

Isle of Wight Pilotage District

In 1808 there were nearly a hundred pilots around the Island at Yarmouth, Cowes, Ryde, Nettlestone, St Helens, Bembridge and Atherfield. These self-employed pilots either had their own boats or hired boats to take them out to ships requiring a pilot. In 1808 Trinity House was given the authority to examine and license pilots. It was decided that there should be 35 first class pilots and 35 second class pilots. The pilots were licensed for either the outward journey to the cutter or the inward journey but not for both.

By 1819 there were 150 pilots licensed for the Island District and stationed at Cowes or Portsmouth.

In 1844, with the increased trade generated by the new docks, T.H. first licensed pilots for the separate Southampton District.

At this time a number of small cutters, manned by 4 or 5 pilots cruised in or beyond the area in competition with one another. A rowing boat, manned by members of the cutter crew, transferred the pilots. Keeping a sailing vessel on station and transferring pilots in all weathers must have been arduous but, at the time, there was no alternative.

In the T.H. annals there is a complaint recorded saying that when all the pilot cutters were afloat there were so many different types of pilot flag displayed that it was difficult to tell who were pilots and who were smugglers.

On February 20th 1886 the separate, independent Cowes Pilotage District was incorporated with Portsmouth, despite strong protests from local authorities on the Island who complained about loss of pilotage rights and privileges. It was required that pilots should reside at Portsmouth.

By 1899 the position had become more ordered and the Needles station was served by two cruising sailing cutters. Some of the vessels in service at that time being Agenoria, Osprey, Neptune, Spider, Hornet and Hesperus

In 1907 the Southampton District was incorporated with the Portsmouth District to form the Isle of Wight District Pilotage Service, continuing to provide two cutters at the Needles.

In 1910 T.H. took on the responsibility of providing the cutter service from the pilots. The pilots were self-employed and paid Trinity House out of their earnings for the support service Trinity House supplied. In those days, supplying a boarding service was provided by sailing cutters.

In 1910 T.H. had two auxiliary ketches built. These were the Solent and the St Helens. They were 60 feet in length with a speed of 6/7 knots under power. The Solent was sunk when in collision with the troopship Duffrin off the Needles in 1912.

Over the years there were many changes. Prior to World War I there were pilots on the Dover/Deal area that were licensed to pilot ships from Gravesend in the Thames as far as the Needles.

Maintaining a cutter on station continually was not always easy. On September 17th 1921 there was a severe gale. The Needles pilot cutter was anchored, sheltering in Totland Bay. Suddenly her anchor cable parted. The auxiliary engine would not start. Three more anchors were deployed but still she dragged. Two of the anchors gave way but the third held just as the cutter was approaching the shore and nearly aground. The auxiliary engine was eventually started and the cutter proceeded under power to deep water. The Coastguard had been standing by to rescue the crew from the beach. Fortunately they were not needed.

With the advent of steam power and diesel engines, the boarding task became easier. Initially the cutters were small motor-sailers such as the Woodbridge, No.4, that can be seen in a photograph showing it on its moorings in the Medina. She carried a rowing boat for transfers. The jetty belonged to East Cowes Sailing club, behind the Victoria Tavern (commonly known as

Myram's after a former landlord). The Pilotage Depot was located at the bottom of Minerva Road in what is now the RNLI offices. It consisted of a flat-roofed store and workshop with offices above for the Superintendent, clerical officer and secretary. There was also an anchor store located at the depot and supplies for the lighthouses were kept here during WW2.

Superintendent Edward J. "Bungy" Young lived at 41 Osborne Road, East Cowes, and had an office there at one time. He had joined the service in 1912 and retired as Superintendent in 1950. The Pilotage secretary was Eileen Millmore. Edward Young was followed as superintendent by Captain Fraser, then Danny Perkins and finally Ron Birkin before the post was down-graded to officer-in-charge in the late 1960s.

There was a seniority order of Pilotage districts. The Superintendents at Harwich and Folkestone wore four rings of braid on their uniform while Superintendents at "Outports" such as East Cowes were entitled to only three rings.

The motor-sailers were replaced in the 1930s by larger coal-fired steamvessels. The **Brook**, No.2, was built in 1932 at Birkenhead and carried a small motor launch for the transfer of pilots. She was joined by a similar vessel, the **Gurnard**, No.3. The **Penda**, a converted motor yacht, became the third of a trio. In 1946 the boilers of the Brook and Gurnard were converted to burn oil rather than coal. This made life much better for the engine room staff. The last Cutter, the diesel powered **Bembridge**, No.9, was built for the Solent area but spent most of her working life on the Dover station. She did not return here until she replaced the Penda when the Needles station was replaced by launches. The Gurnard was scrapped and the Nab station was serviced by the Brook and the Bembridge. The Brook was the last cutter to leave the local service when the launches took over.

