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Lydney Ships

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LYDNEY SHIPS

by FRANK H. HARRIS

THERE is an old tradition in Lydney that the tide of the Severn formerly came up the Pill as far as the site of the present engine sheds, and that a large ship had been built near the Turret spring. This tradition has been strengthened by the discovery in the middle of the last century of the remains of a stone wharf near the old Pill House, and of cannon balls and chain shot on the site of the sheds.

The late Mr F. S. Hockaday, while collecting material for a parish history, came across some correspondence in the Calendar of State Papers (Domestic) 1665-67, relating to the building of two warships at Lydney Pill during the later days of the Commonwealth, and of another built at Cone Pill early in the Restoration. When he abandoned his work on the local history in order to undertake a greater task on the diocesan records, Mr Hockaday gave the writer the notes he had made on the Lydney war ships. These notes form the basis of the present paper.

In the summer of 1556 the naval authorities of the Commonwealth decided that Dean Forest would be a convenient place for building a 5th rate frigate. In August a master shipwright, Daniel Furzer, was instructed to go to Lydney Pill to construct the ship. He was told to apply to Major John Wade, who resided at Little Dean and was Overseer of the Government iron works in the Forest, for orders, money, timber and ironwork. Furzer, incidentally, described the Forest as a 'forlorn wilderness', when he arrived at Lydney.

The frigate was commenced soon afterwards, with timber brought down from the woods. Furzer later wrote for authority to make the masts out of oak from the

Forest, and mentioned that resin could be obtained at Bristol at 11s per cwt. and cordage, sails, etc., as cheaply as in London. He added that there was a dozen of the State's guns on the Back at Bristol, and that there was some talk of casting others at Lydney Furnace. However, it was decided that the 'Friendship', of London, which was carrying timber from Lydney Pill to Chatham, Woolwich, Deptford and the Tower, should bring back masts and rigging for the new frigate.

On September 3, 1657, about a year from the time she was laid down, the ship was launched, and named 'Forester'. Furzer had applied for seamen to rig her and take her to King's Road and by the 22nd she was lying in Lydney Pill with masts and yards set. On the 28th she sailed down the river for King's Road, which she reached in two hours.

In August, Jasper Grant had been appointed master of the new ship, but after waiting six weeks for her completion he was dismissed owing to a 'difference' between him and the boatswain. The new captain was Anthony Archer, who reported on October 24 that the 'Forester' was being manned and victualled, and would be ready for sea the following week.

On her first voyage Archer found the ship very 'tender-sided', and had to put in to Plymouth where he took on ballast and provisions. Apparently the ballast proved effective for he later reported that she sailed very well. Her tonnage was 306 gross and she carried a crew of about 80 men. She was armed with 22 guns, but her captain, writing from Plymouth in June, asked for four more culverins of 12 cwt. apiece, and a few more seamen as his ship 'deserved' more than 100 men.

In September 1558, the 'Forester' left King's Road to convoy 20 ships to Lisbon, Virginia, and other places. The following summer she returned from Copenhagen with a sprung main mast, and Archer complained that her ports were too low, being within 18 to 20 inches of

the water so that they were submerged in a gale. He also declared that her stern was too high, and wanted her keel repaired. The ship was in dry dock at Deptford in 1663 and it was estimated that repairs would cost £352. The next year the price of sail cloth for new sails at Plymouth was reported to have risen from 10*d* and 1*s* to 1*s* 8*d* per yard. There is no further record of the services of the 'Forester', though she occurs in naval accounts up to 1670.

Major Wade, writing in July 1658, to the Admiralty, recommended the building of a 4th rate frigate at Lydney Pill, saying that a ship of that class would go off as well, and go down the Severn as well, as a 5th rate vessel. Moreover, there was 1500 tons of timber in the Forest and in the shipyard by the waterside. It is curious to note that he added that there was not one tree in a thousand in the Forest which was not decaying, and any ship built would be perpetually on the stocks. The next frigate would not cost so much by £200 as the last, as the yard was fitted, and timber and materials to hand. Subsequently he was ordered to proceed with the frigate, and in September, 1658 the plans of Daniel Furzer were approved, with some alterations. Her length of keel was to be 104 feet; breadth without planks 32 feet 5 inches, and the depth in hold 14 feet 4 inches.

