CHAPTER 5 - THE SHIPS

MAKING TOWARDS FALMOUTH

To form a realistic appraisal of what the Quay Punts did, how they did it and under what circumstances, it is necessary to understand something about their main customers: the ships. This has little to do with either their dimensions or the romance which, nowadays, is so often associated with them. Instead, it is to identify the forces which tended to drive the ships towards Falmouth in the first place: apart from making 'Falmouth for Orders', there might have been inclement weather, damage to their fabric, illness amongst the crewmen, or the need to replenish their food-stock. Any such matters would have held the potential of providing work for the Quay Punts.

Although the term 'Falmouth for Orders' is known to have been in use as far back as the end of the 18th century, exactly how and when it was first introduced as a procedural custom no-one seems to know; however, it is important to realise that Falmouth was not the only destination which might have been so stipulated, for there were other strategically-placed ports of Western Europe which also performed similar services, especially what in those days was Queenstown, in south-west Ireland. At whichever port a ship had taken-on cargo, its general destination was announced but it would have been very unlikely that the name of the port at which it was to be delivered would have been known unless, that is, it was on a scheduled run such as was often the case in respect of, say, many guano-carrying vessels where the nature of the cargo required special handling.

Until the early 1900s, ships were virtually incommunicado once they were at sea. Throughout their voyage (which could be several months) the ownership of the cargo was subject to change; as a result, the only way a ship could learn of its destination was to call into a port much farther-on where such information could be made available. Whichever port it was, had to be one which specialised in the provision of such information and, hopefully, also be capable of providing whatever additional services the ship or its crew might require upon its arrival. Falmouth was one such port and, because of its geographical location just inside the north-western edge of the English Channel, one might genuinely say that it became one of most important transit ports in northern Europe; another such port, Queenstown (now Cork), situated in the south east corner of Ireland, was Falmouth's nearest competitor.

Any technological development which enabled key information to be transmitted and received remotely, or anything which would lessen the risk of damage to the ship or her cargo, was to be welcomed by all concerned. Whilst the ships would later become well-served by

advancements in engineering technology e.g. in construction, propulsion, and (especially in this case) communications, it was inevitable that those very initiatives would soon sound the death knell of any port which did not embrace the potential impact of technological improvements. This meant that before being able to reach a reliable appraisal of what Falmouth's Quay Punts did (and under what circumstances) it is essential to draw-up a simple, yet realistic, account of the port's lifeblood *i.e.* its ship-activity.

5.1. Comparative Levels of Trading

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, gaining control over the maritime trading routes was one of Britain's foremost aims. Once secured, there were several means of measuring the level of trade: for instance, by monetary means, by the quantities (tonnage), types of cargo, or merely the raw number of ships visiting various ports. When attempting to measure the level of trade, tonnage of cargo was the most common standard. Connected with that was the nature of any particular cargo, for that would affect a number of factors such as its desirability (which could differ from time to time), the seasonal cycle of crops, its transportability, and its preservation.

To measure the overall annual level of trade one can turn to any one of several sources.

Table 1: Comparative Levels of Foreign Trade During the Last Quarter of the 19th Century: £Millions by Country.[32]

Country	1870	1880	1889	% change
UK	547	698	740	35%
France	227	339	311	37%
Germany	212	294	367	73%
USA	165	308	320	93%
Belgium/Holland	136	237	310	127%

Table 1 indicates both the general growth of maritime trade and Britain's share in relation to other north European countries. This table indicates that, over the period displayed above, Britain's share increased as each successive year passed; furthermore, that by 1889, Britain's share was twice that of its next nearest competitor, Germany.

The 20 years covered by this table reflects the change-over from sail-power to steam. By taking tonnage as a measure, then no matter what the source of information, and even if the figures of one source appear to differ slightly from one to another, one can also detect a dramatic increase in the quantity of cargo being carried by steam at the price of sail.

Table 2: British Register 1870-1875 Tonnage carried per 1,000 by Source of Power.[33]

	Sail	Steam	Total	% share
1870	4,580	901	5,481	84/16
1875	4,200	1,900	6,100	69/31
1881	3,690	3,005	6,695	55/45
1885	3,400	4,000	7,400	46/54

Ensor found that in each of the years shown above, the level of trade had increased significantly. Of even greater significance was that, by 1885, the deployment of steam power had exceeded that of sail. In percentage terms, each of the years saw steam take firstly 16%, then 31%, then 49% and, in 1885, 54% of the work. Impressive though these raw figures appear to be, Ensor also pointed out that whilst they were surprising enough in themselves, what really mattered was not so much the quantities involved, but the nature of the trading. For instance, in the period covered by the table, the major imports from the United States was foodstuff and raw materials of various kinds; whereas from Britain, the main export was manufactured goods. Thereupon rested the foundation of Britain's economic security; however, note should be taken that, despite the favourable figures shown in Table 1, Britain's confidence in its economy had been made fragile as a result of engagement in wars throughout much of its trading world (including America), plus economic problems occurring elsewhere in Europe, especially in France.

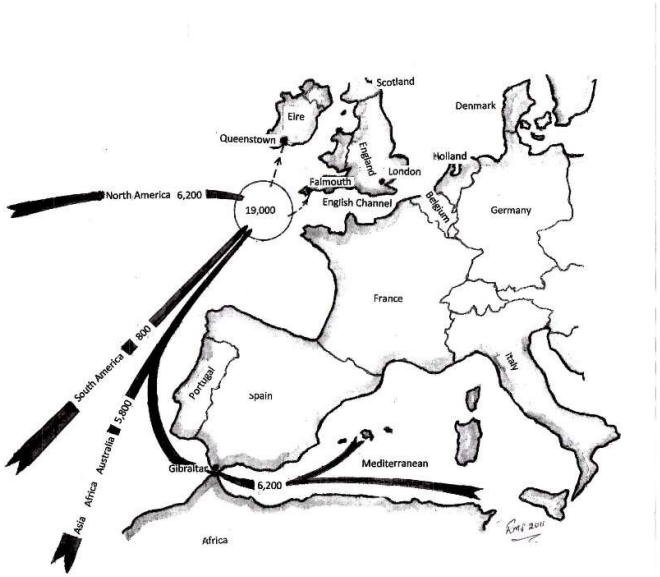
Had the figures in Table 2 been quoted for, say, just five years later (1891), they would have shown a further downturn for Britain brought about by the failure of its banking system in 1886.