The three cutters maintained two pilotage stations, one at the approaches to the Needles' Channel and one at the Nab. The cutters were on station at the Needles for a fortnight then had a week in Cowes for servicing and on standby. They then took over the station at the Nab for a fortnight followed by another week at Cowes.

The arriving ships would communicate with the duty cutter by MF radio operated by the radio officer to give the time of their arrival. There were six cabins for inward pilots waiting for a ship. There was always a "duty pilot" on board. Replacement inward pilots would be collected from Totland or Yarmouth by a small pilot's relief boat. On the Needles cutter the outward pilots would wait for a boat to take them ashore to Yarmouth, then latterly Totland, from where they would make their own way home by bus, train or taxi. There could be up to 7 or 8 pilots on board at any one time.

Each cutter carried a crew nineteen consisting of: -
3 navigating officers, 3 engineer officers, 8 seamen, 2 greasers, a cook, a steward and a cabin boy.

The officers did watches of four hours with eight hours off. The ratings did four hours on and four hours off. The seamen were in two groups of four with two men in the launch taking the pilot and two on deck launching and recovering the boat. The crew had every third week off when the ship was in Cowes and additional holidays when the ship went for refit. In 1951 a second officer received £8.0.0d a week but a third engineer received £7.10.0d, which was considered unfair. Soon afterwards they were put on the same pay scale. Out of their wages the men would have to pay a Mess Bill of about £2.0.0d. They supplied their own dry stores, so it was normal in the officers mess to see six different small teapots lined up for each officer to brew his own tea.

On the 29th March 1961 a new T.H. pilot station was opened at Totland Bay. The cruising cutter service at the Needles closed with the Penda being the last cutter on duty. She then proceeded to Cowes for few days before being transferred to the Harwich Pilotage District. The Gurnard was scrapped and the Brook and

Bembridge continued to maintain the Nab pilot station. The cutter moorings were still opposite Marvin's Yard on the west bank of the Medina but the launches were serviced at the Depot off the High Street.

A House had been built, overlooking Totland Pier to provide accommodation for pilots to wait ashore until required for inbound vessels. The new station stood on a site of approximately half an acre on the cliff top due east of Totland Pier. It was necessary to carry out extensive re-shaping of the site to provide a level plateau for the building and car parking space. The outer walls were of cavity construction, built of bricks made on the Island and the low-pitched roof was covered with copper. Although sited some 150 feet from the cliff edge the station, particularly the interior, had a distinctly nautical atmosphere with its cabin accommodation for five pilots and the commanding "bridge-like" view over the whole of the bay from the double-glazed plate-glass window of the spacious sitting room. There were three divans in this room that could be converted into six beds to provide additional sleeping accommodation at short notice. Near the large window overlooking the bay was a switchboard connected to two telephones by each pilots bed – one direct line to the pier head and the launch and the other to the Freshwater exchange. There was also radio equipment and visual signalling apparatus. There was also an electric kettle and a small cooking grill.

There was a caretaker for the station who lived in a self-contained flat on the ground floor. The kitchen was fully fitted with the latest equipment. Central heating and hot water supplies were provided by an automatic oil-fired boiler located outside the main building. The building was designed by Messrs Drivers, Jonas & Co. and erected by Messrs W. Downer (IW) Ltd. Edward Watts & Sons Ltd and Vectis Electrical Installations, both of Cowes, provided the heating and electrical installations respectively.

Three seventy-foot high-speed launches were purchased for the Needles station. These were based at Totland Pier until required to transfer a pilot. The Leader, built in 1957, was the first of the launches to take up duty. The others were developments of the Leader and named Link and Landward, both built in 1960 by Phillips & Son of Dartmouth to a design by Peter Thornycroft. Landward had her day of fame when she led the funeral procession for Sir Winston Churchill up the Thames in 1965. She continued in the service until sold 1978. She was seen in 2006 at Medway Bridge Marina, Rochester for sale at £160,000, having been refitted in 1981.

The launches were fitted with twin Rolls Royce supercharged engines that gave a service speed of 15 knots. They were fitted with radar and both M.F. and V.H.F. radios. Improvements in short range VHF radios allowed a ship's navigating officer on the Bridge to speak directly to the launches, giving them an accurate time of arrival.

