

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM



THE KETCH IRENE,
PAINTED BY CAPT. THOMAS CHIDGEY, C1910.

The Painting

The painting shows the *Irene* at sea in full sail, with a small island to the left and low coastline to the right. Two people can be seen on-board deck.

About the artist

Watchet-born Thomas Chidgey (1855-1926) was a sea-captain all his life, but was also a talented amateur marine artist. He specialised in the coastal sailing vessels he was familiar with. As well as this painting of the Ketch *Irene*, Blake Museum has two more oil paintings by him - the Ketch *Swan* (ref BWRAB:1965/18) and the Ketch *Florrie* (Ref BWRAB:1968/10).

Capt Chidgey painted the picture in settlement of a private debt owed to Mr Albert George Atwell, Manager of Carver's yard where *Irene* was built in 1907.

The picture eventually came into the hands of Mrs Joyce Tout, Mr Atwell's daughter, and after her death in 1996, the

Blake Museum was presented with it, in November 1997.

Six more of Capt Chidgey's paintings may be seen in Watchet Museum, and others are in private hands.

IRENE

West-country coasting ketch built in Bridgwater, Somerset and launched in 1907

She measures 118 feet from stern to tip of bowsprit with a waterline of 83 feet and a beam of 21 feet. From water level to button top on mainmast she has an overall height of 90 feet. There were two masts, and she would have had a crew of usually three. She was flat-bottomed, allowing her to rest on the river bed at low tide and on isolated beaches, where there were no docking facilities.

Total sail area 4,687 sq.feet comprising:

Mainsail	1,098 sq.ft.
Main-topsail	470 sq.ft.
Mizzen sail	782 sq.ft.

Mizzen topsail	270 sq.ft.
Staysail	430 sq.ft.
Standing jib	308 sq.ft.
Boom jib	240 sq.ft.
Plying jib	286 sq.ft.
Square sail	803 sq.ft.

The hull was constructed of 3" thick Columbian pine double planking on English oak frames with iron knees.

The *Irene* was built by the well-known Shipbuilders of Bridgwater F. J. Carver & Sons and was launched on June 5th 1907. It was a successful launch and she was christened *Irene* with a bottle of wine by Miss Gladys Symons. She was the eldest daughter of Clifford J Symons, one of the owners.

The *Irene* was purchased by Messrs. Clifford J. Symons (Taunton Road), Clifford Symons (Camden Road) and Captain Wm. Lee (her future skipper). The launch was celebrated by a dinner at the 'Ship Aground', Eastover and was presided over by His Worship the Mayor Alderman H. V. Pollard.

1907 –Launched 5 June. Registered at Bridgwater. Used to transport bricks made by Colthurst Symons, the Bridgwater brick-makers, and also as a coasting vessel.

1917 – De-registered and re-registered at Swansea. Owned by W. A. Jenkins

1919 – Fitted with auxiliary engines.

1922 – Sold to Capt. Hugh Shaw of Arlingham.

1927 – Sold to Colthurst Symons and re-registered at Bridgwater. Then used as a coaster, mainly transporting bricks for her owner.

1961 – Ceased being used as a commercial vessel and sold, to be converted to a yacht.

1965 – Bought by Dr Leslie Morrish and restored for commercial cruises and used in films and TV – *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Flying Dutchman* (Biopic about Richard Wagner), etc.

1982 and 1984 – Took part in the Tall Ships Race.

2003 – 22 May. Ravaged by fire in harbour at Marigot Bay, St Maarten, West Indies.

2003-2009 – Restored in Cornwall.

2009 – Resumed sailing.

Pronunciation

IRENE – pronounced I-reen-ee. Not Eye-reen. Irene is a name derived from the Greek word εἰρήνη, (Eirēnē), Peace.

Where was she built?

Irene was built by F J Carver and Sons, whose yard was at East Quay.

Frances James Carver as born at Chilton Trinity in 1836, and apprenticed at John Gough's yard. He became foreman there and in about 1878 started his own yard on East Quay, assisted by his son, Frank, who continued the business until his own death in 1921.

As well as the building slip-way, the yard incorporated the C18 dry dock, 102ft long, and gates 24ft wide and also a grid-iron - timber baulks set in the bed of the river on which a vessel could rest at low tide whilst repairs were made.

The dockyard seems to have been closed during the second world war, and by the 1950s has been filled in and the site used as the town's first bus station. Other than a modern street name - Carver's Road, nothing remains to be seen.

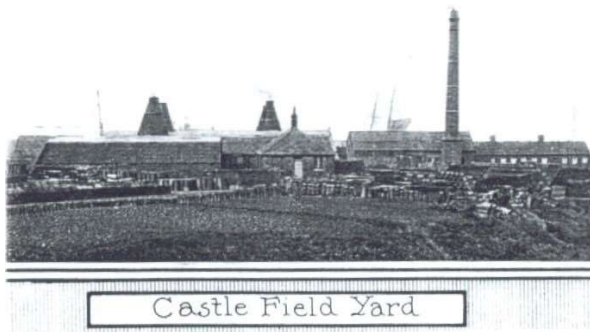
As well as sea-going wooden vessels the dockyard built barges used for transport from Bridgwater to the upper reaches of the River Parrett and on the

Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. The yard made gates for the various clyses on the drainage channels on the Levels, such as the one at Highbridge in 1926.