5.2. MAKING FOR THE WESTERN APPROACHES

A ship-owner would have despatched his ships to a named port or ports to load or to unload a cargo, or to a port like Falmouth which would have demonstrated its ability to pass-on the identity of the desired destination. If a ship was carrying a cargo, as distinct from voyaging 'in ballast', a Bill of Lading would have been issued giving the name of the cargo's current owner, plus a simple instruction as to any interim destination. Supposing that the ship had been stationed in Sydney, Australia, there the Bill might have read '*Falmouth for Orders*' or '*Queenstown* (*i.e*. Cork) *for Orders*', or maybe somewhere else roughly *en route*. With any of these destinations in mind, the ship would then have set a course accordingly, firstly to reach the Atlantic Ocean and to then head northwards towards the western entrance to the English Channel. In that area - generally referred to as the 'Western Approaches' - the captain would have to have considered the ship's ability to make a course either northwards towards (say) Queenstown, or eastwards towards (say) Falmouth. The major factor in respect of this decision would have been the direction of the wind.

To gauge the scale of north European maritime business during the late 19th century one can take a brief look at the number of ships arriving at the Western Approaches at any one time. Fortunately for this study, the museum had already analysed this very matter from the census of 1881[34]. By so doing it was discovered that during that year, no less than 19,000

ships from all parts of the world had passed through the area, 6,200 of which carried cargo and passengers from North America, whilst some 12,000 other ships had arrived from the continents of Central America, Australia, Asia, Africa, and from various ports in the Mediterranean Sea.



The Western Approaches to the English Channel 1881 (Source: NMMC)

Of that total number, those opting to enter Falmouth were relatively easy to discover due to the excellent records kept by the local Customs authorities and the Ship Agents alike. Unfortunately, it is difficult to obtain similar figures for Queenstown as requests addressed to the Port Authorities produced no response. Information proved equally unobtainable from the Cork Archives. In an attempt to overcome this disappointing silence a number of bookshops and libraries in Cork were contacted. The most that could be found was a book recently written by a lecturer at University College Cork. This book gave insight into *some* of the visiting ships at varying times but, unfortunately, not in such a way that comparisons with Falmouth could be made.[35]

Kelly's Trades Directory 1883 reported that, in 1881, the Port of Falmouth took the second highest total of Pilotage fees in the UK. Obviously, that observation would not have included Cork. By accepting the figures stated by Kelly's as being accurate, then the importance of Falmouth in such matters becomes obvious.

5.3.1 Major Navigational Landmarks *en route* to Falmouth Harbour

It was common for the crew of an ocean-going ship to sense the proximity of land, a behavioural phenomenon often referred to as 'Channel Fever'. Conrad speaks of the captain's '*unconquerable restlessness'* whenever a landfall was imminent.[36] In the event of Falmouth being the intended destination, then sight of the Isles of Scilly, the Lizard lighthouse, or of Fox's telegraph station was as good as arriving at a friend's front gate.

Having checked the charts, even the most confident captain would have felt a glimmer of anxiety over the prospect of navigating that part of

the course leading from the Isles of Scilly towards Falmouth, especially so if the weather was inclement.

The Isles of Scilly and eastwards along the southern coast of Cornwall from Lands End provide beautiful, wild places to explore; however, that wild, craggy, granite coastline held dangers galore for any ship, especially the protruding Lizard peninsula.

To peer for the first time at Larne's *Register of Wrecks* for those areas is to admit oneself into the realm of incredulity.[37] Obviously, the wrecks marked on the maps did not occur all on one day as any static site-map might, at first glance, suggest; instead they had been built-up over a long period of time; even so, the measure of human tragedy is pronounced.

If a ship had a fair offshore wind, and was prudent enough to leave those navigational hazards several miles to port, then its 'distance-off' may have been too great to read any land-based messages or warnings, especially if in low light or in poor weather. In such conditions, or if carrying a dangerous cargo, many a ship would have chosen, or have become compelled, to take a patrolling Channel or local Pilot to assist them.

Fortunately, by far the majority of ships did pass safely by, especially when the weather was favourable. It was when the weather was stormy, or when the wind was coming from either the east or the south, or when visibility was obscured, that the passage towards Falmouth became so very treacherous.

John Masefield, having been both a well-experienced seaman and the second-longest serving poet laureate ever (from 1930 until 1967), naturally expressed his thoughts in his favoured idiom; following the sinking of his clipper-ship '*Wanderer'* (which occurred in the Elbe, not off Lizard Point) he recalled his approaches to the English Channel by describing the area as *'the eater of ships …'*[38] Masefield's anthropomorphic simile had the effect of projecting an ever-lasting, melodramatic air upon that area, especially Lizard Point and the group of rocks to the east known as The Manacles, each of which would have been noticed in turn. Anyone who has attempted to stand anywhere on the cliff-tops along that length of Cornwall's coastline, leaning into a wind of force 5 or more could relate to that. Furthermore, whenever the direction of the wind opposed the direction of the tidal flow the consequences could become massive in scale and relentless in fury. It was a natural phenomenon which remains even now.

