

The lovely ketch 'Irene'

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'The Lovely Ketch *Irene*' - that is how Captain Hugh Shaw described her in his book *Schooner Captain* and is an opinion shared by all who have known her during the seventy-five years she has graced the coastal waters of the British Isles, since her launch at Bridgwater in 1907. On that occasion the local press report of the launching doubted whether the builders Messrs F J Carver and Sons, had '... previously built a more shapely and graceful ship than the *Irene*, ...'.

It seems that it had been several years since a new craft had taken the water from a local yard at Bridgwater so the launch of the *Irene* attracted more than ordinary interest, a fact borne out by a contemporary photograph showing both banks of the river solid with onlookers some of whom got pretty damp from the launching wave. Built for Messrs Symons and Captain William Lee (her first skipper), she was named after Miss Irene Symons and was to be employed in 'the general trade of the port'. Thus another little coaster joined the large fleet already working in and out of the Bristol Channel. In fact, she proved to be not only the last sailing coaster to have been built at Bridgwater but also the last Somerset commercial sailing vessel in trade, discharging her last cargo in 1961.

A typical coasting ketch of her period, the *Irene* is wood-built of oak, elm, pine and, perhaps not so typically, chestnut. She was, and still is, gaff rigged, with a long, nicely raked bowsprit setting off her shapely stem, a mainmast surmounted by a tall fidded topmast and a pole mizzenmast. Her basic dimensions are, length on deck 85 ft, beam 21 ft and depth 9 ft aft and 6 ft forward. As launched, she was registered to carry 165 tons. She also had a deep half-deck built in forward, aft side of the forecastle and entered from there. This suggests that she may have been intended for the Newfoundland trade but was, in any case, a feature of many vessels in the Continental trade.

The *Irene* started work on the 17 June 1907, less than a month after her launching, when she loaded at Bridgwater for Penzance and sailed in company with the fast fore-and-aft schooner *Kings Oak*, bound for Liverpool. They left the river together and the local sailing fraternity wondered, not unnaturally, how this new and very trim vessel would shape up against a schooner of proven good performance. In due course a telegram from Watchet arrived, stating that the *Kings Oak* was leading by two miles and both vessels were shortening sail. Then it began to blow very hard so the *Irene* put back to Penarth and the 'race' was off.

Honour was redeemed however, in July 1911, when the *Irene* left Bridgwater in company with a new Goole-built ketch, the *Young Fox*, both bound to the south-west of Ireland. The *Young Fox* took a course direct to Cape Clear whilst the *Irene* bore away more to the northward and they soon lost one another. On raising the Irish coast the *Young Fox* sighted the *Irene* reaching down from the

nor'ard, shaping a course parallel to her own. One can imagine both skippers immediately on their mettle to make a race of it. They rounded Cape Clear abreast, with the *Young Fox* four miles to windward, but the *Irene* steadily drew ahead until by nightfall, she was a clear seven miles ahead and was not caught again.

Throughout her commercial life the *Irene* was made to earn her keep, sailing many hundreds of miles every year with cargoes varying from pit-props to flour, coal, scrap iron, brickyard goods, oil cake, and so on, and one remembers that before loading a 'clean' cargo, after carrying a 'dirty' one, the hold had to be thoroughly swept and scrubbed by her crew. This job must have seemed endless even in a small vessel like the *Irene*.

