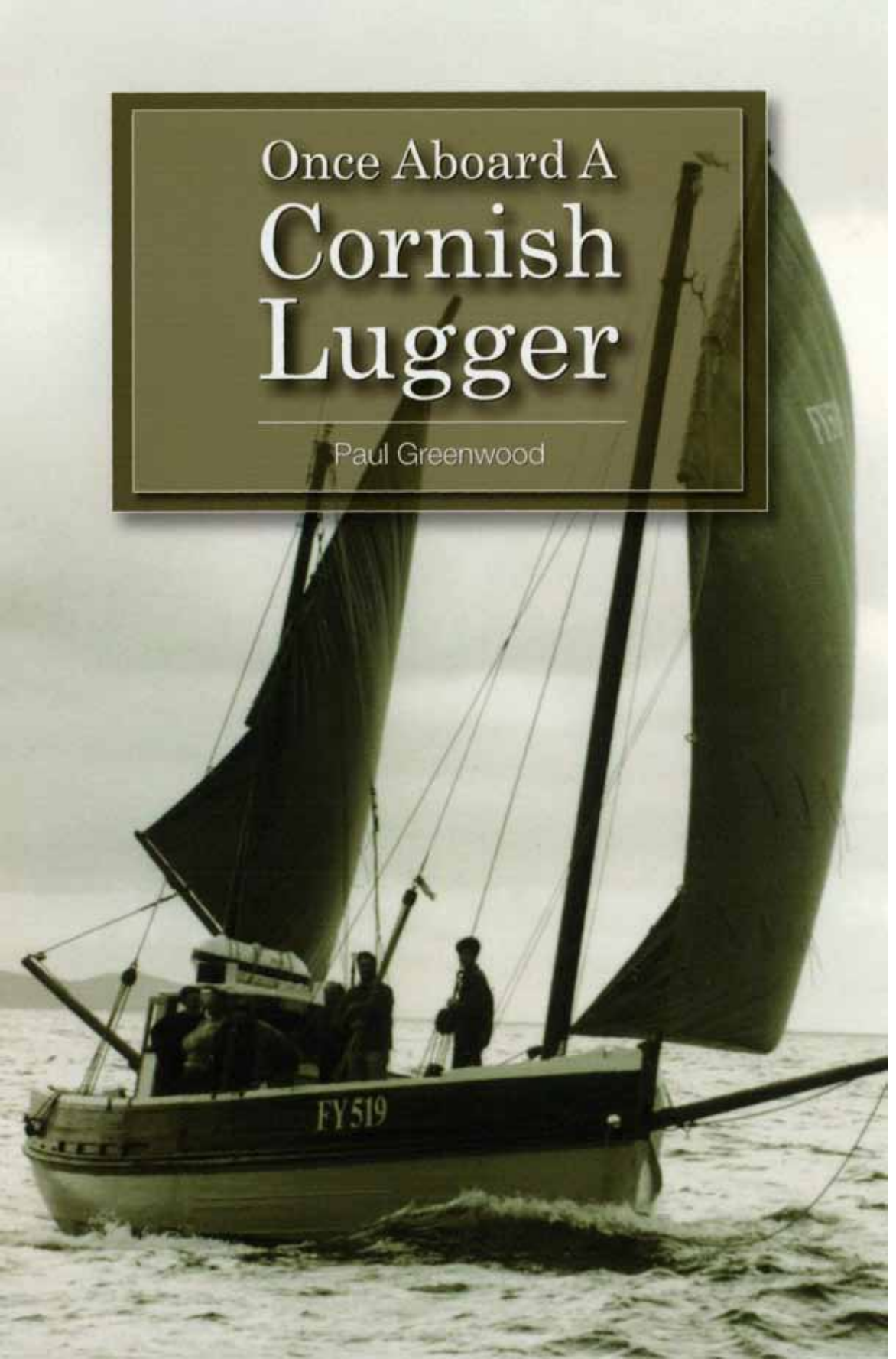
Once Aboard A Cornish Lugger

Paul Greenwood



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I dedicate this book to my old skipper
Thomas Frank 'Moogie' Pengelly
(1920-2002)

