

# **The Rise and Fall of a Cornish Shipbuilder**

## **The Slades of Polruan**

*Elizabeth Clemence, September 2002*

### **My Connection with the Slade Family**

My great grandmother was a Slade and until a few years ago, not yet being much of a genealogist, that was all I knew about the family. Then a cousin who knew I was modestly interested in genealogy produced a marriage certificate for my great grandparents and I was off. Richard Bolitho introduced me to the Toronto Cornish Association and also put me onto 'Members Interests' in the Genealogical Research Dictionary. This led me first to a sixth cousin who led me to a third cousin, Helen Doe, who put me onto another third cousin, an historian living in Truro who had done considerable research on the Slade family. Michael Martyn's research expanded and confirmed my own attempts to trace the Slade family tree through the International Genealogical Index back as far as Richard Slade born in the early 1600's.

### **Meeting the Cornish/English Slades**

In May, Helen Doe, assisted by another Slade family member, Kris Webb, organized the first Slade family reunion. I decided that it might be a once-in-a-lifetime experience and with a little trepidation, decided to send in my registration. I was so glad I did as it was a fantastic experience with 57 attendees. The reunion was held in Slade country near Fowey and focused on the villages of Polruan and Pelynt, both of which had inns previously owned by the family. In fact, the reunion started with a pub lunch at the Russell Inn and finished with a really splendid lunch at the Jubilee Inn, formerly the Axe Inn in the days when it was owned by Thomas Slade. Everyone at the reunion was descended from Thomas and his wife, Elizabeth Bettinson.

A real feature of the reunion was the first viewing of the new and expanded Slade family tree referred to by some as the Bayeaux Tapestry. When it was spread out on a line of chairs in St. Wyllow Church in Lanteglos, it measured about 40 feet. The tree spanned 400 years, detailed about 1000 names and covered 14 generations. The author of this splendid document was Kris Webb who is a marvellous genealogist and expert in genealogy and computers. Luckily, Kris and I have the same software. She is a descendant of my great grandmother's oldest brother. For those who might be interested, I've brought the chart, not as large as the Bayoux as I only included basic data, names and dates of birth and death. I also came to the realization that there are certainly more Slades who immigrated from

Cornwall other than those descended from my great grandmother. Three family members are trying to take the family further back by looking for a connection with John Winslade born circa 1510, a strong Catholic who was involved in the unsuccessful Prayer Book Revolution. It's an interesting suggestion.

### **The Shipbuilding Slades**

Most of my information on the shipbuilding Slades comes from a book written by Helen Doe and published earlier this year. The book is entitled 'Jane Slade of Polruan' and is a tribute to the very strong woman who literally ran 'Slade and Sons' after the death of her husband Christopher who founded the firm. However, let's start at the beginning and have a brief look at this family business.

Thomas Slade, as well as owning the Axe inn, owned several other properties in the village of Pelynt and he also farmed in the Pelynt area. His family was large and one of the sons, Christopher saw more opportunity for employment on the coast rather than in Pelynt. Shipping had always been important in Cornwall due to bad roads and no railways. Smuggling was important to many families as a way of supplementing low incomes but by the time Christopher started his apprenticeship, punitive taxation, increased coastguard activity and greater trading opportunities, the smuggling trade was declining. An increase in legitimate trade brought about by the end of the war with France and the opening of trade routes meant increased demand for merchant vessels which were larger and able to carry heavier cargoes. Christopher likely walked with his father from Pelynt to Polruan ready to start a seven-year apprenticeship as a shipwright. It was 1824 and Christopher was 14. Shipbuilding was expanding during the years 1816-40, 33 ships with average tonnage of 68 were built in Polruan and Boddinick compared to six ships of 41 tons during the previous 30 years. The terms of the apprenticeship showed that Christopher had, of his own free will and by the consent of his father put himself apprentice to the shipbuilders'.

In 1831, Christopher married Jane Salt and with her, was installed by his new father-in-law to manage a new public house, the Russell Inn, named after Lord Russell. Being a landlord and a shipwright was beneficial as local inns were valuable places for business information; shipwrights, ship builders, master mariners, local tradesmen and fishermen congregated there. It is believed that Christopher apprenticed with Geach and Son, the main shipbuilder in Polruan and that he continued to work for them until the firm experienced business problems and declared bankruptcy in 1837. The notice of Public Auction lists the shares in ships owned by Geaches; this illustrates the method by which risk was shared in the significant cost of building and running ships. Smaller ships had just a few

shareholders whereas for larger ships, ownership was spread over many members of the local community to a maximum of 64 shares per vessel. The failure of Geaches meant there were opportunities for new shipbuilding businesses and Christopher likely went to work for one of them and he also invested in new ships built locally and also ships purchased from elsewhere such as Canada and registered in the port. Christopher perhaps worked on some of the ships in which he invested.

In 1839, Christopher's father died and left him two properties both of which he sold to his brother in order to give him some capital. Christopher and his father-in-law had a plan and in 1841 a shipwright's yard was built on the waterfront. At first, it was leased to a sailmaker.

