

Peters Family Story

In the 1800s, William Peters and family had a virtual monopoly on the building of pilot gigs in Cornwall. Their skill and craftsmanship created the fastest boats and whomsoever bought one was virtually guaranteed to be the first to reach an incoming ship and win the contract to pilot her into port. To compete, all pilot crews needed equally fast gigs which meant good business for the Peters family.

That several Peters gigs remain in use today is testament to the just how well they were built. Indeed, the Newquay, built by William Peters in 1812, is probably one of the oldest wooden boats still in regular use in the British Isles.

Family

William Peters was the eldest son of William senior and Ann Peters (née Hall) and was baptised at the Parish Church of St Just in Roseland on 17 March 1776. As the eldest son, William took over the boat building business at Polvarth, St Mawes, from his father. William married Thomasine Toy on 13 September 1800 and between them they raised nine children. At the end of the 1800s, the Peters converted an old salt store into the family home (opposite what later became the Idle Rocks Hotel). This house, bearing the date 1790, still stands.

A lifeboat for the north Cornish coast

Around the time that the Peters family moved into their new home William Peters received an order to build a six-oared gig, which was to be used on the north Cornish coast. It is possible that this 30 foot gig was Padstow's first lifeboat. The order was completed in 1791, and over the following century the Peters boatyard would go on to produce many of Cornwall's finest gigs for rescue, pilotage and racing.

The census of 1841 lists the following people living, presumably, in that house:

William Peters 65, boat builder
Thomasine Peters, 60
John Peters, 35, boat builder
Nicholas Peters, 25 boat builder
Elizabeth Peters, 25, dressmaker
Eliza Peters, 20, dressmaker
Thomasine Peters, 15

Construction

The Peters' gigs varied in length from between 28 and 32 feet as they did not want any plank within the boat to have more than one scarf (joint). The length of the tree used to produce the planks therefore dictated the size of the gig. The timber was mature, narrow-leaved Cornish elm. This was seasoned by being buried in the mud of Polvarth creek for five years. A sawyer from Penryn was then employed to cut the quarter inch planks required, his saw travelling a foot

through the timber with each stroke – highly skilled work. Once cut, the planks were laid up for a further year before being used in the making of a gig. It is believed that when not in use, the Peters sawpit was the venue for cockfights!

To achieve the necessary shape for a gig, the planks were boiled in salt water to allow them to be bent. The thwarts (the crosspieces which form the seats in the gig) were hooped to allow them to bend upwards rather than push through the planking should the boat strike another vessel violently when coming alongside. When completed, all Peters gigs were either painted white, or simply varnished.

Surviving Peters gigs

Five pilot gigs built by William Peters are still in regular use today – three, the Newquay, the Dove and the Treffry, are owned and raced by Newquay Rowing Club. These boats were rediscovered in the Fly cellars at Newquay in the 1920s and removed just before a fire broke out in the building.

The Newquay – known to the Peters family as ‘the very old one’ - was built in 1812 by William Peters as one of three gigs for export overseas. Transport for the long journey could not be found so she was bought by Lloyds shipping agents in Falmouth and then sold on to pilots in Newquay. The Newquay is the oldest gig still in use today.

In the 1950s, fifty old moulds used for the building of gigs were rediscovered in the Peters boatyard. Some measured against the Newquay were believed to be the very same moulds used to build the boat in 1812.

The Dove was built by William Peters in 1820 and made to be faster than the Newquay. However, broad-leafed elm was used in her construction rather than the traditional narrow-leafed elm and it is believed that this is one of the reasons that she handles less well in heavy seas.

The Treffry was built by William Peters in 1838 for the Treffry Company of Newquay and designed to be the longest (at 32 feet) and fastest gig of her day. She was built to win six-oared gig races, which had become popular at the time with substantial prize money on offer. Her builders were so pleased with their efforts that they refused to paint her, instead polishing her with linseed oil and launching her with crews wearing red jackets and top hats! She was delivered to Newquay with great care, being rowed from Polvarth to Truro and then, reputedly, carried over land by hand. There was considerable pomp and ceremony with special costumes. The red jackets and top hats worn could still be found in the Peters boatyard in the 1960s. All modern Cornish pilot gigs are built to the same specifications of the Treffry.

The two other surviving William Peters built gigs are the Slippen and the Bonnet. Slippen was originally named Bernice and built for pilots on St Martin’s, Isles of Scilly in 1830. In the 1950s, she was bought from the Isles of Scilly by Newquay Rowing Club and repaired. In 1972, she was sold back to the Isles of Scilly. Bonnet was also built in 1830 for the pilots of St Martin’s

and was probably used by John Nance to make his 25 smuggling runs to Roscoff – a round trip of more than 250 miles per run.

William built a range of craft in addition to pilot gigs, including small rowing boats, fishing boats and even a smuggling vessel which was intercepted on its first run and sold at Dartmouth. He also built gigs for Lloyds the insurance company and for the Coastguard and Preventative Service. It is likely that his sons helped build many of the boats that he is credited with, learning their traditional skills from him. William was buried on 13 July 1859 at the Parish Church of St Just in Roseland, aged 84.

A Family Business

The business was continued by his sons John and Nicholas, whom it is believed built many more gigs – the following of which survive today:

Golden Eagle - 1870

Shah – 1873

Czar -1879

Sussex - 1886

Campernell - 1895

In 1870, Nicholas charged £1 per foot for making his gigs, considerably more than his contemporary boat builders, and that cost did not include extras such as oars and sails. Nicholas maintained contact with the owners of the gigs he had built, sometimes travelling with the boats to their intended destination or inspecting them after they had been delivered to their owners.

In 1849, Samuel Tiddy, who had been apprenticed to the Peters, moved to the Isles of Scilly, where he built the gigs O&M, Sultan, Hope (allegedly the last gig to smuggle from Brittany) and the Leo.

End of an Era

The last gig to be built by the Peters family was the Queen in 1903. The boatyard continued making other vessels until the 1960s.

In 1928, a Newquay gig crew in the Dove rowed what was then a record time of six minutes and fifteen seconds over one mile. In commemoration, Francis Peters, made a model of the Dove which was presented to the Royal Cornwall Museum.

In 1984, Ralph Bird arranged for the three oldest gigs from Newquay Rowing Club to return to their birthplace. This idea was in part a tribute to Frank Peters for all he had done to support Newquay Rowing Club and to foster gig racing. Frank was delighted to see 'Newquay', 'Dove' and 'Treffry' back at Polvarth.

In an interview at the Cornish Pilot Gig County Championships in Newquay on 15 September 2019, Mike Peters, another descendent of William Peters explained that the Peters Boatyard was no longer owned by the family and the workshop had sadly been demolished.