By unwritten but universal agreement, any ship he had brought up was his to take to sea, but this might entail a long wait and was by no means always adhered to. Before the railways, however, the land-based travel alternatives were unattractive in the extreme, and even in the days of steam they remained a poor economic substitute for a ship.

Channel pilots were experienced deep-sea sailors who had returned to home waters to take up a career in pilotage. Before the Merchant Shipping Act of 1872, there were no licences for their work. The only qualification for the job was that a man was able to do it and could convince a ship's master that this was the case. A favourite device was to carry certificates or letters from satisfied masters and agents, but sometimes it was enough merely to step aboard from a pilot cutter and look convincing.

Some Channel men actually held an official licence for London as well as one or more for the many outports. As such, they were qualified to pilot a ship up to her berth. Outside of the Bristol

Chart of the English Channel

This late nineteenth-century chart of the English Channel shows not only the topography, but also the highly significant tides that the Channel pilots knew so well. Even today, circumnavigating yachtsmen from relatively tideless waters baulk at entering the Channel because of the streams encountered here. Looking closely, we see 3kts in the Dover Strait, over 5kts north of Cherbourg and a spectacular seven in the Race of Alderney. (From the Admiralty Tidal Stream Atlas, published 1899)



Channel with its specific systems, many Channel cutters would be owned by a group of pilots offering a 'one-stop shop' service into the local port as well as the farther-ranging Channel pilotage up to London and beyond. After the 1807 Merchant Shipping Act which granted Trinity House jurisdiction over most of the Channel ports, the position of a Channel pilot was made clear; he could retain the part of the overall pilotage fee which concerned work outside the designated port limits to which his ship was bound. If a licensed port pilot took over for entry and berthing, he kept the rest. If no licensed port pilot presented himself, the Channel pilot could, like any other unlicensed pilot, keep the whole fee, so long as the master was willing.

In 1872 a new Act of Parliament made provisions under which Trinity House availed themselves of the right to grant deep-sea licences to Channel pilots. Ever willing to extend their jurisdiction, the Elder Brethren of the corporation now began to examine candidates of proven sobriety, good conduct, five or more years' sea service in addition to pilotage experience, and who were 'sound in wind and limb'. The licences they issued provided their holders with kudos and an implied seniority in the event of a clash with another pilot. Being licensed also made it easier for a pilot to convince a captain that he was the man for the job, but Channel pilotage remained non-compulsory and the work was still open to unlicensed pilots as well as Trinity House men.

As was the case in other services when licences were first issued, there was hard feeling from established pilots who had been passed over, and a tendency from those who had been selected and had succeeded under examination – often by good fortune rather than any superior ability – to kick away the ladder by which they had climbed. This tension is illustrated by an article from the *Shipping Gazette* of 20 January 1880. It concerns itself with the loss of the Italian ship *Erato*.

The *Erato* boarded an uncertificated Channel pilot at Falmouth who was to take her to the Clyde. All went well as far as southeastern Ireland, but here the pilot ran her ashore on the Barrels near the Tuskar Rock. The article is eloquent in its defence of the ship's master who took on the pilot in good faith, believing him to be competent on the strength

of his professed recommendations. It goes on to state that the Court of Inquiry found the man 'unqualified and ignorant of the navigation' of the Irish Sea. Its conclusion was that while there may have been some unqualified pilots who were competent, there were certainly many who were not and that, were the Channels to be a compulsory pilotage area, all pilots would require certification and the problem would cease.

That this recommendation and its miraculous predicted outcome was held in low esteem by the majority of pilots is clear from a closing remark that, 'while [they] are not required to hold licences – although they may do so, if they think it proper to prove their competency to the satisfaction of the Trinity House or other authorities – few of the men avail themselves of this privilege.'