Three months later Furzer reported that he had 14 shipwrights at work. The keel of the ship was laid, and the post and stem up. He complained that he was still short of money, and the expenses of the yard amounted to £15 per week. In April 1659, Major Wade sent accounts to the Admiralty concerning 789 tons of shot, hoops, bolts, spikes and other ironwork sent to Bristol and London for the Navy, from Dean Forest between September 3rd 1654 and March 25th 1659. Timber and planks sent to Lydney Pill for shipment to London between September 27th 1656 and March 28th 1659, amounted to 1458 tons. Three hundred tons were used

at Lydney in repairing and building frigates, leaving 700-800 tons in the Forest ready for carriage. Tree nails supplied during the same period numbered 123,709.

The following month Furzer gave some details of the building of the frigate. The carver who cut the work for the 'Forester' offered to do it complete for £45. Furzer enquired about masts and rigging, and shortly afterwards wrote again, saying he was pressed for money and unable to get timber down from the woods, or pay the workmen and other expenses. He said he would 'not be able to subsist, being amongst a sort of people not very free to countenance a public good'. Hauling from the Forest was retarded by the drop of 1s in rate, and also the carriers would not have sown all their barley until the middle of May.

By June the ship was planked, and the gun deck beams placed in position. She was launched on August 29th 1660, and named 'Princess'. Captain Harrison thought it would be a long time before she could be got down from where she was built, and she was still there in December. During this period her crew was increased from 100 to 120. She reached King's Road on January 27th 1661, and was at Spithead on March 14th. Two years later the 'Princess' was repaired at Portsmouth. It appears that her planks had been cut from old timber and laid green, with the result that by that time they had shrunk considerably.

The 'Princess' took part in the four days' fight with the Dutch in June, 1666, when her captain was killed. She then carried 52 guns and 209 men. The following year, by plucky fighting and skilful manoeuvring she evaded capture by 17 sail of Rotterdam men-of-war. Shortly afterwards she was attacked by two Danish men-of-war, each of 40 guns. Captain Dawes, the master, and the pilot were both killed, and the lieutenant wounded. The gunner then took command, and after a fierce engagement lasting four hours the Danish ships broke off the

fight and withdrew. Nor did they renew the battle the next morning. The 'Princess' is last mentioned in the year 1671.

In October 1664, Furzer wrote to Pepys that Lydney 'is not so fit a place for building a ship as formerly, on account of the growing of the sands, not known in man's memory before'. He recommended Cone Pill, 3 miles below, as being clear of sand. It may be noted that the distance from the mouth of Lydney Pill to Cone Pill is only about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, while the distance from Pill House to Cone Pill is 3 miles. This seems to confirm the tradition that ships were built near the church at Lydney.

A month later Squire Wintour, owner of the land, claimed Pill House as his property on the ground that it was 'fastened to freeholt'. Furzer had previously had to pay £5 for damage to cultivated land by hauling timber to the waterside. He now settled with Wintour by paying £10 for damages, and wrote to London regarding a new frigate, that two could not be built together owing to the difficulty of procuring workmen, and want of suitable timber. He repeated that Cone Pill was a better place for building, being nearer the woods and having a good dry beach, with ballast at hand and a creek to launch her in. She would take a year to build, and the probable cost would be about £3,000.

Furzer sent a draft of the proposed ship, and a list of the ironwork required for her. Robert Foley, ironmonger, desired to tender for a supply of anchors and ironwork; the prices were lower than those of London. By March, 1665, a storehouse had been put up at Cone Pill and Furzer was arranging for a forge to be fitted up with a blast, etc., and obtaining a smith to make the anchors. The smith's assistant was to receive 15s per week. It was agreed in the same month to pay Robert Tamplin and William Eddy, both of Lydney, blacksmiths, 25s 5d per cwt. for the larger descriptions of ironwork and 28s for smaller, to be delivered to the storehouse at Cone Pill.