Preface

During the last few years of his retirement, I did my very best to persuade my old skipper, Frank Pengelly, that he should put pen to paper and write his life story. If he had done so, it would have been a fascinating and, I think, historically important composition, because he was the very last lugger skipper left in the port of Looe. His knowledge (common to many when he was a young man) had become unique, and he was the final guardian of it. Frank knew the fishing seasons for the drift nets and long lines, as well as the fishing grounds that covered hundreds of square miles of the channel. Without charts he could navigate the coast from Portland Bill to Lands End, his only aids being a clock, a compass and a tide book.

Unfortunately, by the time he did get around to doing something about it, he was very ill and sadly, he passed on before any real progress had been made.

As a boy I served for four and a half years on his lugger the *Iris*. I overcame sea sickness and learned my job on deck working the nets and lines with the other four crew men. Frank, or 'Moogie' as he was known as, always played his cards very close to his chest. He was the skipper, we were the crew, and provided we did our job on deck, that's all he required; there was very little encouragement given to learn more.

There are now only a handful of us left who remember those days, and as 'Moogie' left it too late, I thought that someone ought to try and record the way of life on those boats before it has all faded from living memory.

Frank's knowledge was vast, and I can't pretend for one minute to be able to write the account that he could have written. He was

the skipper, I was the boy, so we are coming at the story from two very different angles. But my memories of the time I spent on the *Iris* are still very vivid, (how could they not be?) and by conferring with the few others remaining from those days, I have endeavoured to keep the account as accurate as possible, although by virtue it is a very personal one.

But before I launch into that tale, I should like to paint in the background history of the Cornish lugger. From the mighty three-masted craft of the smuggling and privateering days of the eighteenth century, to the massive fishing fleets of the late nineteenth century, and the twilight years of the mid to late twentieth century. So you will understand that the those few remaining luggers I write about, working out their last days around the Cornish coast in the 1960s were not there by accident, they had a long, and a proud history.

Paul Greenwood
Looe 2007

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Early Days

I was 16-years-old and brimming with youthful certainty and optimism. I had just won a three-month battle with my parents to gain their permission to go fishing. Not angling with a rod and line for a hobby or sport, but to join the lugger *Iris* as one of her crew.

As a child I had always played around on the water, out with Dad in his dinghy sailing around Talland Bay, towing rubber eels to catch pollack; expeditions to Looe or Polperro on fine summer afternoons, or rowing into all the little gullies and beaches gathering driftwood for a barbeque.

When I was thirteen I bought a boat of my own. She cost me the princely sum of one pound: a poor worn-out old thing that had lain for years upside down in the withy bed above Talland beach. She was in a dreadful condition and, in truth, her next role should really have been to star at a Guy Fawkes party, not go back in the water. The keel was badly hogged and, having been upside down for so long, the bottom of her sagged in sympathy. In an attempt to cure this, some friends and I draped her over an upended 45 gallon drum. This treatment got rid of the hogging temporarily and, hoping to make her stay that way, we nailed a stout piece of driftwood along the length of the keel. The bottom, both inside and out, was then liberally coated with a mixture of beach tar and cement dust, brushed on smoking hot from an oil drum over a bonfire. Tide line enamel (paint tins washed up on the beach, their contents scraped into one can and all stirred up together with paraffin) was used to paint up the rest of her, finishing up a delicate shade of mauve/ brown. She was 14 feet long, clinker built and of an unknown vintage. When out in her we had to bail continually, and the bottom

actually undulated when going over a wave. But she was all mine, and with a gang of friends we had endless fun in her. Sails would be rigged and we would skid off to lee, eventually having to row and bail for ages to get back to the beach again.

After a south-westerly gale, a big ground sea would be breaking on the sand bar at low tide and that was when we would go surfing, not with boards, but in the boat. Six hands were needed for this sport, one on each of the four oars, one forward to keep the bows down and bail with a bucket, and myself aft, one hand on the steering oar, the other bailing with another bucket. One thing you didn't need for this sport was any imagination. How we didn't drown, I don't know.