Bound up-Channel, a ship would, if she were fortunate, find her Channel pilot waiting west of the Isles of Scilly. If she failed to board a man here, her next landfall was likely to be the Lizard Point where a Falmouth cutter was generally cruising, often in company with one or two Le Havre boats ready to service anyone bound their way. Once east of the Lizard, a northbound ship could be lucky off Rame Head with a Plymouth-based cutter or, finally, the Isle of Wight. If she had still failed to take on a pilot by the time she passed the Nab Tower southeast of the Wight, she was probably on her own until she fell in with the Trinity House pilots off Dungeness, unless she first met up with a casual lugger from Deal cruising down-Channel in search of business.



Boarding

A lovely drawing by Arthur Briscoe of the pivotal point of a pilot's work, the actual moment of boarding. The man in the punt is fending her off with an oar as soon as his pilot has his feet firmly on the Jacob's ladder. He now returns to the cutter and does not see his boss again until they meet up at some prearranged point at sea when the pilot brings another ship out, or in harbour when the cutter has chased this ship home. (Private collection)

The Far West – The Isles of Scilly



STANDING ON THE Isles of Scilly on a summer's day, it is hard to believe that one is on the outskirts of the English Channel. Were it not for the Cornish-style buildings, the colours of the shallow waters and sandy beaches could readily be taken for those of the tropics. The seas around the islands are a whirl of fast-running tides and straggling rocks, many of which will always remain unmarked. In the days of sail, and of steam prior to modern navigation systems, the toll they took of shipping was heavy and consistent, ranging from unknown trading schooners to the Royal Naval battle fleet under Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell, which famously ran ashore one nasty night in 1707.

There are a number of reasons for this, apart

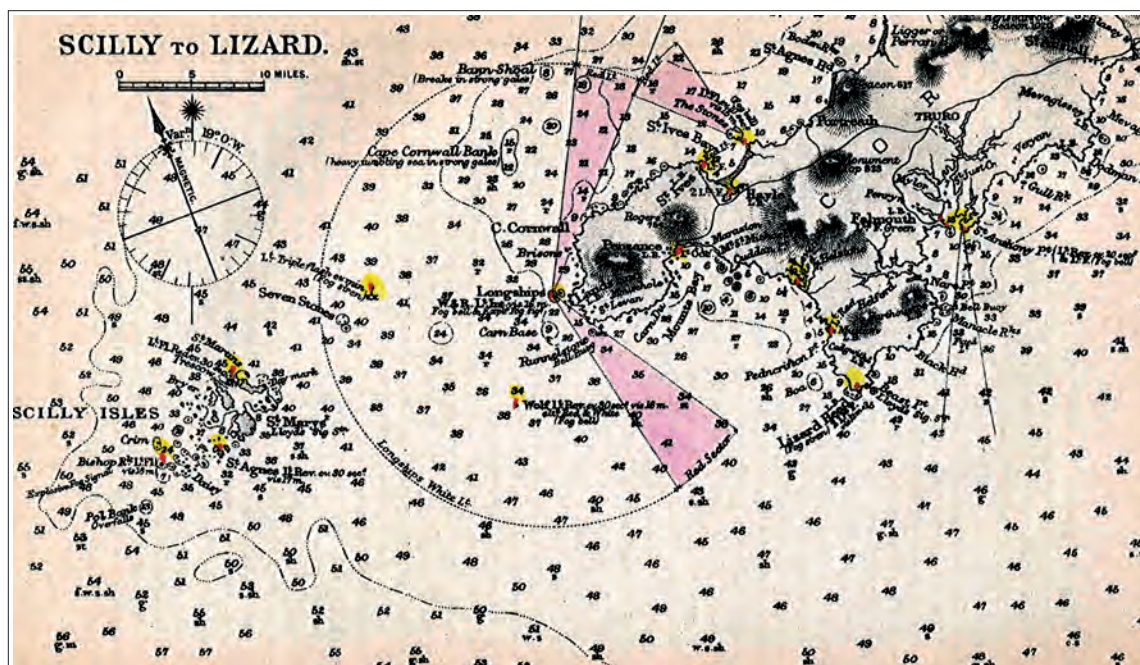
from the obvious one that the islands and their associated reefs lie athwart one of the main shipping routes of the world, at the confluence of the English, the Bristol and St George's Channel leading northwards into the Irish Sea.