The Owners

The vessel was bought from the ship yard by three people, two of whom were partners in Colthurst Symons & Co, brickmakers. The third was *Irene's* first captain

Colthurst, Symons was a long established firm of brickmakers, being founded in the mid-nineteenth century. Their head office was on East Quay, and they had yards at Dunball, Castle Fields, Somerset Bridge, Huntworth, Combnich and Burnham on Sea. The firm ceased operation in 1970 with the closure of the Dunball and Castle Fields yards.

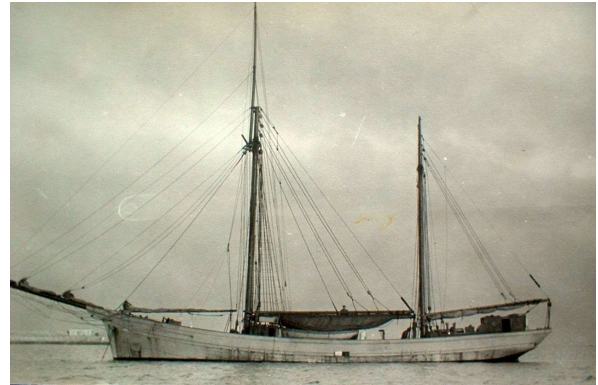


The main business was the production of different patterns of roofing tiles and building bricks, but land drainage pipes were also made as were Bath bricks in some yards. Terra-Cotta decorative mouldings for things like roofing finials were also produced, particularly in the Edwardian era.

A number of the yards were upstream of Bridgwater bridge, so barges were used to transport the brickyard products to the vessels moored at the quays or the docks. They were flat bottomed, clinker-planked, 53 ft long by 13ft beam and could carry 15 tons. Smaller ones were used on the canal. They were steered by

25ft sweeps. The holds were open with a small cabin forward and an equipment cuddy at the stern. All the brick and tile makers maintained fleets of them.

Where did they go? Voyages



Archives of the Friends of Purton – reproduced by permission

In the main, Bridgwater vessels tended to work the local coasting trade of the Bristol Channel and Ireland, though on occasion they went further afield.

Bridgwater ships were home traders, though a few went into deep waters to South America for hides and to New York. They carried all cargoes about the narrow seas, but chiefly the bricks of their native port to Liverpool, to Antwerp, the Elbe and Danish ports. In 1832, *The Alfred*, the local newspaper, recorded:

The trade of Bridgwater was principally confined to London and the ports of the West of England, some few voyages are made to Liverpool, Dublin and Belfast, and probably three or four voyages in the year to the Baltic for timber and tallow. The staple articles of export of the port itself are scouring bricks, bricks for building and pantiles; to which may be added the surplus agricultural produce of the western part of Somersetshire, as wheat, malt, flour, barley, beans, wool, cheese and cider. In addition to these may be mentioned a few cargoes of elm and oak timber, but principally the former.

*Among the articles of **export** scouring*

bricks take the lead; of these, which are made in no other part of England, immense quantities are sent to London, Bristol, Liverpool, Dublin and other large places. Bricks for building and pantiles, and shipped in large quantities to Dublin, Belfast, Penzance, Falmouth and Newport --wool is shipped for Gloucester chiefly; malt and flour, with wheat, beans, and barley to Bristol, and the several ports of Wales.

*Amongst the articles of **import** into the port of Bridgwater, coals form the principal; the greater part of these are brought from Newport, and some from Cardiff and Lydney in Gloucestershire; culm is likewise imported in large quantities from Swansea, for the use of the limeburners; roofing slates are brought from Beaumaris and Port Madoc in Wales; salt, the produce of the Worcestershire brine pits, from Gloucester; groceries and spirits, the latter being chiefly British gin distilled at Bristol, and rum from Bristol; oats from Cardigan and Carmarthen; and some oak bark from Minehead. There are various other articles imported, but the above-mentioned are the principal. Besides the above there are four schooners of about 120 tons burthen each, employed in the trade between London and Bridgwater; and four others in the trade with British America. -16 Dec 1832*

To make a profit vessels needed to be at sea as much as possible, each leg of the journey occupied by carrying another cargo. It is clear that as well as shuttling the owner's products to customers *Irene* also acted as a general cargo trader. In 1913 for example she sailed:-

From Preston in January to Falmouth, Falmouth to Par, Par to London, London to Bridgwater, Bridgwater to Rotterdam,

Rotterdam to Exmouth, Exmouth to Teignmouth, Teignmouth to Glasgow, Glasgow to London, London to Newquay, Newquay to Bridgwater, Bridgwater to Galway, to the Arran Islands, then to Queenborough in Kent, Queenborough to Annan in the Solway Firth, to the Kyles of Bute in the Clyde and from there to London, arriving there in December.