In April he applied for a warrant to press shipwrights at Bristol, and for six trow men for the carriage of timber by water. The 'knowingest' smiths in Bristol said there was no better iron in England than the Forest iron. He would make two specimen anchors. The ship at Cone Pill was progressing. At Chepstow the price asked for 3 inch plank was £3 a load.

Some damage was done to timber by cutting and spoiling by John Morgan and his son William, of Alvington. The pieces were sealed with the King's seal and intended for the new frigate. Thomas Dunning, of Lydney, had warned the men not to touch the timber, but they took no heed, and were brought before the justices, John Barrows and Wm. Morgan. Furzer advised contracting for 240-250 loads of plank from Mr Blackborow, at £3 a load.

Work on the vessel was stopped in November for want of carriage of the timber. Furzer was ordered to provide 12 anchors for ships being built by him at Lydney, and by Baylis at Bristol. He complained that the local justices refused to execute warrants for the land carriage of timber, as they considered there was no need to build more ships. Bristol price for tar was 40s per barrel; pitch 20s per cwt.; blocks under 12 inches 1*d* per inch, 12-17 inches 1½*d*, and above 18 inches 2*d*.

It was apparently proposed in April, 1666, to bring timber from the other side of the Severn. Furzer wrote that unless the delay in getting timber was remedied, the keel would be rotten before she was built. Mr Dunning, of Purton Passage, had proved that oxen and wains could both be forded and ferried across the river, and Mr Smith, of Nibley, confirmed it. In October Sir George Charnock and Sir John Wintour offered to send down timber, if there was an order that it should be cut.

The 'St. David' was launched on March 30th 1667. Her tonnage was 638, she carried 54 guns and 280 men,

and her first commander was Captain Richard Rooth. Iron 'mine' for ballast cost 4s 6d for 12 bushels, and 1s per ton for water carriage to the ship's side.

On April 27th 1667, she arrived at King's Road, and in June went with a convoy to Portsmouth. In the autumn of 1670 she was in the Mediterranean at Leghorn, and in 1672, under the command of Captain Wm. Poole, rendered brilliant service in compelling the capitulation of Tobago. The 'St. David' sank in Portsmouth Harbour on the 11th November, 1690, and was weighed and made a hulk in the following year, and eventually sold at Woolwich on the 20th August, 1713.

After the 'Forester' was completed Furzer stayed on in Lydney, apparently in charge of the shipment of timber and tree nails. Major Wade wrote to the Admiralty in August, 1657:—

'Conceiving that you intend sending for more timber, I would acquaint you that those you have contracted with do not come with their ships into our river, where the timber lies on the shore, but stay in Hunger Road and send trows up the Severn to Lydney Pill, where the timber is put at the water side, and costs them 5s or 6s a ton for fetching it down to their ships, and besides that, they stay 3 spring tides for its coming down, which is not less than 6 weeks, so that stands them in little less than 5s a ton more'.

He went on to suggest delivering the timber at Shirehampton, adjoining Hunger Road, as he could utilize a trow of 20 tons built by Furzer out of scrap timber, and used for carrying pig and bar iron up and down the Severn. The freight to Woolwich in 1662 was 32s per ton. After the great storm in the same year which blew down 3000 oaks in the Forest, Furzer collected 160 bushels of acorns 'as instructed'. Pepys mentions this storm as general.

In January 1663, an order was made for a warrant authorizing the Duke of York to empower the Navy

officers and Commissioners to sell all useless and decayed planks and other provisions at Lydney, and also the old 'Success', the 'Weymouth' pink, and the 'Fellowship', being not worth repairing, and to pay the money into the Navy Treasury.

In later times Lydney Pill became quite silted up, and its former course can only be traced as a winding depression in the flat meadows known as the Tack. The stream which fed the Pill, known as Newerne Brook, now empties into the railway canal.