The 1840's were a time of severe economic depression in Cornwall and shipbuilding slowed down. Businesses were in a state of flux causing employment problems for shipwrights and carpenters and many Cornish people emigrated, my own great grandparents among them. Smuggling was again reported and an example of the tragedy affecting the rural poor was a recipe in the Royal Cornwall Gazette describing how to make wholesome food from diseased potatoes. Fortunately, the inn keeping business remained a constant source of income

### **Slades Yard**

Although they had owned the site for six years, it was not until the end of the recession in 1847, that Christopher with his father-in-law, William Salt, finally set up their shipbuilding yard. A new yard required wood, tools, men and buildings; these were financed by William taking out a mortgage of 200 pounds on the Russell Inn. It is likely that the initial work was repairing, converting and re-rigging ships which they acquired elsewhere before selling them. By 1851, more than half of the occupations of the population of Polruan were related to shipping. By 1852, however, only Slades and Butsons had shipbuilding/repair businesses on the east side of the Fowey River. Christopher was now ready to start building new schooners and brigantines.

### **The First Ships**

Christopher had several posts in Polruan. He had been the host for the Annual Court Leet at the Russell Inn; he was overseer of the poor and he was renting a cellar on the quay for coal. Cornwall had no coal reserves of its own and as an essential energy source for any activity, it remained the main import to Cornwall for many years. Several of Jane and Christopher's 12 children worked with their father at the yard and one son was at sea. The first Slade ship, a

brigantine, 156 tons, called the Peter and James, and built for Peter Tadd, was launched in 1856. Like all ships, it had shareholders who were hopeful investors; success was based on good weather, a capable master and crew, a well-built ship, a regular supply of cargoes and good fortune. The Peter and James lasted until 1865 when it was lost with all her crew on passage from Salonica. Christopher bought shares in other ships such as the Capella, a Prince Edward Island-built brigantine. Canadian ships had to be strengthened and adapted; this type of work was bread and butter income to the yards; when the building of a new ship was started, it dominated the small yards and it might be up to a year before it could be launched. In 1858, Christopher launched the Kate & Anne for the Hocken family, a boat which was well built and carefully sailed until it was sunk in a collision with a steamship. Even so, it was later raised and used as a barge until 1974, an amazing survival of 108 years.

### **Expansion**

The West Street yards were too small for the larger ships which were now in demand. Christopher expanded taking over the lease of Butsons old yard which allowed repair work in one yard and new building in the other. He also increased his investment in ships. Still, the Polruan yards were small, restricted by the steep sides of the harbour. They enlarged where possible out into the harbour but still, the Polruan yards were very small allowing the building of one ship at a time as compared with say a yard in Padstow covering five acres and building five ships at a time. However, the Port of Fowey was becoming busy and a railway line was proposed to bring china clay more easily into port for export. Christopher rented the town quay and received fees for all merchandise landed there. This landed him into several disputes such as one over the Polruan ferry.

There is a gap of six years in Christopher's shipbuilding, the next one being the Juno, built with a partner although he continued to invest in ships. A superior clipper schooner. 280 tons, 'The Sparkling Wave' was built and launched in 1866 followed by 'The Silver Stream' of the same size and destined for the Mediterranean and Brazilian trade in 1868. Also, that year he bought Bennett's House and Quays, a valuable and important site. Bigger ships could now be built and the sawpit, steam chest and blacksmith's shed could now be sited safely away from the inflammable sawdust. In 1869, the new railway delivered the first shipment of china clay straight to the dockside; this meant there was a significant increase in the number of ships using the port. Christopher and his wife Jane now decided it was time to move from building ships for other investors to building a ship and retaining ownership, thus retaining the trading profits. The ship, named after Jane, was destined for the fruit trade with Thomas, the second son who was a

master mariner, in command

But tragedy struck with the death of Christopher in 1870. All his property, stock-in-trade as a shipbuilder and innkeeper was left in trust to his children with Jane having full use of the Trust. In an age of the stereotypical Victorian autocrat, he treated his sons and daughters equally. Christopher had owned or leased four of five shipbuilding yards, Bennett's House and Quay, rented Newquay Dock and a yard off West Street, was the tenant of the Russell Inn, had shares in several local ships, was the managing owner of the Alert and had an interest in the coal trade. He was also the lessee of the Polruan Town Quay. Instead of retiring, Jane placed herself firmly as chairman of the firm, continuing to run the Russell Inn but also managing the rest of the business. William, the eldest son was head shipwright at the yards assisted by John and Philip and the firm became 'Mrs. Jane Slade and Sons'.

The 'Jane Slade' was launched in 1870. John Keast in his 'History of Fowey' notes: It was a great day when a ship was to be launched. Flags and bunting were displayed, and the cheers echoed across the harbour as the vessel glided down and slapped into the water. Unlike other Polruan ships, the 'Jane Slade' was owned and managed by her builders; she was laid up in 1928, still majority owned by the family. Her first voyage was to Palermo where a cargo (probably lemons and raisins) was loaded followed by a transatlantic crossing to New York. Farmers came in from the country to swell the crowd celebrating the launch of a beautifully modelled schooner, 'The Snow Flake' and now the business was well established.