After absorbing yet more of Larne's work, it becomes a jolt to one's senses to find that Masefield had also described that same area as being 'beloved' by homecoming men. That dichotomy was no mistake, for the two observations were made in differing contexts: the first relating to the raw, natural dangers of the area concerned, the second from the sense of relief arising from having made a landfall after so long.

In support of Masefield's outlook it must also be pointed-out that the Admiralty's *Sailing Directions for the English Channel 1848* reads '*The headland* [The Lizard] *is one of the most noted among English navigators and is also the properest place for a landfall when homeward bound*.' If relying upon traditional methods of navigation, this comment remains as true as it ever it did but, to the uninitiated, the message tends to suggest that the sea around the Lizard peninsula holds an almost benevolent quality whereas, as has already been indicated, in certain conditions the waters directly to

its south will always remain a fickle friend and forever '*ship-hungry,*' as Masefield was apt to describe such places.

5.3.2 Fox's Signal Station, Bass Point (SW715119)

In 1872 a Station was built by Fox's, the well-known Ship Agent in Falmouth, a little to the east of Lizard Point, where it was conspicuous from seaward. Its purpose was twofold: to communicate by sight with passing ships, and to communicate by telegraph to ship owners. On its wide, flat roof it had a semaphore mast. Provided that visibility was sufficiently good and a ship was within telescopic range, all manner of messages could be sent until the movement of the ship took it too far away. The building also had its name printed boldly upon its side. Even more conspicuously (and for a hitherto unknown period), were the letters 'ICU' written large upon a board alongside the building.[39] The purpose was to give ships the idea that if they could close sufficiently to read those three letters, then not only might a ship be able to read any code flags which had been raised on the roof, there would also have been a fair chance that the on-shore Station would have been able to read a ship's identity flags.

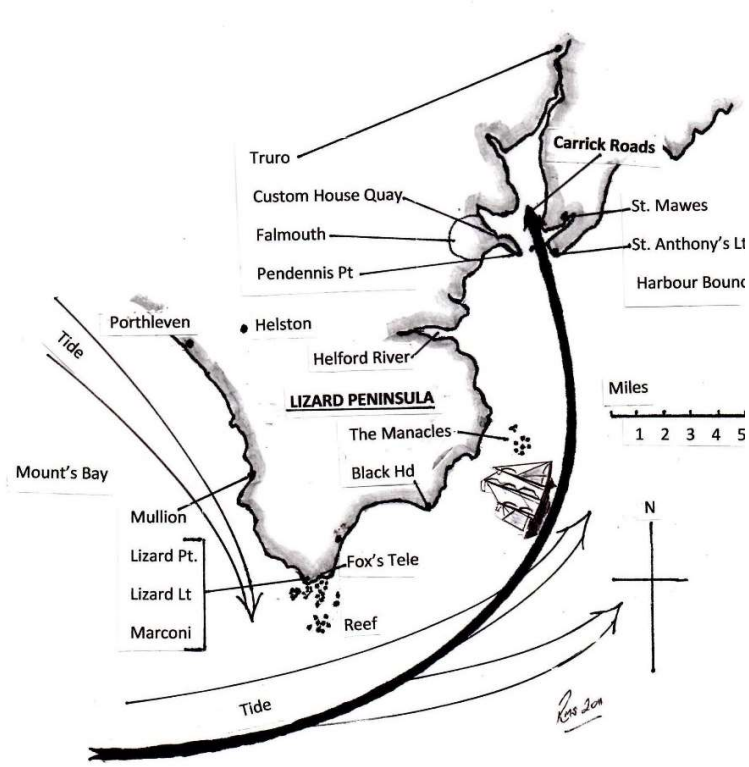
On 1st January 1875, another prominent Ship Agent, W Broad and Sons, had negotiated the use of part of Fox's station. Fox's later arranged a direct electronic link with their office in Falmouth so as to hasten messages to shipping companies. The station was so successful that, on 1st January 1883 Fox's sold the establishment to Lloyds and, from then onwards, it became known as Lloyds Signal Station.

Not surprisingly, the Quay Punt boatmen were keen to benefit from this and many did; however, the extent to which they were able to rely upon the information arising from this station has not been possible to establish.[40]

5.3.3 From Lizard Point Towards Falmouth

Many of the ships wrecked in the vicinity of the Lizard had probably entertained hopes of visiting Falmouth harbour, if only to escape the wrath of the weather. As if to flummox those ships which had negotiated all else, nature had placed yet another obstacle before them: 'The Manacles' a jagged reef situated slightly eastwards. (50.02'78N/ 05.01'085W)[41]. Here, the Quay Punt boatmen found rich pickings in fish, but not without entertaining a considerable amount of risk.

The moderate prevailing south-westerly winds, when coupled with a flood tide, would be sufficient to assist a ship to leave the Manacles comfortably to port. In the event of the wind coming from a more southerly or easterly direction however, especially with an ebb tide, the reef became a significant hazard. For many years, a buoy marking this dangerous reef has guided ships well to the east and south of the reef, thereby helping to prevent a ship from taking a direct course between Lizard Point and Falmouth, or *vice versa*.



Lizard Point to Falmouth (Source: NMMC)

The danger posed by the Manacles reef was such that, in 1884, the Elder Brethren of the Corporation of the Trinity House sent a letter to the Falmouth Harbour Commissioners stating that, on or about 27th January 1885, they would be sending a deputation in the hope of gaining their support for an application to establish a lightship in that position.

At a meeting of the Harbour Commissioners on 17th February that year, a list was circulated showing the number of casualties which had occurred in the neighbourhood of that reef over the years 1875–1884. This showed that 23 ships had struck the rocks (totalling 13,905 tons) of which 14 had been total losses. The resulting loss of human life amounted to 1,247 passengers and 448 crew (the number of those saved was not stated), and the total salvage value over that period amounted to £395,300. Unfortunately, no more seems to have been said on the idea of a lightship. One can only assume that the proposal was not supported. At that time, life seems to have been cheap.