The boat was dragged out into waist-deep water and the person at the bow would hang on while the rest of us scrambled aboard and made ready at the oars; the bow man then hopped in and we would start pulling through the breakers. Trying to hold her steady while riding over a cresting sea, the bow pointing at the sky, the boat seeming to hover balanced on her transom. Sliding down into a trough the other side, the next wave might be breaking, burying us over our heads in white sun-filled foam. Many is the time we were tipped end for end or totally swamped, boat and crew being washed back onto the sand in one big heap. There, laughing at the mishap and wiping the salt water from our eyes and hair, we would gather up the oars and buckets, tip the water out of the boat and launch out again. Given half a chance though, we would make it to the back of the breakers, bucket out half the ocean, then hold station facing the beach, awaiting that big wave. Along it would come, cresting feet above the rest, and half a dozen good strokes on the oars would see us catch the wave as it broke. Oars were then boated and, with myself on the steering oar desperately trying to keep her straight, we would hurtle towards the beach in a mass of spume to be (if all went to plan) left high, but far from dry, on the sand as the wave retreated. Sometimes we would end up skidding down the face of a wave, totally out of control and at a most perilous angle. If we didn't get swamped we would be driven onto the rocks that flanked the sand bar, crashing to halt, then to drag her off and up the beach to inspect for damage. Occasionally a plank would be stove in, but a strip of hardboard generously buttered with tar and nailed over the damage soon had us away again.

Another memory that stands out is of going wrecking after a south-west gale. A friend of mine, Kevin Curtis, rang up one morning to say a yacht had been wrecked during the night under the cliffs at Polperro. As the storm baulks were down, no one in the village could get out and there were loads of stuff for the taking, just washing in the tide line. The gale of the previous night had died down, leaving just a big ground swell. Launching off Talland beach, the boat rode the seas like a little duck as the two of us pulled towards the cliffs where the wreck had struck.

Backing in on the swell, we loaded up with all sorts of treasures: a bottle of gas and a can of petrol, lengths of rope, bits of wood, a rug and loads of other things that we grabbed just because they were there. Being first on the scene, our greed was well up so we decided to row over to a cove where the tide seemed to be taking much of the wreckage. At the mouth of the cove we held station, bow to sea, to work out how we might make a landing. We made a landing alright - a great wave came cresting in and tipped the boat bow over stern, washing us all of a heap right up to the head of the cove. Luckily the boat jammed behind a rock and Kevin and I held on to it, as the backwash of the sea scoured the cove clean of everything, including my bottom boards and paddles. The wreckers had become the wrecked; Neptune was obviously not happy with our avarice and had decided to chamfer a bit off our egos. It was Easter time, the air was cold, the sea was colder, and we stood there like a pair of drowned shags, with nothing but an empty boat and lucky to have that.

After dragging the poor old boat up clear of the tide line, Kevin and I then had to scramble up the cliff through the gorse and marram grass to reach the cliff path. There we went our separate ways home, soggy and crestfallen. A couple of days later, when the ground sea had gone down, I returned in another boat to tow mine back to Talland. The wrecked yacht was Norwegian, being sailed back single-handed from the Mediterranean; the skipper's body was washed up some days later and I was told that his watch was still working.

Playing around in boats as a schoolboy led to more adventures, in the form of night trips out pilchard drifting from Polperro on Jack Joliffe's little lugger, the *One Accord* (FY185). This was great fun, working the dip net, pumping out, and helping to land the catch

at the end of the night. Mind you, as I soon found out, this was a very soft introduction to the real thing, going out when the fancy took you, and then only if the weather was fine. Even then I used occasionally to get seasick, and my bedroom would be all a-sway when back home the next morning.

The *One Accord* was about 38 feet long and had originally been an open-decked St Ives gig. Jack had bought her when he was demobbed from the navy after the war, refitting her with decks, bulwarks and new engines plus a little one-man wheelhouse. The four-man crew had sailed together for many years: Tom Joliffe, a tall wry sort of fellow who always did the steering; Arkie Pucky drove the engines; Edmund Curtis was chief net mender, while Jacko the skipper kept an overall eye on things and smoked his pipe.