Early days

Until very recently, of course, all deep-sea navigation relied upon the captain obtaining a view of the heavens from which to fix his position. Any sailor who remembers those days can testify that the facts of life in the Western Approaches are such that this is by no means always available. Ships which had had no confirmation of their position for days thus had two choices: either go with the

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

The Isles of Scilly lie approximately twenty-five sea miles from Land's End. In the days of sail, they had enough trade in their own right to warrant a pilotage service, but it was as Channel pilots that the men of the islands excelled. Their dangerous, rock-bound fastness was strategically placed for boarding ships inbound to Great Britain or Northern Europe from the Atlantic, and hence from the whole world. Many a ship's master was mightily relieved to be hailed by the Scillonian pilot cutter as he ran in, heart in mouth, perhaps having had no sight of the heavens for a fix for several days. (From *The Pilot's Handbook of the English Channel*, 1898)

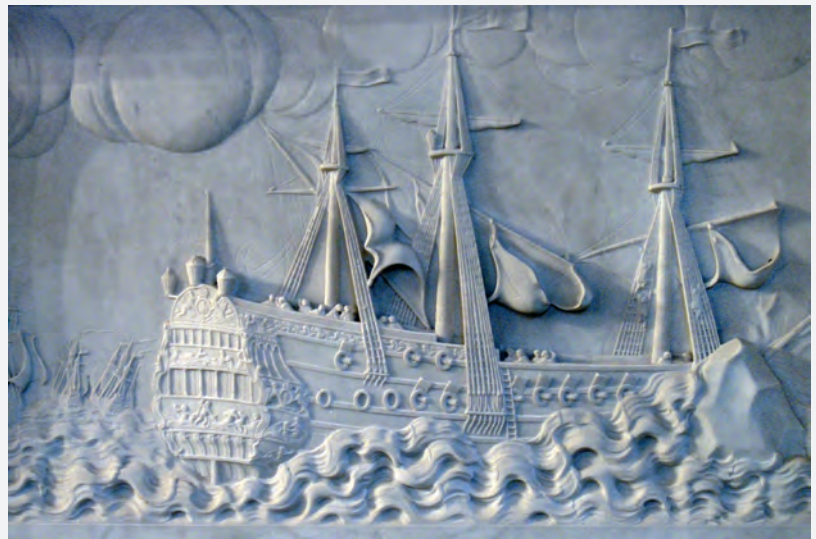


unpopular but safe option of heaving to until the sky cleared, or trust their dead reckoning and run in before the prevailing westerly weather. With crews who might have been at sea for months, it took a leader of strong moral fibre not to go for the soft choice and run in, hoping against hope to find a pilot. At night or in fog, things would be bad enough in themselves, but three further factors must be added to understand why even carefully estimated positions might well prove far removed from reality.

The first of these is the Rennell Current, whose existence was not fully established until 1793. This sets northwest across the entrance to the English Channel and can reach aggregate speeds of almost 1kt, even when the tide has been allowed for. A ship approaching from the Atlantic without having obtained a fix for some days could therefore find herself many miles north of her dead reckoning position. There are instances of ships whose navigators imagined they were passing south of the islands only surviving stranding because they were so far off track to the north that when day dawned they found themselves proceeding up the Bristol Channel rather than the sea high-road to London.

The effects of the Rennell Current were aggravated before about 1750 by the inconvenient fact that the charted position of the islands (and the Lizard – the next landfall point) was anything from five to fifteen miles north of their actual location. Yet another nuisance to navigation at this period was that compass variation, changing steadily as it always has and always will, shifted from east to west. Within a few years, this rendered an uncorrected chart (the usual state of affairs in those days) potentially dangerous and undoubtedly added to the wreck toll on the islands.

