

A Brief History of Pilotage in the Bristol Channel and River Severn

Up to the end of the 18th Century there was no local Pilotage Authority in the Bristol Channel, and therefore no standard of skill and efficiency enforced on persons engaged in the responsible job of guiding ships to and from harbours in that area.

Bristol had always been the pre-eminent Port and City in this part of the country, and so when in 1798 steps were taken to introduce a system of control for pilotage, the Bristol Corporation was constituted as the Pilotage Authority for the Severn ports and those further west, including Cardiff. However, control was loose and individual ports became virtually autonomous as they grew and developed.

The position was clarified in 1807 by the Bristol Channel Pilotage Act, which received Royal Assent in that year. Bristol was given responsibility for the pilotage of vessels, inward and outward, eastward of Lundy Island throughout the Bristol Channel and all the creeks and rivers leading thereto. Byelaws for the regulation and conduct of pilots were passed and published in 1809, with further regulations promulgated, notably in 1840 and 1853.

Various attempts were made in succeeding years by individual ports to break this monopoly, but it was not until 1861 that Cardiff, Newport and Gloucester took concerted action because of the increase in the trades using the ports of Cardiff, Newport and Gloucester and petitioned Parliament to press for the passing of the Bristol Channel Pilotage Act 1861, This gave them the independence they sought. Pilotage Commissioners were constituted for these ports with powers to licence pilots for the non-compulsory pilotage of ships in the Bristol Channel and River Severn bound for these ports, each port having a defined area of jurisdiction. The Gloucester District is described as follows:

"That portion of the Bristol Channel which lies eastward of Lundy Island, including the River Severn to the City of Gloucester and the River Wye to Chepstow Bridge".

The Act authorised the appointment of a Pilotage Board for the Port of Gloucester consisting of members of the Gloucester Corporation and of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Company, the two bodies having most interest in the flow of commerce on the River.

At the time, pilots and masters were reluctant to pilot vessels up and down the river during the dark winter tides, with the result that vessels were often delayed at the Kingroad anchorage, with consequent injury to the Port of Gloucester. The Pilotage Board was therefore approached by the Canal Company about the erection of lighthouses and beacons to make the passage easier. The establishment of navigation aids began in 1873, funded by grants and loans from the Canal Company.

By 1888, beacons had been established at eight locations. These were lit from 1st September to 1st May each year. Expenditure associated with the upkeep of these navigation aids mounted and, with no direct revenue for the service from shipowners, steps were taken to establish a separate organisation with direct responsibility for the erection and maintenance of lights which would be empowered to collect dues from ships for that purpose.

Although, to some extent, controlled and regulated by the local Pilotage Authority, pilots were a proud and fiercely independent community of skilled seamen, making a living utilising these hard won skills to guide vessels safely into and out of port. They operated and

maintained their justly famous Bristol Channel Pilot cutters, recognised worldwide as one of the most efficient and seaworthy type of sailing vessels ever. The 'living' was hard and dangerous in the exposed waters of the Western Approaches. No ships meant no money. It was feast or famine. Each pilot was self-employed, and responsible for himself, his dependents and thousands, even millions, of pounds worth of property.

One or two pilots would pool resources to invest in a new cutter, or a second-hand one altered to their own specifications, and employ a professional seaman and a boy (apprentice) to sail her back when the pilot had boarded his ship. In the mid-1800s, Gloucester had the distinction of being home port to two of the largest and most powerful cutters, the "Berkeley Castle", and the "Alaska", the former remaining in Pilotage service right up to the 1960s. Both craft were built with oak keels obtained from one huge tree owned by the Earl of Berkeley. (but therein lies another tale).

Rivalry and competition were intense between individual ports, as well as between pilots licenced by different Authorities, as each vied with the other to board the most lucrative ships inward bound from sea. Pilots pushed their cutters ever further to the west, "seeking" as it was called, even patrolling as far afield as the English Channel and St Georges Channel when ships were expected.

However, the historical system of free-for-all and 'first come, first served' when providing a pilotage service was less than satisfactory, and in many ways inefficient. Consequently, moves were made to form the pilots into an amalgamation under a common agreement of service. This set out rules of conduct and service, but more importantly, a system whereby earnings and resources could be pooled, managed, and distributed more fairly. Set up in 1903, this agreement met with strong opposition in some quarters, especially from senior, more experienced pilots. Only after the milestone of the Pilotage Act 1913 were all disputes finally settled and the agreement fully implemented in 1914. This agreement set out a regime and conditions of service which stood the test of time right up to the late 1980s.

In the years since amalgamation, the number of pilots has fluctuated between 35, when the ports of Sharpness, Gloucester, Lydney and Chepstow were at their peak, and the present level of 4.

In 1957, official recognition was given to the fragmented nature of pilotage around the coast of the UK, and the anomalies in the levels of earnings enjoyed by pilots in different districts. A committee was set up under the chairmanship of Sir Robert Letch, and its findings and recommendations finally agreed on behalf of thirty two ports and districts throughout the nation. Gloucester eventually also accepted these recommendations and became a "Letch" port.

The next great milestone in the evolution of pilotage was the Pilotage Act of 1987 which reorganised pilotage on a national basis. This Act provided that Marine Pilotage, for any given port, should fall under the auspices of a Competent Harbour Authority (CHA) and also dealt with the cessation of the previous UK system of Marine Pilotage. Gloucester, like all UK ports, was radically affected, with the existing Gloucester Pilotage Authority being dissolved and the Gloucester Harbour Trustees taking over responsibility for pilotage.

A CHA has a statutory duty to determine what pilotage services are required for that port, to what classes of ship the pilotage services should apply and the number, authorisation

requirements and regulation of Pilots at that port. The CHA may also grant "Pilotage Exemption Certificates" to Masters and/or First Officers of ships who regularly make passages within the Gloucester Harbour and can satisfy the CHA as to their competence. The requirement to provide pilot boats of the approved standard is fulfilled under an agreement with the Bristol Port Company, who operate a boarding and landing service at Barry in South Wales. Each CHA has total autonomy over its area of jurisdiction. Due to the huge diversity of ports and harbours around the UK coast there is considerable variation in the manner in which Pilotage Services are structured.

Throughout the many years of change, during which trading patterns, ship design, alternative forms of goods transport and legislation have had significant effects on the Gloucester Pilots, the men themselves have remained self-employed, retaining some of the independence, character, and strong attitudes of their forebears. In a spirit of co-operation with the Gloucester Harbour Trustees, they have helped preserve a first class professional service to shipping in the Severn Estuary. This same service is also available to a growing amount of leisure traffic that makes use of the Gloucester Harbour. The Gloucester Pilots Partnership is able to offer pilotage services to all types of craft, including yachts and narrow-boats throughout the Severn Estuary and Bristol Channel within the limits of the Pilotage District. This includes destinations such as Penarth, Ilfracombe, Swansea, Portishead and Avonmouth (for Bristol).

Sharpness is one of the ports closest to the heart of the United Kingdom and in consequence the length of the pilotage act is protracted, covering 16 miles within the compulsory area. Vessels of up to 10,000 DWT can be accommodated in the harbour under certain conditions. The current average size of vessel is approximately 3,500 DWT.

The River Severn is unique in many ways; not least in that it is home to the second greatest tidal range in the world. It is often possible to experience a rise in tidal level of over 10 metres in under three hours at Sharpness. This, together with the difficult nature of the navigable channel and the presence of two motorway bridges, is one of the reasons why all but the smallest of vessels are subject to compulsory pilotage.

The Gloucester Harbour Trustees recoup the costs of providing a pilotage service and navigation aids by imposing pilotage charges and local lights dues.