Because the *One Accord* was the only remaining pilchard drifter working from Polperro, she had to land her catches in Looe and then steam back to her home port, a distance of about three miles. On more than one occasion, when the sea was glassy calm, Jack would drop me off in Talland Bay to save me the walk home from Polperro. They would be those rare occasions when he actually took charge of his own boat. Nudging her gently into a gully on the west side of the bay under what was known as 'Dickey Bunt's' house, Arkie would be up in the bows looking down into the water: "Rock here, just to port of us, Jack!" he would shout. "Another one ahead of us, and it's not very deep." The skipper would be calmly drawing on his pipe and taking very little notice of Arkie's rock warnings. Giving a touch here and there on the wheel and a nudge on the engine, he would have her along side in the gully. I would await his order before leaping onto the rocks, then turn around to wave goodbye and thank him as they went astern back out into the bay. Scrambling up the cliff to join the path, I was soon home in bed. The first time Jack put me ashore in that gully, Tommy Toms who was out in his crabber, the *Sheila*, hauling pots, looked up from his labours and, for a moment, was convinced that Tom had nodded off at the wheel and had put the *One Accord* ashore.

Mind you, Jacko wasn't averse to scraping the odd rock. The word in Polperro was that if you wanted to know where the rocks were up and down the shore, ask Jack: he had been up on every one of them.

On another occasion, when battling back from Looe to Polperro in heavy rain and a rising south-west gale, I was sent down into the cabin for safety. Sitting below in such conditions it wasn't long before I was sick all over the cabin sole. For a while I pondered how I was going to explain the mess when we got to the moorings, but I had no need to worry. The old *One Accord* worked a fair bit in poor weather, so it wasn't long before the bilge water was lapping over the cabin sole, washing away all the evidence of my mishap. But seasickness aside, what a wonderful sensation it was to go from all the bang crash wallop and flying spray of a rising gale to escape into the tranquillity and safety of Polperro harbour. Soon we were riding snug on the mooring chains, but it was quite a while before we could scull ashore in the punt and go home. Arkie reckoned we had at least half the Channel to pump out of her.

Looking back now, I can't really say why I decided to go fishing for a living. Maybe it was the freedom and independence that it seemed to offer, or just my youthful need for a tough challenge. If it was the latter, then fishing certainly had all the right ingredients. Leaving school at fifteen, I had started work in an antique shop with a view to learning the trade, but shop life was not for me. I craved fresh air and sunshine and the company of less devious, more straight- forward people.

As a hobby I had started to make a collection of old photographs of Looe, and during my lunch hour I used to wander around the quayside talking to the fishermen, trying to get boats and people in these photos identified. That was when I first met Frank Pengelly, the skipper of the lugger *Iris*. Climbing the vertical iron ladder up to his net loft above the old fish market, I would find him there overhauling the drift nets ready for the coming season. Watching Frank at work with the net needle, mending rents and tears in the nets, fascinated me, and it wasn't long before I was having a go, learning to mend 'bars' and 'three-ers'.

In conversation one day, we were talking about the antique trade. I mentioned that I was getting fed up with it, especially being stuck indoors. Having played around in boats most of my life, and having done those few trips out on the *One Accord*, the idea was growing in me that I might like going to sea on a full time basis. When I told Frank this, much to my amazement he offered me a berth on the *Iris* and from that moment there was no going back.

It was then that a battle royal began with Mum and Dad. I couldn't blame them for being somewhat hostile to the idea of this career change. I was in a job with regular wages and very good prospects, and I wanted to throw it all in to go fishing. Dad gave me the waggly finger, trying to impress upon me the fact that there was no future prospect in fishing. It was a dying trade, the wages were dreadfully uncertain and, what's more, he reckoned that I was never strong enough, or tough enough, to stick the long hours and harsh conditions worked in at sea. He was right on all points of course, but still I persisted, until eventually they caved in.