Over the next several years, there were several new ship launches from the five shipyard sites in Polruan plus the repair and maintenance business. Ships were now felted and yellow metalled ready for voyages to warmer climates. This protected the wood from the ravages of tropical worms.

### **The Last Ships**

In 1877, one of Polruan's most well-known ships was launched, the 'Koh-I-Noor', a 243-ton barquentine. It had a long list of shareholders including Jane and her brother-in-law, John, owner of the Axe Inn at Pelynt. This was the inn owned by his father, my great great grandfather and is now the Jubilee Inn where I stayed this past May. Work continued at a steady pace for the next decade. In 1879, the biggest ship ever to be built in the Port of Fowey was launched, the 'ES Hocken', a 243-ton barquentine which had cost £5250 to build.

By 1890, the days of fruit carrying were numbered; it was harder to get the

cargoes and increased competition from steam tonnage on ocean routes was pushing older sailing vessels into coastal trade. Steam was more effective and could get to the smaller ports. Several ships were lost in the eighties, sometimes with all hands; this included four Slade-built ships within a 12-month period and the news for the continuing viability of the remaining ships was not encouraging.

The woman whose energy and drive had been the main force of the business, Jane Slade, died in 1885 and taking her place was her son Samuel who had the expertise to find the orders and keep the books. He was an active networker However; the great days of schooner building were over. The repair business continued, and fishing boats were built although even these were less in number. However, with the opening of the Fowey-Lostwithiel railway line in 1883, tourism was becoming an important part of the local economy and by the 1890's, recreative sailing and boating were well established. The Slades turned their hand to yachts, producing the 'Foam', an important boost to the community long starved of the excitement and job opportunities brought by the ship launches. By 1892, the family reached the peak of its influence in the port. Samuel was on the board of Fowey Commissioners and Thomas, a grandson became Harbourmaster. Samuel also was busy with local matters in Polruan such as the waterworks; water still came from communal wells and a typhoid outbreak was attributed to the appalling drainage. The Jubilee waterworks were opened with a hearty celebration and the children and old people over 60 had a free tea.

It was time for the third generation. Joseph, Jim and Ernest were learning the trade at the turn of the 20th century, a difficult time as the world of the sailing vessel was coming to a close although there was still plenty of maintenance and repair work. the remaining sailing vessels were mostly working in the coastal trade with china clay, coal and other cargoes. When John died like several Slades, at the Bodmin Asylum, his son Ernie took over as manager of Slade and Sons. Yachts were launched and the Slades became blockmakers and chandlers as well as boat builders and repairers; they also built a new steam powered ferry running between Polruan and Fowey.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the yard was having financial difficulties. Bills for private patient care at the Bodmin Asylum and from customers, were problems. Ernie was unlucky in his purchase of old cheap ships and he was not a good manager but Slades yard still had an excellent reputation. However, the old life of the port was changing and for many, the reality of postwar life was unemployment. Cornwall was suffering from a severe crisis in mining and even the dependable china clay industry. Families left for better opportunities.

Firms scrambled to get hold of any vessel capable of carrying freight as the freight rates rose steeply at the end of the war. A shipbroker purchased a war prize, the three-masted American ship AB Sherman in Plymouth. She had been caught just off the Scillies handing fuel to the Germans. She was brought to Slades who would handle the repair work and there was excitement for this very significant commission would require a large workforce. Ernie thought that the money would allow Slades to build a permanent dry dock for repair work. The work was completed in 1921 and the ship received a class A1 certificate from Lloyds. But in the meantime, an acute shortage of ships at the start of her repair had turned into a surplus. The original cost plus the repair costs as well as a problem with water getting into the cargo meant that the ship was sold. She had put her owners out of pocket by £48,000! Slades had no chance. After 1922 the yard did little work and men were laid off. Ernie and his brothers worked to put it back on its feet and pay off creditors, but the firm needed help and a chartered accountant drew up a deed between J. Slade and Sons and their creditors. The Deed of Arrangement allowed the firm to stay in business listing everyone's assets as security against the debts thus avoiding bankruptcy. One asset on the books, the 'Jane Slade', spent a few years in the coastal trade but she was laid up, fully rigged, in Pont Pill-a legacy of the past.

The Slades had an interesting connection with Daphne du Maurier whose family bought a second home in Bodinnick. She discovered the 'Jane Slade' and delved into her history, talking with her father's boatman Harry Adams, married to Dora, a granddaughter of Jane Slade, Dora herself, Ernie and other villagers. She then based her book 'The Loving Spirit' on the family. However, the ship's entry on the Fowey Ships Register was closed in 1928 and she was gradually dismantled. Slades yard still did the occasional small piece of work and built a yacht for Daphne.

The Slades were bankrupt carrying on the yard through the grace of their creditors. A fourth generation tried to keep it going but it was sold two or three times (including to Mrs. D. Browning). Today it is Toms yard. The owners have expanded, recreating and extending the line of yards that were once all run by the Slades.

#### References:

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