

MARITIME HISTORY OF FALMOUTH

The Port, Its Shipping and Pilotage Service

D. G. Wilson

Positioned towards the western end of the English Channel the port of Falmouth has played an important part in the nation's maritime affairs for centuries. The great natural harbour provided shelter from storm and enemy alike. Its ship-yards built and repaired merchant ships which would sail the oceans of the world in search of trade.

Before the days of wireless communication Falmouth was a major port for ships 'calling for orders' when they arrived back in home waters. Here they were met by shipping agents giving instructions for delivery of cargoes. The arrivals were brought into port by highly skilled Trinity House pilots who sailed out to meet them in their fast pilot cutters, often as far as the Isles of Scilly.

This book is about the development of the town, its harbour, and its shipping. It is also about the people who spent their working lives around the Fal estuary and along the dangerous and magnificent coastline of west Cornwall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

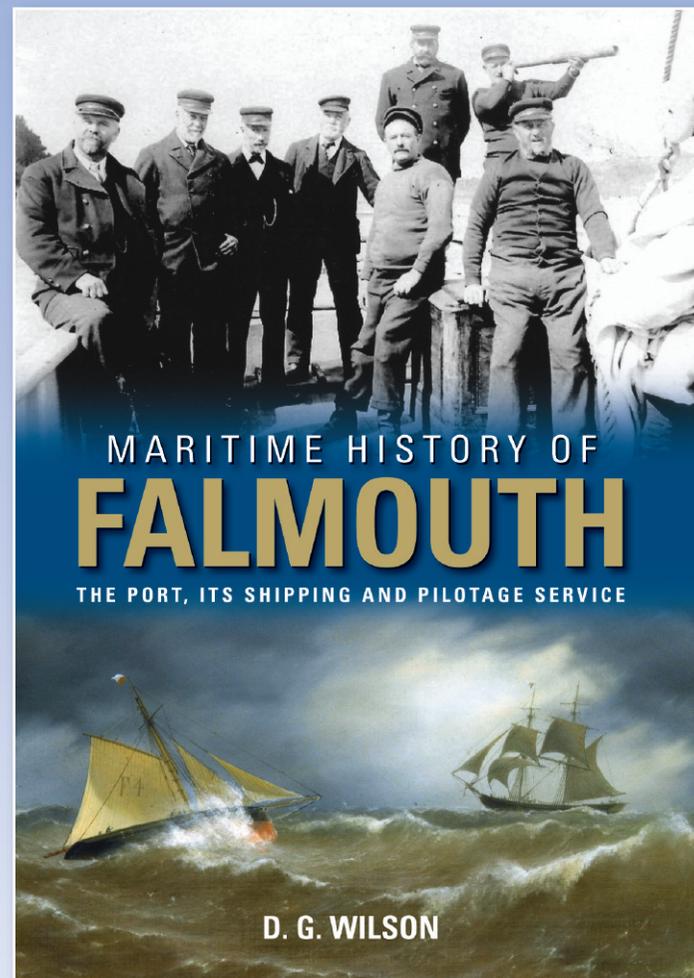


David Wilson has had many years of experience in amateur archaeology, local history studies and sailing traditional craft. He has previously published books on the history of the River Thames, including *The Thames, Record of a Working Waterway* and *The Victorian Thames*. Following a career as a Thames lock keeper he retired to Cornwall in 1997 and has since produced the booklet *The Mills of a Cornish Valley* and the book *Falmouth Haven*. He has got to know his subject intimately, while sailing on the Fal estuary and walking the cliffs of southwest Cornwall. Since 2003 he has worked in Falmouth as a gallery and library volunteer at the National Maritime Museum Cornwall.

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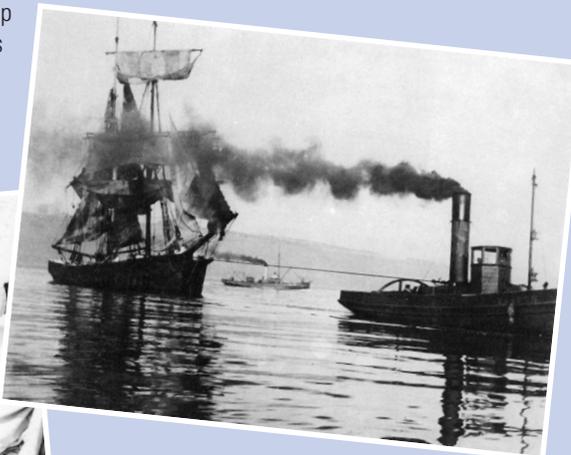


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MARITIME HISTORY OF FALMOUTH – ITS PORT, SHIPPING AND PILOTAGE SERVICE

Right: The aptly-named harbour tug Carbon, burning cheap coal, towing a brigantine on a windless day. The tug was built on The Bar by George Symons in 1893 for shipping agent Robert Fox of Grove Hill House, Falmouth. (RCPS)

Below: Pilots and crew aboard *Richard Green*.



