

Bessie Ellen History.

Launched in 1907, Bessie Ellen is one of the last remaining examples of the schooners and ketches of the West Country, which in the latter part of last century, and up until the 1930's carried cargo around the coasts of the United Kingdom and Europe. These sailing ships became the livelihood to many families of the small towns and villages in the South West, such as Par and Fowey, in Cornwall, Appledore, Bideford and Braunton on the Estuaries of the Taw and Torridge in North Devon. Not only did these towns supply excellent seamen and captains, shipyards grew up to build and maintain the large fleet, sail makers and blacksmiths for repairs, chandlers, brokers and merchants gathered to supply the ships with cargos. In fact a large percentage of the community was somehow involved with sailing ships and the sea.

Bessie Ellen's story starts in Plymouth, a large town on the south coast of England, long associated with maritime tradition and the sea.

Across the water from Plymouth lies the small village of Turnchapel with the small peninsular of Mount Batten leading off it. It was here, in Clovelly bay that William Samuel Kelly; a shipyard owner had his premises. It was in 1904 that he commenced the building of Bessie Ellen; she was being built as a "chopping block". This was a project to keep the shipwrights busy in the time of a slack period, meaning that Bessie Ellen took two years to complete before being ready for launching towards the end of 1906. William Kelly had built Bessie Ellen for the Newfoundland trade; with a fine clipper bow and a transom stern she had the appearance of a fast sailer.

It was in the summer of 1906 that John Chichester, a ship owner captain arrived to pick up a cargo in his little ship, the Julie. Whilst in port, he heard mention of a 150-ton ship that was being built over the water in Mount Batten which he duly went to inspect.

When John had decided on buying the ketch, the shipping firm of Clarke, Incedon and Clarke approached him, asking if he would like to go into a partnership of the vessel. John declined though he did borrow some of the capital from Harry Clarke, Harry being his brother -in-law. Bessie, John's wife also provided some of the funding. With his finances secure, John went back to Plymouth with his son Jack to buy the ship. During the journey on the train, father pulled out a bag of gold sovereigns and said to his son "I don't suppose you have seen them before, and I doubt you will ever see them again" at which the bag went back in his pocket until his arrival at Williams yard where he laid them on the table and paid for his ship.

Although finished at the end of 1906, John withheld the launching date until January 1907, an apparent gain of a year regarding her age. John's two daughters, Ellen 13, and Bessie 11 performed the ceremony between them, Ellen naming the vessel Bessie Ellen, and Bessie breaking the wine bottle on her bow. (Today in possession of the Chichester family is the postcard of Plymouth Hoe. Dated January 3rd 1907 it contains the message to his wife Bessie, saying that he was sending their children home, their part being done.)

Thus, after registration in Barnstaple, Bessie Ellen became the beloved ship of the Chichester family. Adverse weather conditions slowed up the vessels first passage from Plymouth to Bideford, this being 11 days. However, her subsequent voyages proved her a good and speedy sailer.

An accident with long standing effects befell the ship. In January 1910, Bessie Ellen hit the rock, the Morte stone in an area of treacherous currents around Morte Point. With a badly damaged keel, the captain took her into Ilfracombe where she was found to be leaking so badly that water was coming up the cabin companionway. With a temporary repair so she could make a trip to the Appledore shipyard, the local steamer Snowflake undertook to tow the ship. She was out of action for over a month, her next cargo being on March 3rd. Even after all the repairs it was found that in some awkward berths, the ship would open up and leak. Some years later she went up to Appledore shipyard again, this time for a more permanent repair. During the first nine years, Bessie Ellen was under sail alone, rigged with a main topmast, the topsail was set on a jackstay and stowed furled up to the mast. Sail had its drawbacks, on a trip to Goodhorne with clay, Captain John had a rendezvous with a steamer which visited the docks every three weeks, bad weather made the ship a day late for discharging, and by the time they arrived in London Docks the steamer had

sailed and John had to wait another three weeks for the steamers return. This was very damaging to an owner/captain as all the crew wages and ships maintenance came out of the cargoes procured.

This last voyage was the deciding factor to install an auxiliary. So in 1917 a 25hp Widdop paraffin engine was installed. This engine had previously been in the Braunton ketch Heatherbell, which had run ashore on the Irish coast. Overhauled by the Bray brothers the engine was put in at Vellator, just down from Braunton town. With a lot of rough language, the sailors came to terms with the new machine. It had to be swung to gain compression, and there was a hot tube ignition such as was used in early car engines. A small closed tube extended from the cylinder wall, with its open inner end inside the cylinder, when the paraffin vapour filled the cylinder for each stroke, it filled the tube as well. A big blowlamp was set to play its flame upon the outer end of the tube, to heat it throughout its length and explode the vapour in the tube, this setting off the main charge of vapour in the cylinder. When the motor was hot, single drops of water served a drip - feed to create steam for increased efficiency. At the start of each voyage the ships boat had to be filled with water for supplying this drip- feed and the water-cooling system.