Against the number of wrecks recorded in the vicinity, one can number those ships which had successfully navigated their way into Falmouth Harbour. Fortunately, these were by far the majority. A fact that perhaps weighed against the idea of money being spent on preventive measures.

The presence of the Manacles Buoy must have saved many a life but it was visible only in clear daylight. Even then it is written that:

> *'Mr Bluet says … We have the uncontradicted statements of seamen of all classes, that the bell-buoy, fixed to one of the outer manacles, is utterly inadequate to warn vessels of their nearness to danger …'*[42]

Just two pages onward in that same publication, another interesting statement is made, this time by the author of the document, the authenticity of which is not given, that:

'… captains who get their ships among the Manacles are so anxious to keep the news from reaching the owners that they hang a sail over the names of their ships'.

Until 1835 there had been no additional safeguard for ships. That same year a lighthouse was built on St Anthony's Head at the eastern side of the entrance to the Carrick Roads which gave some directional assistance at night whether approaching Falmouth from the west (from the Atlantic side), or leaving Falmouth harbour in a westward direction. Later still a Fog Bell was added but, what with all the noise accompanying the movement of a sailing ship and the manner in which the direction of sound can be deflected by fog, it could not possibly have been regarded as an adequate appendage.

5.3.4 Piracy, Smuggling, And Wrecking: A Comment

There is more than enough evidence to confirm the number and type of difficulties - even disasters - attending the voyages of merchant ships as they sailed along Cornwall's coastline, particularly from the direction of the Scilly Isles. As if it was not enough to witness crewmen and passengers being swept overboard, or occasioning dreadful injuries sustained by falling from rigging when attempting to shorten sail, or to hear of piracy and smuggling, inevitably someone will raise the subject of wrecking.

Even now Cornwall seems to be a byword for the first two activities; but wrecking? It cannot be considered until the term is more clearly defined. Many of Cornwall's inhabitants were, and remain, as ready as any to 'help' by salvaging (as they might put it) spilled cargo. Some, presumably from the more callous corners of Cornish society, are believed to have expressed dismay when they heard that a light-ship might be placed on the Manacles Reef, thereby reducing the annual crop of goodies spilling-out from wrecks. However, if by wrecking one includes the idea that ships were being deliberately lured towards the rocks by false lights and that, upon striking the rocks, the crews of wrecked ships were put to death by avaricious local inhabitants, then 'no'. That idea is, and must rightly remain, fodder for the lesser grades of romantic fiction. Instead, those who appreciate the truth will find the facts published in both Larne's *Record of Wrecks*, and in the clear, simple and honest account of Cornish generosity to shipwrecked mariners described in a book of reminiscences published by Dinah Craik in 1884.[43] Each of these publications offers greater wonderment and genuine excitement than any fiction could possibly muster.

CHAPTER 6 - THE SHIPS

UPON REACHING FALMOUTH HARBOUR

6.1 HARBOUR DUES

Any ship entering Falmouth Harbour was required to register its arrival within 24 hours. In most cases this made the ship liable to pay Harbour Dues: a daily rate according to the ship's Net Registered Tonnage. On 5th December 1870 - just three months after the appointment of the new Commission - the following minute was recorded:

> *'The Harbour Commissioners do **not** intend, until further notice, to levy tolls on vessels in any of the following cases* viz*:*
>
> - *On any vessel putting in through strong or contrary winds,*
> - *On any vessel in through any cause not attributable to the neglect or default of those on board or the owners thereof,*
> - *On any steam vessel through being short of coal for the further prosecution of her voyage,*
> - *On any vessel for necessary supplies for the prosecution of her voyage or in distress or for repairs*
>
> *Provided that, in every such case, the said vessels do not break bulk, or take cargo or embark or disembark passengers or receive any orders as to her ultimate port of destination while making use of the harbour, and that the Master should present himself with a formal statement at the Custom House within 24 hours'.*

The conditions described above appear remarkably generous, but Falmouth was not the only harbour to make such concessions.

6.2 THEIR REASONS FOR ENTERING

By the 1880s or so, most ships had acquired the ability to receive their orders by some distant means, thereby finding that they no longer needed to reach a harbour for that purpose. They might, however, still have need of other services which could not await their arrival at their intended port of delivery. In such instances the ship's local agent would usually notify the ship's owner as soon as possible. To that extent Falmouth Harbour could be likened to a pit-stop serving the needs of a racing-car insofar as speed of service often mattered. In the case of the ships, their haste was due to the likelihood of delay having a negative impact upon the market-price of whatever cargo was being carried, especially if it was perishable.

6.3 THE CONDITION OF THE SHIPS UPON ARRIVAL

Brief details of each ship's condition were often recorded on arrival by the Ship Agents and occasionally in the local newspapers. Therein one can expect to find such entries as '*the replenishment of fresh food and water*'; '*the*

replacement of worn or broken items of equipment'; '*the provision of torn clothes*'; '*the opportunity of a visit from a missionary from one of the Seaman's missions*'; '*the hospitalisation of crewmen who had been injured or who were suffering from disease*'; or '*checks upon the condition of perishable cargo*'. Whatever the need, the ship's personnel could expect the harbour to provide the best attention available at the time.

To underline this point, a random period was taken from the 1881 edition of Fox's *Register of Arrivals and Sailings.*[A] *Some 237 ships* entered the harbour in the first six weeks of that year, sixteen of which had encountered serious problems of one kind or another, none of which could have been properly dealt with whilst still at sea. This selection provides a fair representation (both by frequency and by type) of all that can be found within the covers of the Register, not only for that year, but also for previous years and those which were to follow:

Table 3. Condition of Ships Entering Falmouth Harbour 1st January – 13th February 1881 inclusive.