Permission was granted, but with the final rejoinder that I would be back in less than six months begging for my old job back. I must admit they were very nearly right on several occasions. Working out my last week at the antique shop seemed more like a month, but eventually Friday afternoon arrived, I picked up my last wage packet (£3.10) and cycled home with that wonderful end of term feeling.

Saturday morning saw me biking down to Polperro to buy oilskins and sea boots at Owen Goodland's hardware shop. Owen himself wasn't there, but he had opened his shop and a note on the door informed customers that he had gone out to his garden for the day and if anyone wanted anything, please help yourself, leave a note by the till of what you have had and come back and pay another day. This was typical of Owen; if there was anything more interesting to do than stay in his shop on a fine day, like gardening, fishing or greeting visitors in the street, he did it. His system seemed to work, even if he didn't. Pushing the shop door open, the spring bell jangled and I entered an establishment that seemed to sell just about everything. Clothes, artists' materials, bedding, lamp glasses and lino, carpets and crockery, 78rpm records, shoes, even garden produce, in fact anything you could think of, much of it so out of date or style that there was surely very little hope of ever finding customers for it. At the back of the shop I positioned the stepladder and helped myself to an oilskin jumper off of the top shelf. Next, by ferreting around in boxes and cupboards I found the other items that I needed: a sou'wester, sea boots and an oilskin apron. Leaving my name and a list for Owen, I strapped everything on the carrier of my bike and cycled back home to Talland Bay, feeling on top of the world. It was March 1964 and my new way of life was about to begin.

The lugger Iris *in the early 1920s, Looe, rigged for sail.*

(L-R) Bruce 'Tiddler' Sammels, Clarence Libby, Roy Pengelly, Frank 'Moogie' Pengelly on the Iris *c1955*

The author aboard the Our Boys *with his wife Maggie.*

Postscript

The five luggers working out of Looe when I first went to sea are all still in service. The *Guide Me* was rebuilt and re-rigged by Jono and Judy Brickhill, bringing up four children aboard while she was their home for many years. They have cruised her extensively, winning the Antigua classics in the West Indies and today she is the flyer of the fleet.

The *Our Daddy* fished from Looe until the early 1980s. She was then bought by a Plymouth businessman who had her extensively rebuilt and converted into a no-expense spared luxury classic yacht which rather gives her the air of a grand old duchess. Now owned by Looe businessman Mike Cotton in partnership with her skipper Mike Darlington, they do charter work and day sailing from Looe.

After many years in limbo, the *Eileen* is now back in good order, thanks to the hard work put in by her owner and skipper Lorain Harris of Penryn. She is a dipping lug rig and can be seen every summer taking part in the local regattas.

The *Our Boys* is splendidly refitted as a charter yacht, sporting a massive standing lug rig. She is now working out of Cowes in the Isle of Wight under skipper Richard Parr.

Last, but not least, is my old ship the *Iris*. When her fishing days ended in the early 1970s she eventually became a houseboat. Later a local shipwright, Andy Scantlebury, made her into a gaff ketch yacht. Based at Falmouth, he and his family lived on her for several years. Sold on, she suffered a couple of very indifferent owners and by 2000 was in a sorry state. She is now owned by trawler skipper and marine artist Toni Knights of Brixham and is undergoing massive restoration work from the keel up. The 'Old Black Dragon' will rise again.

I visited the *Iris* at the boat yard at Galmpton, up the river from Dartmouth. Craned out high and dry her new decks and hull planking looked fine, while down below she was stripped out from end to end awaiting her new fit out. I looked aft to where the old cabin used to be and in my mind's eye I could still see the sou'westers and mufflers swinging gently from their nails beside each bunk, the old Lister engine clattering away while the coal range puffed smoke from its open door. In his usual corner Harry sat rolling fags from a tin of dog-ends, while up top the decks were once more crowded with baskets of line, and there was 'Tiddler', Clarence, 'Moogie' and Jack.

For a brief flash of time it was like watching a piece of film that I had somehow stepped into and become part of. I could see, hear and smell it all again. Then someone spoke and the spell was broken; I was no longer 16-years-old and out lining in the Channel, I was nearer 60 and standing in a boatyard in Devon.