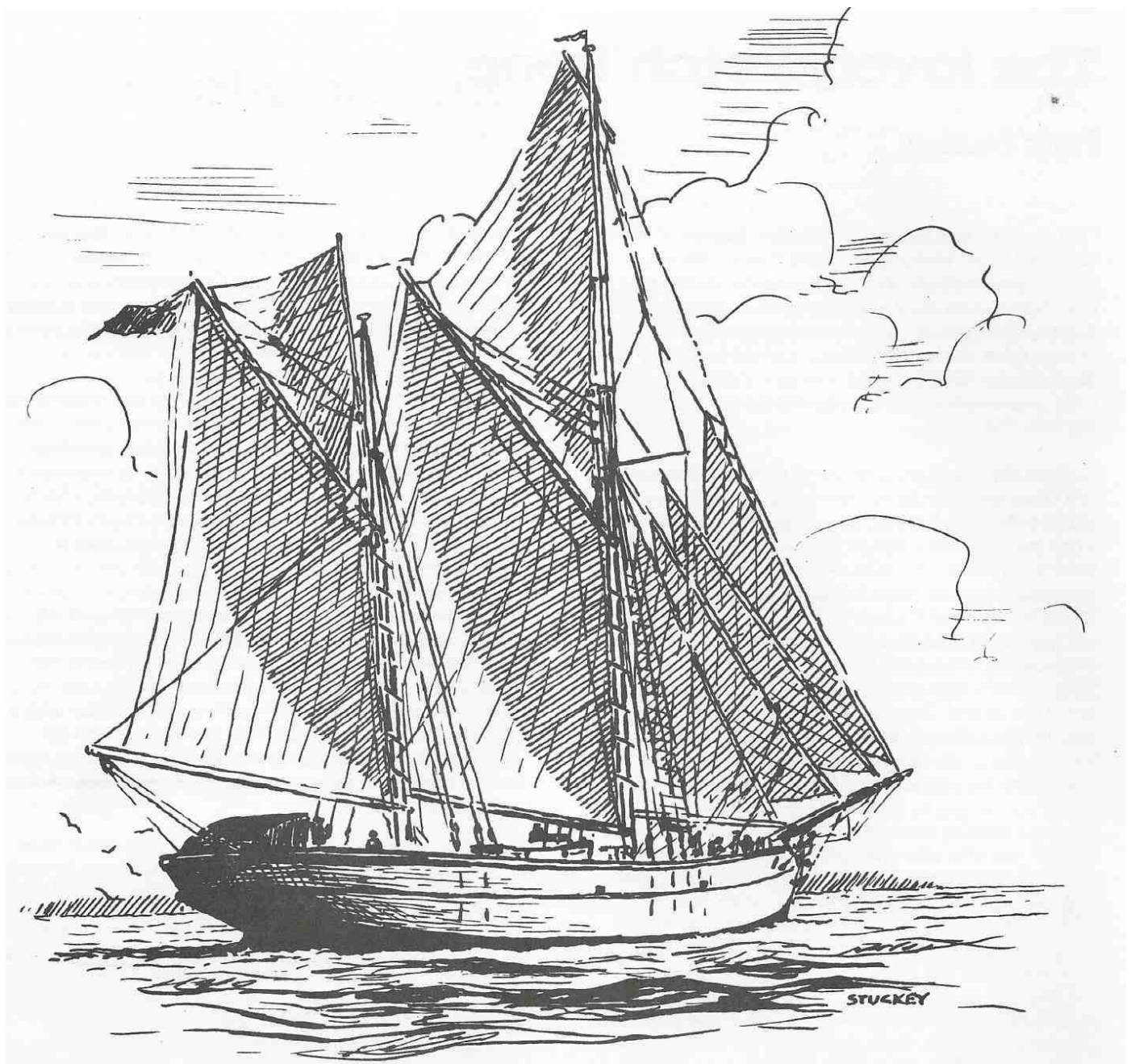
As an example of the sort of distances she covered, Mr James Dew informs us that in 1913 the *Irene* sailed from Teignmouth to Glasgow, a distance of 500 miles, in five days which, even today, would be considered a very creditable performance for a modern sailing cruiser with a relatively large crew, self-steering gear and mechanical and navigational aids. Mr Dew gives a sample twelve months work of the *Irene*, taken at random from his notes of the year 1913:-

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.

Her cargo books show that this was her trading pattern right through her long and busy working life, including both world wars when, like her sisters in trade, she was always a potential defenceless target for enemy action whenever she put to sea.