Source: G C Fox & Co *Register of Ship Arrivals and Departures*

Reason	Number	%
Orders	147	62%
Coal bunkering	22	9%
Damage repair *	16	7%
Wind bound	16	7%
Channel pilot	6	2%
Sick and injured *	6	2%
Water *	4	2%
Provisions *	2	1%
Not stated	18	8%
Total	237	100%

*Denotes the reasons which, over that period of six weeks, were likely were likely to have provided varying levels of work for Quay Punts, in addition to transporting the captains to H M Customs upon arrival.

[A] Fox's, the Ship Agents, maintained a Register of daily *Ship Arrivals and Sailings*, within which was noted the names of the captains, where their ships were registered, their Port of departure, their destination, if known, and, the reasons for their arrival in Falmouth Harbour.

Some more specific examples included above are:

14th Jan	**Pheonix**	**Bk**	**Rotha-Cetta**	**Captain sick**
2nd Feb	Prof Mohn	Ship	Cardiff - San Francisco	Lost sails, cross-jackyard lost
12th Feb	Pietro G	Bk	Boston – London	Lost boat, sails, and Sampling (wheat)
	Glendovey	Bk	Glasgow - Valpariso	Lost sails
	Imatra	Ship	Philadelphia - Dublin	Decks swept and oteher damage
	Turin	Bgte	Maracaibo - Runcorn	At Lizard lost bulwarks, galley etc
13th Feb	Dagny	Ship	Shields – Bombay	Lost 4 men o/b, lost sails, cargo shifted
	Botvid	Bk	Maryport - Baltimore	Leaky

The Quay Punt boatmen could never be sure what they would find once they had secured themselves a ship. Their ship, or ships, might be in any condition ranging from the most seaworthy to the least; or from the most ill-disciplined, to the thoroughly bullied or anarchic. To those ships which were in a dangerously unseaworthy condition the seamen were apt to apply the adage 'Coffin Ships', a term borrowed from a few of the earlier Falmouth-based Packet ships. This term was also applied to those which were believed to be over-burdened or seriously undermanned. In Table 3 the actual entries would have been abbreviated and therefore appearing relatively bland compared with what was actually the case, thereby hiding the fact that the lives of crewmen might have been placed in jeopardy.

No ship-owner could ever have had a viable excuse for not knowing the physical condition of any of his ships at the point of them leaving any harbour; however, it was not unknown for a significant number of owners to overlook the matter lest their profits might be adversely affected. Up until the end of the 19th century, profit seemed to matter more than did the lives of seamen. Behind that attitude rested the shenanigans surrounding the world of insurance.

One puzzling aspect of this whole situation was that whilst many a ship's officer could see for himself that the ship upon which he was due to sail would be placing his life in danger just as much as would have been the case for rest of the crew, he was still prepared to apply the most vicious punishments upon any crewmen who failed in their attempt to leave the ship. There was little doubt that strong retribution might sometimes have been required in the pursuit of discipline but, today, one cannot read of such incidents without detecting a distinct element of sadism.

Attempted desertion and theft from ships became such a problem that the Harbour Commissioners eventually agreed to appoint a Police Officer to be on board selected ships overnight until 11.00 hrs the following day. The fee for this was five shillings (25p) to any ship, availability of labour

permitting. Eventually the demand for this service became so great that the Commissioners appointed a small number of 'night officers' to fulfil this, presumably lucrative, service.

Looking back, it seems that when profits were at stake, those who had pecuniary interests in the value of either the ship or its cargo were determined to exercise whatever local forces were available to support their purpose. For instance, the minutes of the Harbour Commissioners of the time indicate that they, the Commissioners, considered themselves bound by a sense of lawful duty to *'provide direct control over the containment of would-be deserters. It was correctly understood that a ship would be severely hampered in its purpose if it had an insufficient number of seamen as crew'.*

Little thought appears to have been given as why so many attempted to desert in the first place.

6.4 Changing the Situation

To correct this attitude, someone was required who was not only selfless, persistent, and heroic, but also wise to the ways of Parliament: someone who had the confidence to take-on those many influential people whose self-interest eclipsed all else.

Samuel Plimsoll, the MP for Derby turned-out to be the one who would devote much of his life to improving the safety of mariners. Fortunately, Plimsoll was not entirely alone in his quest to generate respect for the crews of these deadly ships: he, and others, tackled the ship-owners and their powerful political allies, especially those who had (often hidden) financial interests in maintaining the s*tatus quo.* In this pursuit he had two major aims: his first was the eradication of un-seaworthy ships and, therefore, the safety of the crewmen and his second was the alleged misuse of insurance, especially in respect of lost ships and their cargo. Because of the strength and nature of the resistance he faced, it took Plimsoll a full 20 years (from 1874 until 1894) to arrange effective controls over this matter, by which time one Royal Commission on Unseaworthy Ships (1874), one *Merchant Shipping Act* (1875) and one *Employer's Liability Act* (1880) had been announced, each having little effect. Then, in 1894, all previous Acts were consolidated into one *Merchant Shipping Act*.[44] Despite that, the topic received a further damning report which was put before the Board of Trade. That report was recommended action in respect of three major points:

- The proper manning of ships,
- The detention of undermanned ships proposing to leave Ports of the UK, and
- The punishment of persons responsible for proposing that an undermanned ship should be taken to sea.[45]

Almost to the end of this whole period the satirical journals such as *Punch* lampooned Plimsoll and his supporters alike but, like so many parasitic forces of that kind, once the tables began to turn, those forces either withdrew, or did an 'about turn' in respect of their allegiance.

