3. The Waterfront

Introduction

Today the Lympstone village waterfront is a place for sailing, small boats, swimming, paddle-boarding, and sipping wine as the sun goes down behind the Haldon Hills, and a small amount of commercial fishing. In the past lime was burned in two kilns; ships were built and repaired on the foreshore; there was lots of fishing activity; there was a whale processing works. Like any seaside village there were also activities like smuggling, press-gangs; privateering and piracy.

To find out more, scroll down.
This is one of a set of info points around the village.
For more information click here.

3. The Waterfront

2022

A Waterside Village

The waterfront is now mainly seen as a place for leisure activities but this was not always the case. In Tudor times most people did not go into the water, or consider it necessary to take a bath! The seafront was a place for economic activity – boat-building and repair, fishing, scavenging, transport, lime burning, whale processing and smuggling. This is probably reflected in the fact that the centre of the village near the church is some 400 meters from the waterfront. Many of the current houses on the waterfront would have had their origins as cellars for the storage of fishing gear, nets and boats. Though in late Tudor times people began to convert the cellars to places in which to live, the maps drawn when the railway line was being planned in 1840 indicate that many waterfront buildings were still cellars.

On the modern waterfront you will see signs of the past. There are two lime kilns (see *Lime Kilns* below) and washing lines that were originally the lines for drying fishing nets. The railway was built in the 1860s to bring Victorians to the seaside. There is a small harbour, referred to locally as the boat shelter, and a thriving sailing club.

Lime processing

There are two lime kilns on the waterfront, one now with a house on top of it, and the other with a garden on top. The current kilns probably date to the early 19th Century, though there was almost certainly lime processing previous to this. Limestone (sometimes including egg and oyster shell) was fed into the top of the kilns and layered with firewood, coal or *culm* (coal dust). Kilns were fired from beneath for three to five days, being fed all the time with more stone ***(what is stone??)*** and fuel. The lime (calcium oxide) that was formed was slaked with water to make mortar for building, or was spread on fields to reduce acidity in the soil. The operation of the kilns would have led to noise, heat, smoke and toxic fumes and busy activity on the waterfront. The limestone, and possibly the coal and culm, would have come to Lympstone by boat from other places along the coast, with the boats lying up on the beach during low tide and the contents carried on horses or donkeys or in carts up to the top of the kiln. There would have been lines of carts collecting the processed lime and travelling out through the village. It is said that people used

the heat of the kiln to warm themselves, or sometimes to cook their bread and other food.

Fishing and Maritime Activities

Fishing and coastal trading for local or commercial purposes has been a part of Lympstone life over the centuries. Lympstone men were involved, too, in transatlantic trips from the mid 1500's.

At least from Medieval times Lympstone was a port. There is a record of a dealer from the village working at Exeter market in the late 1300's, and another record in 1525 mentions the lines for drying nets on the beach. In the mid 1500s a *seine net* was purchased jointly by the villages of Lympstone and Woodbury. Seine nets hang downwards from floats on the water surface and small boats, or men in the water, drew the net in around the fish, trapping them. Seine nets can be used for a variety of fish, but on the Exe they were mostly used for herring and salmon.

In more recent centuries the fortunes of fishing enterprises have come and gone. Herring, mackerel, pilchards, salmon, plaice, and mullet have been favoured or in greater and lesser abundance at different times. Salmon fishing was particularly successful in the early 20th Century. On one tide in 1930, 108 salmon were brought in. In the l900's, there were many mackerel boats that sailed out of the village. The advent of the railway in the mid 1800's facilitated trade as it enabled fish to be transported to Billingsgate or the Midlands with relative ease.

From the mid 1500's and for several hundred years, in addition to local fishing there were opportunities to engage in the potentially lucrative fishing trips 2000 miles across the Atlantic to Newfoundland to fish for cod. There are records of a number of Lympstone men being involved in this trade, and there are still houses and areas of the village that carry the family names (Bass, Withall and Stafford). The ships would sail out in March, taking 3 – 5 weeks to brave cold, icebergs, storm and fog. They would fish for cod from small boats and the cod would be salted and dried and brought back, sometimes to the local ports or sometimes to Spain and Portugal, with wine and salt being bought with the profits. Dried and salted cod was highly valued as it could last up to 10 years and was an excellent source of protein.
For more information about this trade see our booklet 'Devon Boy', by Jenny Moon.

For many people, over the years, fishing would have been a part time occupation that depended on the season, on abundances of different fish, other earning opportunities and the work required on the land. Over long periods, for example, there was important trade of wool and cloth to local and European ports and this probably involved local sailors, though the main trade was carried on from the port of Topsham.

Other factors that have influenced fishing activities in Lympstone were the prevalence of smuggling opportunities, the threat of piracy around the coasts and, at times, the threat of press-gangs forcing seamen into naval service, since fishermen were valued for their seamanship skills (see *Danger on the Waterfront* below).