For the first ten years of her life the *Irene* worked out of Bridgwater, but, in 1917 she was registered in Swansea and re-registered there in 1919 under the ownership of W A Jenkins, who sold her to Captain Hugh Shaw in 1922. Captain Shaw of Arlingham, Gloucestershire, also had the schooners *Camborne* and *Kate* working the Irish Sea out of South Wales and the *Irene* - by now fitted with a 1919 'invincible' paraffin auxiliary motor - joined them in this trade under Captain Ira Aldridge, just in time to encounter the Irish 'troubles' of those days. But trade was slack on the English coast and Captain Shaw had no alternative but to send his vessels where cargoes were to be found, danger or no.

As can be imagined, the Irish coastal trade was badly disrupted at this time and the fortunes of the Shaw fleet varied almost from tide to tide. They were either being



chartered by shippers desperate to get their goods shifted, or being boarded by armed men demanding transportation. Sometimes a cargo could be rather unusual, such as when the *Irene* loaded live pigs at Dingle for Tralee. The hold was spread with earth ballast, upon which the pigs were turned loose! Fortunately, the weather was good and the animals survived the voyage safely.

The *Irene* seems to have come through those perilous times unscathed and continued into the deepening economic crisis of the late 1920s, which eventually forced Captain Shaw to sell her in 1928 back to her first owners, Messrs Colthurst Symons. In 1927 she had been re-registered in Bridgwater, which remained her port of registry for the rest of her working life and, indeed, right up to the present day, for 'Bridgwater' is still to be seen carved into her counter.

From 1928 onwards the *Irene* went quietly about the work for which she had been built, seldom getting into the news for she was seldom in trouble. It was inevitable, however,

that this busy little trader should have had some anxious moments during her long and active career. One of the first must have been in 1910 when she put into Newhaven having lost her main gaff, splitting her mainsail, losing her gaff topsail and foresail, during a hard blow in the Channel. A year later she was in collision with a lighter in Rouen, sustaining slight damage to her stern. A similar misfortune befell her at Avonmouth in 1952. As far as the records show the *Irene* has been put ashore only twice - the first time in the 1950s when she stranded just below Barry and had to go to Appledore for a new keel and the second time in 1980 when she went aground off Comwich on the river Parrett. This caused no structural damage but created a lot of interest among the locals, most of whom had never seen a West Country trading ketch, let alone one of their own local craft.

Since becoming an auxiliary vessel in the early 1920s the *Irene* has had a number of engines. In the 1930s her old

Invincible was changed for a 36hp Petter engine and, in 1946, this was replaced by a nine-year-old two-cylinder Bolinder, which, in turn, was replaced by a two-cylinder Svenska. Thirty years later this unit could produce a smoke-screen more effective than that of a coal-fired destroyer! However, in its hey-day this was a powerful engine and her last commercial skipper, Captain Bill Schiller of Appledore, felt justified in reducing the old ketch's sail plan by sending down her lofty main topmast and shortening her bowsprit by fifteen feet. He used the topmast to make a new main gaff and, according to his son, Roy, the resulting solid pitch-pine spar made very heavy work of setting the big flax mainsail.

Under Captain Schiller the *Irene* remained a general cargo carrier working up Channel with grain, tiles from Bridgwater to Ireland etc until 1961 when she came out of trade after a hard working life of fifty-four years. In the September of that year she went to the Hamble for conversion to a yacht and she was based there until 1969, when she was taken around to Conyer Creek on the river Swale. From here she went to Kew Bridge on the Thames in 1971. Her cruising activities for this first ten years out of trade are obscure but she is believed to have cruised along the south coast at least to the isle of Wight, by which time she had acquired two large and unsightly deck houses which completely ruined the sweet line of her sheer and, no doubt, her sailing qualities.

