

Towing in the port of Fowey

The first record of a tug in Fowey was a vessel with a dual role mainly as a passenger vessel but occasionally used for towing. Towing in the early days was to assist sailing vessels from sea into the harbour and up river to the loading or lay by berths. Once loaded they were towed to sea getting over the long delays waiting for favourable winds and tides. Early vessels which towed other vessels in Fowey did not work full-time as tug boats. Instead they were passenger vessels which towed other vessels on occasion. There is no record of the first vessel to tow or of the vessel being towed but indications are that men in rowing boats assisted the sailing vessels. Further up the river at Loswithiel horses were used as in the canals.

Tugs were powered by steam which was produced by burning wood or coal. This limited how far the early tugs could travel because they had to be able to carry enough fuel and water to power their engines. Quite large amounts of coal were needed to power early engines as they were not very efficient. As steam engines became more efficient tugs were able to steam for longer and travel further. This allowed tugs to work far out at sea as well as in and around the port. Towing other vessels, usually much larger than themselves and often in difficult weather conditions, required a large power unit.

There is no record of paddle tugs being used in Fowey and all were single screw tugs until the late 1900's when two smaller tugs were twin propelled. Early steering was by blocks and tackles replaced by chains and then steam pistons and finally by hydraulics.

Tugs were small by today's standards first built in wood then iron and steel. Iron was better than wood because it was stronger and so protected tugs against the difficult conditions in which they worked. Working closely with much larger vessels, often in rough waters, meant that tugs were at high risk of collision with other vessels.

Whilst Fowey had its own tugs the Plymouth and Falmouth tugs regularly towed ships to the port. The need for tugs in Fowey was great because the river is narrow, has high sides and twists and bends including a right angle. There is also a lot of fresh water coming down the river. This creates very fast currents as well as a big rise and fall in the water level. Tugs helped much larger vessels to enter and leave Fowey Harbour more safely in these very difficult conditions and quicker than waiting for the right conditions. Tugs were also used to tow vessels in and out of Par harbour and from some distance off the harbour. Tugs would go to sea looking to tow ships in especially in light winds and adverse tides. This was known as seeking and tugs from as far afield as London would seek sailing ships to tow to their destination. Fowey tugs would regularly tow from the Dodman or Lizard in the west and off Start

point up channel. Sometimes a fee would have been agreed with the owners beforehand but often it was the tug captain or skipper who negotiated verbally with the master of the sailing ship a fee to tow in. Disputes often arose and needed sorting in the courts.

As steam ships replaced sailing ships the operation change to one of manoeuvring inside the harbour. The width of the river and depths of water off the jetties restricted turning under their own power and ships were not that manoeuvrable. The harbour was often also congested as ships had to wait to get loaded. Larger ships were turned in the lower harbour being towed stern first to their berth. This manoeuvre continues today and is a well-practised operation.

Inward bound the tug or tugs meet the ship just outside the harbour running in with her whilst the lines are passed securing the ship for towage. Ships lines were normally used and heaving lines are thrown from the tug on board to haul the tow rope or wire aboard securing it to the tow hook. A gob rope is attached to the topline with a large bow shackle able to slide up and down. The gob rope is then paid away allowing the tug to manoeuvre. This is to stop girthing or capsizing. The process of securing to the ship can be the most hazardous as the interaction between ship and tug can cause collision. Securing to the bow of the ship in particular is a dangerous operation requiring great skill and judgement on the part of the tug skipper. Once fast, the tugs take the ship to the "swing ground" off Penleath Point and under the directions of the pilot commence the turning operation. The swing ground is a part of the harbour kept clear of moorings and smaller craft allowing this turning process. Once the ship has been rotated through 180 degrees and is facing bow to sea the stern tug commences taking the ship stern first backwards to her berth. For the bigger ships two tugs are used and the bow tug now acts as a drag steering the ship through the narrows at Caffa Mill into Lew roads and then through a 90 degree turn into Mixtow Reach.

Steam Tugs whilst improving with design were still hard to manoeuvre but in 1966 the port saw its 1st diesel tug. These could be brought to readiness for use much quicker and had better response times. The Cannis still require 16 full turns of the steering wheel to go from hard over from port to starboard. The Ingleby Cross renamed Gribbin Head soon followed and the port was served by these two tugs powered by Crosby diesel until 1986 and the arrival of the next generation of tugs. Large ships need assistance getting back to sea. The tugs lift the ship off the berth guiding her around the bend out of Mixtow reach back down through Lew roads and past Bodinnick. This is the deepest part of the harbour but also the narrowest and laden ships proceeding slowly can often take a sheer here and the tugs are alert to get her safely through and down to the lower harbour. Other ships would be moored on the jetties and to the buoys in the roads and under the Hills. The tugs would let go by the town quay but escorted the ship to sea.

In addition to providing towage to ships barges had to be towed to sea to dump ballast and once the dredging had started hopper barges with mud were towed to Lantic Bay a mile to the east of Fowey