These engines caused a lot of anxiety as although not relied upon, they were an aid in tricky situations and due to their complexity quite often refused to start, or they would turn over, chug for a few beats and then die. It was around this time that Bessie Ellen's rig was reduced in height. The main topmast came off her and a single pole main mast took the place instead, the topsail now being sent up from the deck. All these changes made it possible to handle the ship with less men. This all helped in the times of diminishing cargoes for sailing vessels, most work being handed over to the new and reliable iron steamers.

With such a small crew, life on board was very hard. With now only three men the watches were split into two hours on deck and four hours below. While off watch, the ship was cleaned and minor repairs were undertaken to keep Bessie Ellen shipshape. Food was prepared and maybe a quick nap before entering the next port ready for discharging the cargoes. A fast turn around was imperative. The captain's ability, good sense and industry, worked the ship to the best advantage, and quite often when discharging, John went down into the hold to fill the baskets for hoisting, therefore avoiding hiring labour at 3s 6d (17p) per day.

In February 1920 his wife and their youngest son Reuben, a fragile young man who had been delicate from birth, joined John. John secured a contract to run barbed wire, left over from army war supplies, from the docks in Gloucester up to the steel works in Briton Ferry where it was to be re-melted. For several months Bessie Ellen continued in this trade until one fateful morning on May 4th. As the ship was being worked into Sharpness lock, the engine running to nudge her into the quay, a big motor barge was following her closely. The captain noticed that the small ships towing boat was in danger of being run down by the barge. He jumped into the small boat and worked it in under Bessie Ellen's counter to avoid it being destroyed. As he was climbing back aboard, the barge hit Bessie Ellen, trapping John against the ships side. Managing to reach the deck, he made his way to the aft cabin where his wife was laying in her bunk. A few moments later she called to George Stevens the deckhand. George found captain John in a terrible condition, his bowel contents squeezes out. George prepared the Captain as best he could for going to the hospital, but by 10 o'clock that night Captain John died.

Bessie, understandably distressed over the death of her husband, now had to make arrangements to continue working the ship. She sent an urgent message back to Braunton asking Jimmy Watts to come up and help out.

The captaincy of Bessie Ellen now passed over to John's son Jack. Jack had been working alongside George Stevens as a deckhand until the accident. With this new responsibility, Jack was very glad to have the very capable Jimmy to lean on.

Jack had been sailing with his father since he was a schoolboy. Against his fathers wishes he then joined Bessie Ellen as a deckhand. Jack could draw and write so well that his father was against young Jack taking a life at sea, wanting him instead to go to Chalons school at the age of 14, to develop his abilities and become an architect. Jack was determined to follow the family tradition, and make a career at sea. After all this, Jack did not show himself to be a keen seaman, becoming a great disappointment to his father. For a while he continued to skipper Bessie Ellen with the cargoes being organised by his mother Bessie. Some time in the late 1920s, Jack retired and the late Captain Johns brother undertook the position of skipper. From this time on, the skipper changed regularly, being passed on to an Appledore man Percy Lamey. The ship still being run by Bessie who refused to sell up.

During the war, trade was slow and dangerous, with minefields having been laid in the Irish Sea. Bessie Ellen now found herself running cargoes to and from Ireland alongside the now diminishing fleet of North Devon Ketches. Many of these had been commandeered by the forces, and were put to use as barrage balloon platforms in the Severn Estuary. This was the downfall of many vessels, as the maintenance was severely neglected by the troops on board who had no knowledge of how to look after a wooden vessel. Bessie Ellen escaped this service as she was deemed too small and not enough headroom below for the men to live in comfort. With the end of the war came the end of an era for the sailing ship. The small ship owners could not compete with the new steel ships coming from our own shipyards and from across the water in Holland. Cargoes were slow in being procured, and when they were found, the price gained could not compete with the funds needed to upkeep the vessels. The age of sail was dead. Ships were abandoned where they lay up small creeks, the mud claiming and destroying these once beautiful creations.

Not all countries felt the need to modernize into steel ships. The Baltic States still kept up the traditions of wooden ships and sail. In 1947, a Dane arrived in Braunton with the intention of purchasing a sound wooden hull to continue in the coastal trade on the Danish coast. Captain Christian Moller inspected the Bessie Ellen, found her to be in good order and purchased her on the spot. He took her back to Frederikshavn in North Jutland, changing her name to Forsøget (The Attempt) Sadly; even in Denmark sail alone was not profitable enough to run a ship. Bessie Ellen went through a radical transformation, the rig greatly reduced and a large Hundested single cylinder engine installed. Deck beams were cut and a much larger steel hatch was made to give ease of handling the cargo by use of machinery for unloading. Captain Moller did very well with the ship, continuing to run scrap iron cargoes well into the 1970s, until finally the ship became too small a capacity to be profitable.

Not long after Bessie Ellen was laid up, Ole Pietersen, who recognised the lovely lines of the ship and set about to restore her once again to a sailing ketch, inspected her. After major timber replacement, Pietersen found that due to his age and lack of finances he could not feasibly continue with the project. The ship was towed down to Svendborg and again laid up in the shipyard of J. Ring Andersen and offered up for sale. She lay there for 20 years with little interest shown, until in May 2000 she was purchased and given a new lease of life, 94 years after she had run off the slip of W. S. Kelly.