Although she was moored above bridges at Kew, her present owner, Dr Leslie Morrish, took the *Irene* to sea, even though this meant taking out her masts for each trip downstream and re-rigging below Tower Bridge - no mean undertaking in a vessel of this size. Eventually, however, he took her out of the Thames and into the Medway, where she lay off Queenborough for a while before coming back to her home waters of the Bristol Channel in 1980, calling in at her birthplace, Bridgwater, on passage to Bristol.

The *Irene* underwent an extensive refit in one of the docks of Hill's old Albion Dockyard, scene of the launching of Bristol's last deep-water square-rigger, the barque *Favell*, but now a busy yacht building and repair yard. Much painstaking, large scale reconstruction went into her, including the replanking of both sides from just above the waterline and it is obvious that no effort was spared to restore her to a standard worthy of her original builders. Her engine was replaced again and she is now powered by a modern Gardner diesel.

Irene completed her major refit at Gloucester where she was dry-docked and where a small celebration was held to mark her 75th birthday. Here the historical atmosphere of the inland port was emphasised when *Irene* was joined by the *Soren Larsen* and the *Marques*, both of which had arrived at Gloucester to undertake filming work in the docks. The casual passer-by could have been forgiven for thinking that he had stepped back a century when the three sailing vessels, all wood-built, were in port together.

In addition to new hull and deck planking, *Irene* had new masts, new topmast and bowsprit fitted and a new whale-back constructed behind her wheel. Pride of the small team of skilled shipwrights who worked on her, however, was the new wooden windlass on the foredeck, The unsightly large

deckhouse referred to earlier was removed and the *Irene* looked altogether a very trim craft when she left Gloucester docks early in June and motored down the ship canal which connects the inland port with the Severn Estuary at Sharpness. Her hull had been authentically painted in the pale grey which was characteristic of her type in former days.

An interesting aside was that the keeper of one of the canal's numerous swing bridges referred to *Irene* as she approached as a *Dandy* - a local name for a trading ketch which, with the passing of time, has all but been forgotten.

Irene was bound, initially, for Bristol where further work was undertaken in the City Docks and from where sailing trials were carried out. From Bristol *Irene* went round to Falmouth in July where she was entered for the Cutty Sark Tall Ships Race, something which opened a new and novel chapter in her varied career.

The *Irene* was very active during 1983, charter cruising all round the coasts of the British Isles, from Devon to the Western isles of Scotland, returning to Bristol at the end of the season. She had nudged a pier-head somewhere along the way, causing some damage to her counter and taff-rail and repairs were started whilst alongside Narrow Quay. Dr Morrish had hoped to put her into dry-dock at the Albion Yard but there seemed to be insurmountable difficulties there so, once again she was made welcome at Gloucester, where extensive repairs were completed to her stern, alterations were carried out below decks and the quayside was piled high with her ballast. It was interesting to see that Dr Morrish is now setting a standing tops'l with the old-style head-stick, such as the *Irene* would have carried in her first years. Such is his interest in the authentic restoration of this fine old vessel.

She started her 1984 season at Bideford - and there could not be a more appropriate base for a West Country ketch - before moving on to work around the coast, including taking part in the 1984 Tall Ships Race. It would be nice to think that Bristol would extend a welcome to her for her winter lay-up in the future, since she is the only genuine West Country vessel of her type still in regular commission.

Dr Morrish, *Irene's* owner, and his enthusiastic team, are deserving of our thanks for the work which has been undertaken on restoring the last of the West Country trading ketches still in commission to her former glory. We wish, them and the lovely ketch *Irene* every success.

For the information given in this article the author wishes to acknowledge the valuable assistance of Mr Bernard Shaw of Arlingham, Dr Leslie Morrish and members of his crew, the late Mr Graham Farr, Mr Jim Crissup, Captain Schiller, Mr Roy Schiller and Mr L J Nurse

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This article has been revised and updated from the version first published in 'Ships Monthly' November 1982.