6.5 The Impact of the 1894 Act Upon the Quay Punt Boatmen

How much, and in what way, the poor condition of many ships impinged upon the Quay Punt boatmen is impossible to quantify but it is pleasing to find examples which indicated the presence of sound humanitarian values. For instance, 23 year-old boatman Henry Wills who, sometime on or before 1885, became the owner of the Quay Punt *Louie Wills,* was preparing to tend a regular customer of his, the French Barque *CPD*. Wills had tended this ship for many years and had become well acquainted with the captain. One day Wills called upon the ship and was, as usual, invited on board by her normally affable captain. Upon reaching deck-level the captain informed Wills that, on this particular occasion, he should not attempt to talk to any member of the ship's crew.

Wills, being a straightforward man of principal, told the captain that it was against his nature not to speak with the sailors and that, if it was to be a condition of his being allowed on board, then he would decline the invitation. At that very moment, out of the corner of his eye, Wills was reported as having seen a slip of paper fall into his Quay Punt. It had been deliberately dropped there by an evidently desperate member of the ship's crew.

Declining the captain's invitation to step aboard under such restrictions, Wills returned to his punt and, once clear of the *CPD*, picked-up the letter and read it. The unnamed crewman was offering Wills the sum of £5 simply to deliver the note to the Mayor of Falmouth, the late Alderman R C Richards.[46]

The message described an incident concerning an officer's behaviour towards one of the crew alleging '*such bad treatment of a man from Bridgewater that he died from the effects'*. Wills delivered the note as asked; however, no action could be taken at Falmouth because the *CPD* sailed under the French flag. At that time, the incident might just as easily have occurred under the flag of any country, including Britain.

No-one can be sure about the level of concern felt by Falmouth's boatmen as a group. Fortunately for them, their self-employed status meant that as long as they operated within the Harbour's bye-laws, they were able to enjoy a good deal more control over their own day-to-day destiny than had any crewman aboard any one of the sailing ships. A boatman's response to any malpractice on the part of others was a matter for their own conscience. In Will's case he was sympathetic towards the seaman's plight. One likes to think that many of the other boatmen would also have reacted in a similar manner. If they ever did, then such behaviour would surely have mitigated against the generally negative reports by which so many boatmen seemed to suffer at the hands of several local people.

6.6 The Level of Business Available to the Quay Punts

Up until 1875/6 Falmouth had considered itself fortunate in respect of its maritime business. The harbour had shown itself capable not only of covering its costs but also increasing the depth and breadth of its services. At the same time the Quay Punts appeared to be sufficient in number to cope with the demands of their traditional work. At a superficial level everything seemed as it should be. However, early in 1876, Fox and Sons - probably the most prominent Ship Agents of Falmouth - decided to analyse their '*Register of Arrivals and Departures*'. On the arrivals side, most

countries in the world appear to have been represented. However, it is noticeable that the total level of imports arriving in Britain from both America and Australia did not equate with what Fox considered to be the number of ships which one might reasonably have expected to be arriving at Falmouth.

The investigation undertaken by Fox's indicated that ships setting-off from those two countries had always been instructed to call at 'Cork for Orders' without the option of calling at Falmouth being stated.[47] Fox's took the initiative to make contact with the appropriate foreign agencies. Soon afterwards, they had the satisfaction of announcing that, in the reply from Australia, the Chartering Brokers had chosen to alter their ways accordingly. The Americans also followed suite. From that time onwards Falmouth was usually either named as an optional destination, or as the primary port for receiving orders.

Exactly how much difference this made to the number of arrivals has not been calculated but, in a short report in the *Falmouth Packet* of 10th June 1876 the following comment appeared:

> *'the favourable winds, so long looked for, have at last come and brought a considerable influx of shipping into this port. More than 100 vessels, many of large size, have arrived from foreign ports during the present week, nearly all calling for orders.'*

On the 24th June that same year, the Falmouth Harbour Police reported to the Commissioners that '*no less than 200 vessels had arrived from overseas during the last 20 days.'* Later still, on Saturday 19th August 1876, the *Falmouth Packet* also reported upon the apparent increase in traffic: '*Upwards of 50 vessels arrived at this port for orders yesterday, so the pilots and steam tugs are having a lively time of it'*. The Quay Punts too, no doubt.

6.7 Mooring Alongside the Docks

On 10th August 1876, a question was raised concerning charges being made to ships which wished to moor alongside the docks, only to discover that there was insufficient space. That being so, they anchored elsewhere in the harbour until such time as a vacancy arose. As a result the Harbourmaster chased them for Dues. A number of shipping companies made representation to the Board of Trade about this practice for, had space been available at the time they entered the harbour, they would have reached the docks and moored without additional cost. The outcome of this is not recorded in the minutes so it is probably safe to assume that the charges were dropped.

6.8 Anchoring Beyond the Harbour's Boundary

Acquiring orders was by far the most frequent reason for a ship to make for Falmouth; however, if a ship was intent only upon receiving orders, then its captain might have chosen to anchor a little seaward of the harbour's southernmost boundary to await the arrival of either a Ship agent's cutter or a Quay Punt. It appears as if news of the frequency of this occurrence reached the Secretary of the Falmouth Harbour Commissioners in April 1896, because he wrote to the Board of Trade asking them to forbid such behaviour *i.e.* that, if any ship sought services from the harbour, then it should be compelled to enter the harbour and become

subject to its bye-laws and, more to the point, to any of the harbour's charges.

On 4th May 1876, the Board of Trade (Harbour Department) replied in the following manner

> *'I am to state that this Board do not see how ships are to be prevented from anchoring outside the harbour if they prefer to do so where wind and weather permit': the letter continued 'many ships calling for orders only would often prefer to bring up outside rather than incur the expense and trouble involved by entering the harbour.'*[48]

The Harbour Commissioner's reaction to this is not formally recorded, but it can be imagined. The Quay Punts, however, being independent operators, would take work from a ship regardless of where it was anchored; if it happened to be beyond the harbour's boundaries, then that ship might thereby make itself liable to a boatman's own (possibly inflated) charges.