The Isles of Scilly were home to a substantial community and as such generated a coasting trade of their own, but they also attracted ships because they were the base of operations for a large group of Channel pilots. Many ships anchored in St Mary's Roads to await orders, or sailed close by, specifically in the hope of finding a pilot to take them up to Dungeness, the Downs or London. Many pilots from Scilly were capable of piloting into Havre, Liverpool, Glasgow, Antwerp, or any other important Northern European port, and so



The stranding of Sir Cloudesley Shovell

In 1707, Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell was in command of the Grand Fleet of the Royal Navy when it ran ashore on the Isles of Scilly in darkness. Ships from small schooners to significant merchantmen piled up here every year, but the loss of many of Sir Cloudesley's warships made clear the need for pilots if anyone had ever doubted it. This plaque at St Clement's Church near Deal in Kent stands in memory of Admiral Sir John Narborough's two sons. The Admiral, a distinguished sailor, had married Elizabeth Hill, daughter of a Commissioner of the Navy. After his death, Elizabeth married Sir Cloudesley who thus became stepfather to the boys, both of whom perished with him in this disaster.

(Private collection)



A gig shipping flowers from the out-islands

As the advent of steam reduced shipwreck in the islands and competition from wealthy ports further east curtailed and finally tolled the bell on Channel piloting for the local gigs and cutters, the pilots and their men looked to alternative employment. Many found new careers in the burgeoning cut-flower business which remains a staple to this day. This load of flowers coming to St Mary's boxed up for shipping to the mainland shows the remarkable carrying capacity of a gig.

(Gibsons of Scilly)

were in high demand. Pilot James Hicks of the cutter *Atlantic* piloted the crack China clipper *Thermopylae* to London on one of her famous races to be first with the season's tea crop. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the pilot service was the mainstay of the monetary system of the islands.

Throughout the eighteenth century, appointment and control of the Scilly pilots was exercised from within the community by the so-called 'Court of Twelve', a committee of gentlemen who, to all intents and purposes, were the law in the islands. In those days, there were no pilots' licences of any

sort for the Channel, so anyone capable of the work could take it on. The income from pilotage fees, wreck salvage and smuggling provided all that was needed to eke out the basic local economy of farming and kelp harvesting.

While pilot communities the world over have always been generous in saving life at sea, the Scillonians, like the men of Deal and the Norfolk beaches, were unusually prolific in this respect. The nature of their ironbound home ensured a constant stream of shipwrecks, while the fast and seaworthy six-oared gigs that were a local speciality allowed them to work out to the farthest rocks in most weathers. Using gigs or pilot cutters, the people of Scilly could, after saving what life they were able, remove cargoes from derelicts and either auction them officially, taking a salvor's share, or pass the goods unofficially into local trade. Both methods had a real effect on the prosperity of the people, but this was not the only way Scillonians benefited financially by supplying a service to those in need.

Smuggling was a long-standing business that worked at two levels. A big-time undercover trade existed between the islands and Brittany, generally carried on by gigs under oar and, if conditions allowed, sail as well. A gig was typically around 30ft overall, with a beam as little as 4ft 9in, yet, so long as they kept under way, they were as famous for their sea-keeping as for their electrifying turn of speed.

The 1820 Cornish gig *Dove* was timed over a measured mile in 1928, rowed by a crew from Newquay, at 6 minutes and 15 seconds, which adds up to just a shade under 10kts! By rowing in shifts with a couple of extra crewmen to 'spell' the first team, an easily driven gig could comfortably maintain 4kts or more for long distances. This made the hundred-odd-mile passages to France achievable, with high-value goods such as spirits and tobacco being regularly landed for sale locally and in Cornwall. Pilot James Nance, for whom smuggling was definitely a 'second-string' occupation, boasted openly that he had rowed to France no less than twenty-five times. These activities were of increasing primary concern to the Revenue men stationed in the islands. In addition, the officers of the crown also took an interest in a widespread but far more innocent contraband activity carried on by the pilots.

From way back, hard currency had been sparse in Scilly, with an ancient system of barter existing in its place.