Top right: A small part of the Southwest fishing fleet at the Town Quay, c. 1930. (Cornwall Centre)



Right: Old salts cast a critical eye over this trading ketch laid alongside North Quay, c.1930. (RCPS)
Below: Rounding the mark off Trefusis Point on Classics Day during Falmouth Week in the 1990s.



Example of a double-page spread.

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be close to the shore to catch the business as boats were towed onto the beach from ships anchored in the harbour.

Before any substantial buildings could be erected along the southern mall from Smithick towards Arwenack, the ground had to be cut out and levelled along an axis between the steeply sloping hillside and the drop of between five and ten metres to the foreshore. The ground consists of Devonian rock, part of the Mylor Slane formation, best seen in section in the Quay car park on the north side of the town. On the landward side of the new streets the hillside in places had to be cut away to accommodate the buildings. Steep alleysways or ways still lead to the higher backstreets and gardens, and to higher streets. The quarried stone was used to build up the foundations of buildings rising from the bedrock exposed on the shoreline. These foundations still support shops and offices today. The stone for the construction of early buildings was of course handled on site; timber for the same was no doubt being shipped into the port during general trading from Scandinavia.

Right: A view from the King's Arms Hotel in 1770, by Jan Bawden, looking up the cobbled High Street, which is partly obscured by the hanging sign of the Royal Standard inn. The early market house is on the left; the 'bump-off' depicted on the right indicates that a small vessel is drawn up on the slipway.

Below: An early photograph of the Strand slipway, bordered with quay walls and buildings. The way of the King's Arms Hotel is on the right. In 1871 the slipway was filled in to form the Market Strand pier. (RCPS)

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Market Strand c.1920. The tiered buildings of the High Street to beyond. The columns and balcony on the right mark the entrance to the former King's Hotel (now replaced by the present King's Arms Hotel in 1903). The Market Strand (Prince of Wales pier in the right) behind the boys.

Left: Advertisement from Warren's Falmouth guide of 1864. The new Globe Hotel was situated on the Town Quay.

Far left: Looking down the quay to Fish Strand Quay. (RCPS)

Below: A rather grandiose but informative advertisement for the Royal Hotel, published in Philip Sparrow's of Falmouth, 1827. Some recognizable elements of the building still remain at the junction of Market Street, Church Street, and Fish Strand Quay.

The development of the town would have been overseen by the Arwenack estate officials who set the property boundaries and fixed the rents. By the 1660s the swampy ground of the Smithick cove had been raised and consolidated, apart from a wide central slipway (The Strand). Sea walls were extending in both directions along the shoreline. Buildings included fish cellars, inns, Custom and market houses. Close by in prominent positions were the large houses of merchants, who perhaps had moved from London and elsewhere. This area is still known as Market Strand. The first planned street would have been the present Market Street, extending southwards from the Strand. This was the most desirable area, being close to the centre of trade on the Strand (and later quay that was built over it). The present main shop frontages must reflect the seventeenth century boundaries. Modern large-scale maps show that those on the seaward side, although not of exact equal widths to each other, are comparatively wider, and the strip down to high tide level longer than the rest of the town. Shop property boundaries on the other side of the street are generally narrower; large development was restricted here by the slope of the hill, although the maps indicate a plethora of ancillary buildings on several levels to the rear of the main properties. One can imagine that in the early days the shopkeepers or artisans who rented the properties, having perhaps built them themselves, would have lived behind or 'above the shop'. Naturally there have been major architectural changes to all the streets since the seventeenth century.

Although there has been a massive infilling of the original valley and cove, the contours can still be observed at Market Strand and The Moor behind it. Market Street rises quite considerably from the Strand, and follows the curving line of the foreshore as far as Fish Strand. As the name suggests, in the days when Falmouth had substantial fishing here the catch was landed and sold here. A long quay was later built over the open beach. As an adjacent site from 1819 a large platform was built out into the harbour; this held the town gas works, an essential but ugly feature of the waterfront.

Fish Strand, Falmouth.