6.9 Falmouth Harbour as a Shelter

On 13th February 1881, a number of vessels entered Falmouth Harbour under 'stress of weather'. Amongst the ships which gathered over the following days, four of them had been damaged by storm - presumably the same storm which had caused the other, nearer vessels to have made for Falmouth over the preceding days. The Falmouth Harbourmaster's Journal for that period, reads:

> Thursday 10th February 1881*: 'Strong gale and showers throughout the day. Only two arrivals for orders. Remained on there in the afternoon to fill-out Waterman's* (*i.e.* boatmen's) *licences.*
>
> Friday 11th February 1881*: 'The early and middle part of the day strong gale with heavy squalls. Latter part moderate. Hoisted two* [gale-warning] *balls in the forenoon, hauled one down in the afternoon. I made two attempts to get on board the steamer in the morning but could not succeed in consequence of the violence of the wind…'*

Sheltered, Falmouth Harbour can genuinely claim to be but there were, and always will be, times when wind comes from a south-easterly direction. That was, and remains, the direction from which the harbour affords the least protection. In such conditions, several large ships anchored in the harbour were reported as having dragged their anchors. In consequence, several found themselves swept mercilessly upon the rocky shores of Trefusis Point, incurring considerable loss of life.[B]

Several of the Quay Punt boatmen would have attempted to shelter their boats in Custom House Quay and themselves in any one of the quayside pubs, each boatman somewhat sanguine in the knowledge that their enforced leisure would soon be handsomely rewarded by the likelihood of several damaged ships limping their way towards Falmouth Harbour. There must have been at least one boatman who would have had

[B] The loss of many lives when, in 1881, the *Queen* was driven on to Trefusis Point during a gale.

the sick-wit to mutter 'it's an ill wind that blows no good'. In the meantime, no doubt the Harbourmaster would have ordered the raising of a second ball to indicate the imminence - if not the presence - of heavy-weather.

6.10.1 Sampling the Cargo

The word 'sampling' describes a practice whereby the owner - or prospective owner - of a ship's cargo might at any time ask their Agent to check its condition, either whilst somewhere in Falmouth Bay or at anchor in the harbour. Sometimes this descended into a competitive activity. In a report of an interview with Mr Henry Wills, great rivalry was reported between the Ship Agents Fox's and Zuppolini for the business of the Austrian and Italian ships.[49] Accordingly, the gigs would leave Falmouth at 3.00 am and await passing ships, boarding them if they could, with a view to taking samples.

Behind this activity was the fact that wet, or just damp, grain, sugar, nuts or rice, would hold no commercial value and could even become dangerous either through swelling - thereby holding the danger of bursting the structure of the hold - or even by catching fire due to spontaneous combustion. According to the late Jimmy Morrison,[50] one method of sampling grain was to plunge a 12ft long (3.66m) brass tube deeply into the hold in order to extract a sample for the agent to send to the cargo owners, or for the cargo's owner to send as a sample to prospective buyers. It is not clear whether this was the only method of checking the cargo, especially when one considers the fact that much granular cargo was loaded in bags as well as some being loose. However, there was no way that access to the whole cargo was possible and therefore it was unlikely that a random sample of sacks from the top of the hold would ever have provided a reliable result, hence the long tube. Obviously, this in-transit sampling would have been a lot less thorough than would have been the case once it had arrived at its final destination: there, upon unloading, access to the whole cargo would have been feasible.

6.10.2 Transporting the Samples

The arrival of the railway line at Truro in 1852 had a direct impact upon commerce in Cornwall, including the ships awaiting orders in Falmouth. Until then the Cornish people had to rely upon horse-drawn Mail Coaches transporting messages and packages to and from Plymouth. The Mail Coaches *Tally Ho,* the *Telegraph,* and the *Times* had a remarkably frequent timetable for journeys to and from many parts of Cornwall, as well as to Plymouth, London and to all points in between. For instance, it is reported that the *Tally Ho* would leave Truro at 05.45 hours, so that passengers and the mail could catch the 1.00 pm train from *Laira* railway station (Plymouth), arriving in London at ten o'clock[C] that same evening.[51]

[C] This does seem a short time, bearing in mind the need to change horses between Falmouth and Plymouth.

After 1852 it was inevitable that the railway took away the business of the Mail Coaches, even more so when the railway was extended to Falmouth on 24th August 1863, nicely in time for the opening of business at the newly-built docks. It was the speed of the railway that mattered so much, enabling information to reach the ships so much sooner than by horse-drawn coach.

6.10.3 Dangerous or Volatile Cargo

An altogether different matter also affected the Quay Punts: the problems of dangerous or volatile cargos. On 9th March 1872 the Harbour Commissioners had to consider how best to deal with ships whose cargo was petrol, particularly those which intended to either load or discharge it within the boundaries of Falmouth Harbour. At this time there was no designated anchorage for ships carrying a highly volatile cargo. As conditions were known to change from time to time, it was left that the Harbourmaster should determine where such vessels should be moored. A firm regulation was then applied to the discharge of petrol: *i.e.* that it should be handled only between sunrise and sunset. Into that regulation an additional *caveat* was inserted: that, in respect of petrol, *'Quay Punts are forbidden to act as lighters'.*

The ships whose purpose was to carry Cornish-made explosives were also out-of-bounds to the Quay Punts. Understandably, such work required specialised handling in set places and with appropriate safeguards, such as being handled only in daylight. During the course of 1877 the Falmouth Harbour Commissioners were not just authorised, but compelled under the *Explosives Act* 1875 to make bye-laws to cover this activity.[52] More likely than not, this restriction would still have allowed the Quay Punts to ferry the ship's captain or master to and from the Customs House following arrival, but only if the cargo was not being man-handled at the time.

