

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 shipyards 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.

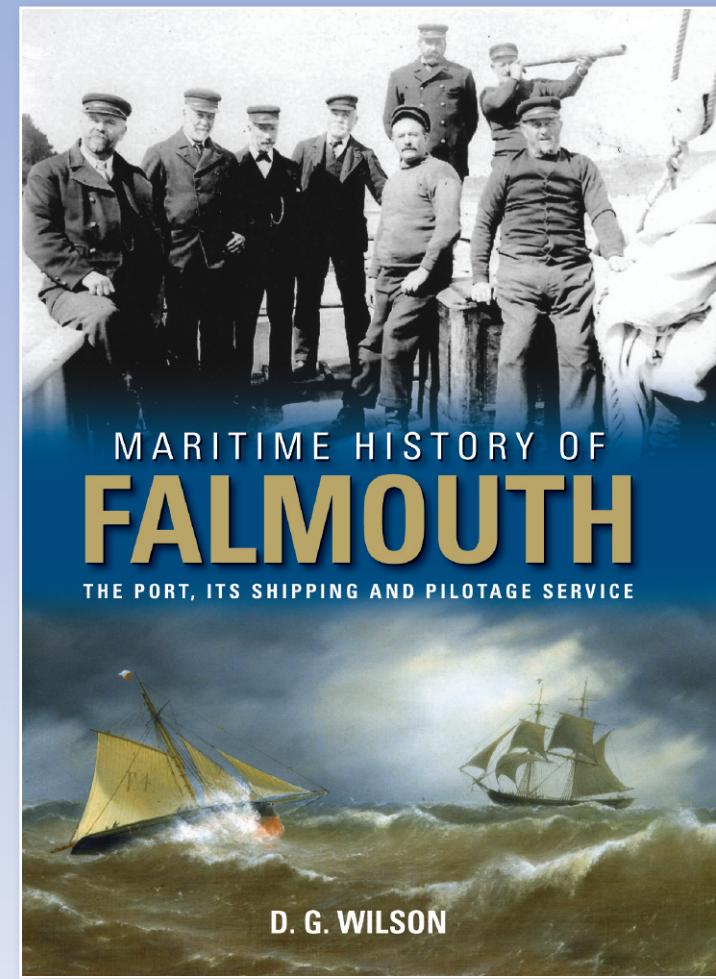
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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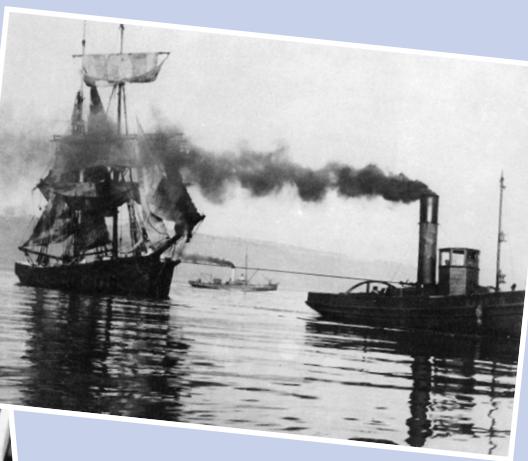
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MARITIME HISTORY OF FALMOUTH – ITS PORT, SHIPPING AND PILOTAGE SERVICE

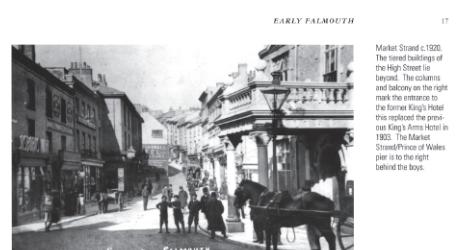
Right: The aptly-named harbour tug Carbon, burning cheap coal, towing a brigantine on a windless day. The tug was built on The Bar by George Symons in 1893 for shipping agent Robert Fox of Grove Hill House, Falmouth. (RCPS)

Below: Pilots and crew aboard *Richard Green*.



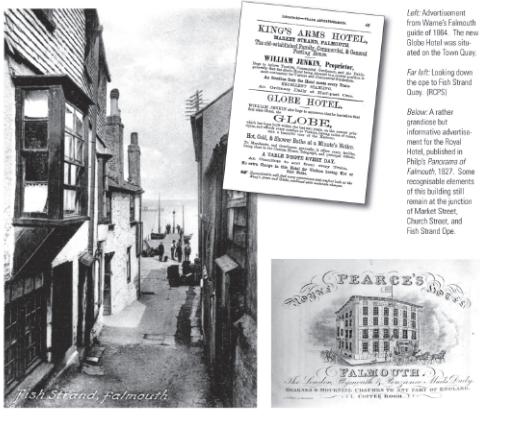
Top right: A small part of the Southwest fishing fleet at the Town Quay, c. 1930.
(Cornwall Centre)

Example of a double-page spread.



EARLY FALMOUTH

Market Strand c1920.
The road leading to the High Street is beyond. The columns and balustrade on the right mark the site of the former King's Hotel. This replaced the previous King's Arms Hotel in 1880. The Strand/Prince of Wales pier is to the right behind the boys.



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MARITIME HISTORY OF FALMOUTH

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

Before any substantial buildings could be erected along the southern end from Smeathick towards the head of the strand, the ground had to be cut out and levelled along an area between the steep sloping hillside and the drop of between five and ten metres to the foreshore. The ground consists of Devonian rock, part of the Mylor Slate formation, best seen in section in the Quarry car park on the north side of the town. On the landward side of the new strand the road was planned to lead away to accommodate the new buildings. Some also had to be moved to the higher bank above the strand, 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 handy on site; timber for the same was no doubt being shipped into the port during general trading from Scandinavia.



The development of the town would have been overseen by the Argyll estate officials who set the property boundaries and fixed the rents. By the 1600s the swampy ground of the Smeathick 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 cellars, inns, Cornish and merchant houses. Close by in particular were the large inns of the time, which had probably 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 main thoroughfare, being the route to the quays on the Strand (and later quite possibly over it). The present main street does not 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 steps down to high tide level look like the remains of the town. Ship propellers are shown on the sides of some of the crevices and innumerable large depressions were restricted here by the slope of the hill, although the maps indicate a plethora of ancient buildings at several levels to the rear of the main properties. One can imagine that at the early days the shopkeepers or artisans who made this property their permanent home, and their families, 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 the top of the hill. The road behind it, Market Street, runs quite independently from the Strand. It follows the carriageway of the modern Strand. As its name suggests, in the days when Falmouth had a substantial fishing fleet the catch was landed and sold here. A long quay was later built over the open beach. At 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



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 during Falmouth Week in the 1990s.