Ship and boat building and repairs

Perhaps because of its substantial drying at low tide, and firm, stony foreshore, Lympstone has been an important site of boat and ship building and repair over the centuries. There are plenty of old nails on the shore to tell that tale. Some ships were built in the mouth of Wotton Brook, which was in a different position at the time and was wider and deeper.

One of the earliest records of ship building was the fitting out of a *pinnace* constructed for Queen Elizabeth 1st in 1588; *The Gyfte* later sailed in the Armada. From the 1700's onwards there were a number of families of mariners, particularly those involved in the Newfoundland trade, who turned some of their earnings into substantial shipbuilding and then trading enterprises. There was a decline in ship-building in the village in the early to mid-1800's as ships became larger and were increasingly constructed of iron. The coming of the railway through the village and the consequent disruption contributed to the decline in the ship-building and repair work.

Boat shelter

Much of the shipping activities on the Exe would have relied on small boats rowing out from larger vessels lying at anchor in the deeper parts of the estuary, or on flat bottomed river craft that could lie up on the foreshore and which could then be unloaded and transported on by donkey or by horse-drawn carts. In the late 19th Century, there was a petition to the new Parish Council asking for support to build a boat shelter for the fishing boats. A shelter with a substantial curved wall was completed in 1897 but it only lasted until 1912 when it was largely destroyed in a storm, with consequent damage to some of the boats.

The boat shelter as it exists now was built by volunteers, encouraged in their efforts, it is said, by subsidized trips to the pub. The new shelter opened to great fanfare in 1936.

Whaling in Lympstone

The base for whaling in Lympstone was a bay a little further up the river (Parsonage Stile). The current form of the bay differs from its shape in the past because the line of the railway cuts across it.

Whaling started in Lympstone when a ship-builder based in the bay, Worthington Brice, became a shareholder in the Exeter Whale Fishery Company in 1754. The development of whaling was in response to a government subsidy to boost competition in the trade with the Dutch. Worthington Brice fitted out a ship, the 'Worthy Shepherd', which left for Greenland the following year and returned four months later. Four years later, the Worthy Shepherd was crushed in Greenland ice, however two other ships, one of which was called 'The Lympstone' continued the trade to Lympstone until 1787 (when the subsidy was withdrawn). There are other records of the whaling industry continuing well into 19th Century at different ports on the Exe.

It was the blubber of the whales that was processed in the local whaling trade, particularly to produce lamp oil. The blubber was 'cooked' over *tryworks (*open fires in a large pot on the beach). Worthington Brice set up a tryworks at his yard at Parsonage Stile and there are records of complaints about the smell of the cooking blubber in the village. Other parts of the whales were brought back with the blubber and whale jaws turn up in the structure of cottages, while other bone was used in sieves, wndow gratings, and women's stays.

Worthington Brice lived in Parsonage Stile House, overlooking his yard. The house had previously been an inn, and was probably a smuggler's haunt. It burned down in 1932.

Smuggling

Between 1700 and 1850 smuggling was particularly rife along the coasts of the West Country. While the better known smuggled goods were spirits and tobacco, there were plenty of other goods transported to and from England. As well as goods transported in order to evade taxes, the 'trade' included stolen goods. An estuary village like Lympstone would have had its fair share of mariners involved in smuggling, some of whom received and hid contraband in cottages, barns and underground. Others would have been happy to drink, smoke and sell the products of this 'free trade'. There were routes across the river Exe that were associated with the transport of smuggled goods: one went from Powderham to bays such as Parsonage Stile; and there were routes that led out through the village and away across Woodbury Common, or up to Exeter. There were probably plenty of Preventative Officers who accepted the odd bribe to 'not notice' a landing.

Smuggling required secrecy and good hiding places, and there is evidence in Lympstone of hiding-holes in cottages; adjoining roof spaces that appeared to be sealed; the use of farm barns and 'useful' outbuildings and there is a local story of an underground passage leading from the beach back to one of the larger houses in the village.

Danger on the Waterfront – Press-gangs and Pirates

Apart from the inherent dangers of smuggling itself, there was sometimes the danger of being pressed into naval service. Press-gangs knew that those involved in smuggling and those who had been involved in the Newfoundland cod trade, for example, had valuable seamanshp skills and these were the men they sought.

Between the 16th and 17th century piracy was particularly rife on the coast of Devon. International pirates stole ships and transported men to foreign shores, particularly to the coasts of North Africa, where they were used or sold as slaves. Sometimes those who were captured were held until local people were able to pay ransoms for their return. These North African pirates were known as the '*Barbary pirates*'. The line between piracy and legitimate activities was often blurred: sometimes pirates took on work as privateers, carrying a '*Letter of Marque*' issued by the State that allowed them to attack and take any ship designated as 'enemy'. The crew shared the 'prize' between them. In the latter half of the 16th Century, two of Sir Walter Raleigh's half-brothers worked as privateers, and in the early 1600s John Nutt of Lympstone was both a pirate and a privateer.

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Content and images are largely sourced from the Lympstone History Archive.
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