6.11 Falmouth as a Home Port

There had always been a modest number of Falmouth-based ships which constantly exported goods to a number of north-European ports, plus other foreign ships pursuing a similar pattern of work. The Falmouth-registered ships tended to be in addition to those counted from other ports. In 1853 a fleet of comparatively small local merchant vessels exported local tin ore, fish, granite coal and other minerals. These vessels, which traded through Falmouth, were of both local and foreign origin. They tended to load or discharge their cargo either alongside the docks, or at the local wharves, where transport services of one kind or another might have been made available, or by lighter. The smaller locally-based ships seldom required the service of a Quay Punt.

In 1865, agents of the Peruvian Government successfully established a Falmouth depot for the import of guano. Steamers of the British, Irish and Liverpool Lines were scheduled to call at Falmouth for passengers, many of whom were emigrating to America. Other ships deposited timber from the Baltic and the USA. Fruit, wine, hemp, grain, flour, dry fish and, rather surprisingly, live cattle were delivered from Spain (for about 25 years or so, these cattle provided food for the British Armed Forces).

6.12 Preventing the Importation of Disease

All who resided along the coast of Britain had forever to guard against the accidental importation of disease. If, upon entering any British harbour, a crewman was suspected of having either typhoid or cholera, special arrangements for quarantine (as dictated by the Board of Trade) had to be implemented immediately. When the manifestations of any infectious or contagious disease became obvious, controls would be applied but, when disease was present, but unrecognisable to the crew, it is obvious that the risk remained.

Cholera was a much feared and highly infectious disease. For this, the Board of Trade recommended certain procedures to follow in the event of a break-out. The official recommendations were printed in many places, including the very front of the annual Merchant Navy Lists. The subject of Cholera is given specific attention under the heading 'Official Notices' in the edition of 1861. Four other much-feared diseases were typhus, typhoid, scrofula, and 'the ague' (malaria).

The earliest-known date discovered in respect of official control was 25th November 1695, when a local bye-law had been passed stating that '*Going on board a ship from any place infected with the plague before a clean Bill* [of health] *had been shown to the Mayor – fine £10.'*

Whatever type of bumboat might have been around at that time could have become a potential carrier and thereby a danger to the public. Under no circumstances whatsoever would a Quay Punt be permitted to serve an infected ship.

6.13 The Ever-Changing Waterborne Community: The 1881 Census

What mattered to the Quay Punts was not so much the size of the ships, nor was it the nature and quantities of cargo; instead it was the amount of daily work which arose from each one of them. Three matters appear to have influenced their workload:

- The number of ships accommodated within the harbour's precincts at any one time
- The nature of the jobs they were required to undertake, and
- The ship's duration of stay.

To have several ships, each producing a lot of work for many days on end, would have been a boatman's dream.

Throughout the 1870s and the first half of the 1880s, the occupancy of the harbour varied considerably. At some points it would have been quite usual for two or three hundred (or even more) ships to be lying at anchor in Carrick Roads and the inner harbour at any one time. In order to gain a reliable impression of Falmouth on a specific date, the Census of 1881 was carefully examined.[D] This showed that on the day of the census (5th April),

[D] FQP Appendix 1a: Population: Maritime Occupations. Census 1881.

249 vessels were accommodated within Falmouth Harbour of which 209 were visiting ships. Of that 209:

- 47 (22%) were fishing boats (none of which would have been likely to make demands upon the Quay Punts)
- 162 (76%) vessels as potential customers of the Quay Punts. Of these:
  - 119 (73%) were British merchant ships
  - 43 (27%) were from other countries: the larger proportion of which were from France and Germany, the lesser from the various (perhaps more distant) countries of Northern Europe.

On board the 249 ships anchored in the harbour were 1,988 souls.

Two of the vessels were Naval Ships: the permanently moored Training Ship HMS *Ganges* and the long-term visitor HMS *Jacket*. For the purposes of the Census, both the *Ganges* and the *Jacket* were officially regarded as 'Visiting Ships' even though their presence was, to all intents and purposes, permanent. On that day, those two vessels held a combined total of 357 souls (It should be pointed out that, for the most part, these vessels were largely self-sufficient and only occasionally required the services of a Quay Punt).

The remaining 207 foreign vessels therefore carried a population of 1,493 souls (an average of just 7 souls per vessel). That same night the names of several ships' captains were said to have been ashore, and spotted on the registers of local harbourside hotels.

The figures given above were almost certainly towards the higher end of the daily population of ships to be found in Falmouth Harbour. It is considered that although it was Census Day, it was unlikely to have caused the numbers to either swell or to contract to any great extent unless some of the more local inshore fishing vessels felt it necessary to register their presence. 1881 was a reasonably good year for the harbour's business but, unknown to all who depended upon it, the nationwide recession of 1886 was building-up and heading towards them.[E]

Bearing in mind that the total population of the waterborne community was equivalent to a fair-sized village, the description of these individual ships forming an 'ever-changing archipelago' suddenly strikes home. Each ship amounting to a separate floating island upon which would be found many ready-made hierarchical communities utilising finite resources for their survival. They also relied heavily upon the tradesmen of Falmouth being able to anticipate their needs and having the required provisions readily available, and upon each Quay Punt being ready to transport those goods to them. According to the same analysis, it was estimated that, in one way or another, at least 60% of Falmouth's land-based workforce earned much of their wages, if not all, from 'the sea'.

The ships were a mixture of every type to appear in the annual editions of the *Mercantile Navy List*, or *Lloyds Register of Shipping* and recorded by the Ship Agents such as G C Fox and Co.

[E] Allegedly brought about by irresponsible lending by the banks.