Also in 1913, the *Florrie*, built at Bridgwater in 1892, sailed to Dublin, Glasgow, Newport, Portleven, Newlyn, Limerick, Llanelly, Guernsey, Rotterdam, Caen, Alderney and Southampton.

They used to visit every small haven around the west and south coast of Eire. Youghal, Clonakilty, Waterford, Kinsale, Baltimore, Killaloe, Limerick, Fenit, Galway, the Aran Isles, penetrating far inland on the tidal rivers and discharging at remote quays between the wooded banks of small creeks. They carried anthracite from Hook, Saudersfoot and Swansea, coal from Liverpool and Lydney, granite from Penmaenmawr, Trevor, Porth Gain, Porthoustock and Newlyn, and timber from the Baltic ports.

The journeys were often hazardous. Numbers of Bridgwater vessels foundered with all hands during storms, and three were torpedoed by German submarines in the First World War. Few people today can conceive what the conditions were like. They are described in some of the books noted in sources, following.

Sources

Most are in the Blake Museum library.

Theses

Michael Roberts. "The Port of Bridgwater - Conservancy and Operations, Dredging, Pilotage and Buoyage, 1912-1946". Honours Project for

a degree in Marine Studies, Institute of Marine Studies, University of Plymouth, May 1996. [Based on a collection of records in the Pilot House, Burnham. Describes in detail the day-to-day running of the Port.]

Books

Rod Fitzhugh, *Bridgwater and the River Parrett in old photographs*, Alan Sutton 1993, ISBN 0750905182

Basil Greenhill, *The Merchant Schooners*, 1951, reprinted Conway Maritime Press, 1988 ISBN 9780851774756

Basil Greenhill, with illustrations and commentary by Sam Manning, *The Evolution of the Wooden Ship*, 1988, reprinted by Blackburn Press 2009 ISBN-13: 97819328419

Leslie Morrish, *Goodnight Irene*, February Press, 1985, ISBN 9780948304002

B.J. Murless, *Bridgwater Docks and the River Parrett*, Somerset County Library, 1983 ISBN 9780861830381

B. J. Murless, *Somerset Brick and Tile Manufacturers : a brief history and gazetteer*, SIAS, 2000, ISBN 9780953353927

James Nurse, *The Nurse family of Bridgwater and their ships*, Carmania, 1999, ISBN 9780953429127

W. J. Slade and Basil Greenhill, *West Country Coasting Ketches*, Conway Maritime Press, 1974 ISBN 851770754

Articles

G. M. Gilman "Captain Thomas Chidgey and the Port of Watchet ", *Maritime History* 4 (1974) 31-48.

W. A. Sharman, "Gallant little ships of the past: The Bridgwater Coasters", *Sea Breezes* [Year not known but 1930s] 2 part serial [Describes individual sailing

vessels around the time of the Great War, their journeys and their eventual fate - 3 sunk by enemy action, others lost in storms etc]

Peter Stuckey, "The lovely ketch 'Irene' ", *BIAS Journal*, 17, 1984, pp 9-11

Peter Thomson, "The Changing Face of a coast port: Bridgwater shipping between the wars", *The Mariner's Mirror*, 86, No. 1 (2000), 78

Ideas for teaching

- The information here and in the web links provided is the suggested resource for teachers to build upon.

- Get the children to map where vessels went and to research the kinds of commodities they carried. The Welsh coal trade was once highly important for the local shipping. So was the export of Bridgwater bricks and tiles. Visit the Bridgwater Brick and Tile Museum. (Geography/history/English)

- The sea has a language of its own, as does ship building. Use the resources here to investigate this, and maybe have the children compose their own sea shanties or poems. (English/music)

- Sailing ships were hand-built, and put together with wooden dowels. Gaps were caulked with oakum, and the hulls were mainly sealed with hot tar. How are ships built today? The Maritime room of the Museum has a good display of shipwrights tools of the time. (Design and technology)

- One of the photographs shows the Launch of the *Irene*. The children might write a story based on it. What was the day like – the cheering crowds, the excitement. Once the hull was launched, what happened next? (English)

- Ships sailed by the force of the wind on the sails. There are mathematical rules

for learning the effect of the wind, and also how navigation is done.

(Mathematics).

- The picture itself is rather unassuming, somewhat tranquil in fact. Where might she have been? How would *Irene* appear in a storm? (Art/English)

- Where is Irene now? There is a web-link for this.

- Irene was ketch-rigged. What other kinds of rigs were there, and why were they different?



Irene at Combwich taking on cargo, 1930s

All images are from the Museum collection

18 January 2010