In 1965 The East Cowes Depot, in the High Street, was extended and rebuilt. The pilotage service was invited to move into a boat store and offices in the new building. The Superintendents office was located on the right of the entrance to the office block. Ron Birkin was superintendent at the time but, when he retired in 1966, his position was taken by Jack Sharp as Officer-in-charge of the Pilotage district. This avoided having two superintendents in the East Cowes District, one for Pilotage and one for the Lights Department.

In 1966 a pilot station was set up at the end of Ryde Pier. There had been an office for pilots in Union Street and now accommodation was added. This became the office for Jack Sharp as officer-in-charge until he was promoted to Superintendent of Pilots at Harwich. Peter Trafford took over the post until the district closed in 1988.

The establishment of the Ryde pilot station marked the end of the cruising cutters. They were withdrawn from service and replaced by two forty foot high speed launches based at the pier. Most of

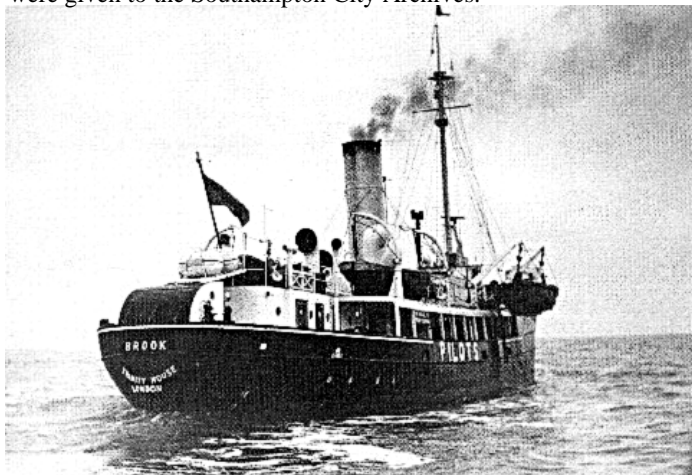
the launches were built at Bembridge – Nelson craft built to the design of Commander Thornycroft. Their names were Vigil, Versatile, Valid, Vanquisher, Velonia, Vagrant, Van Dyke and Valkyrie.

Other pilot launches built at Bembridge were tested in the Solent before being taken to Dover, Harwich, Middlesborough, Liverpool or Whitehaven. Generally Arthur Morris checked the engines in his capacity as Engineer-in-Charge of the pilotage district from 1966, based at the East Cowes Depot. In his youth, Arthur had been unable to go to sea due to a medical condition but had completed an engineering apprenticeship at the London Graving Dock. A Trinity House pilot cutter was in for overhaul when Arthur learnt that he would be able to get a job on pilot cutters. He joined his first cutter, the Brook, at the Needles in 1950 in a force 7 gale. He could not look at rice pudding again for many years!

The Southampton Pilotage District at this time had a support staff of sixteen uniformed officers, twenty ratings, seven coxswains with two boatmen at Portsmouth. They operated five pilot launches, a 30-footer at Portsmouth, 40-footers at Southampton and Totland and two at Ryde.

Maintenance of all the launches was carried out at East Cowes. On one occasion one of the launches reported loss of all propulsion on one engine. The launch returned to the depot on the other engine. The Depot crane lifted the stern of the launch out of the water to confirm that the propeller had fallen off but the engineers were surprised to see a discarded car tyre neatly placed over the tips of the propeller as if on the wheel of a car.

In 1988 the government removed the responsibility for maintaining pilotage districts away from Trinity House and gave it to the local port authorities. This reduced the demands on the Trinity House budget. The pilotage for Southampton is now run by Associated British Ports at Southampton Docks. The assets, including the launches together with some of the crews, were transferred to Associated British Ports (Southampton) and the Trinity House Pilotage in East Cowes closed down. The bell from the Penda and some old photographs now decorate the pilot's lounge in the pilots accommodation at Dock Head in Southampton. Other archives were given to the Southampton City Archives.



This article is by David Burdett, an Old Conway who served part of his career with the Trinity House Steamvessel Service and is writing a book on TH at East Cowes, including pilotage.

David helped establish the East Cowes Heritage Centre in 1992 and now spends his time running the I.O.W Society.

He says: *I shall be very grateful if you would include the attached article in an edition of the Cachalot as it will let a wider audience know of my research and provide a chance to correct any mistakes I have made and possibly add to the information. For example I have no information about what happened to the pilotage service during the two World Wars, nor have I included anything about Portsmouth pilotage when the Trinity House service was terminated.*

Please point out that I am not a serious researcher and the article is based on a casual collection of information so is liable to inaccuracies. Any information and memories that members might have will be gratefully received and passed on to David.

Ed