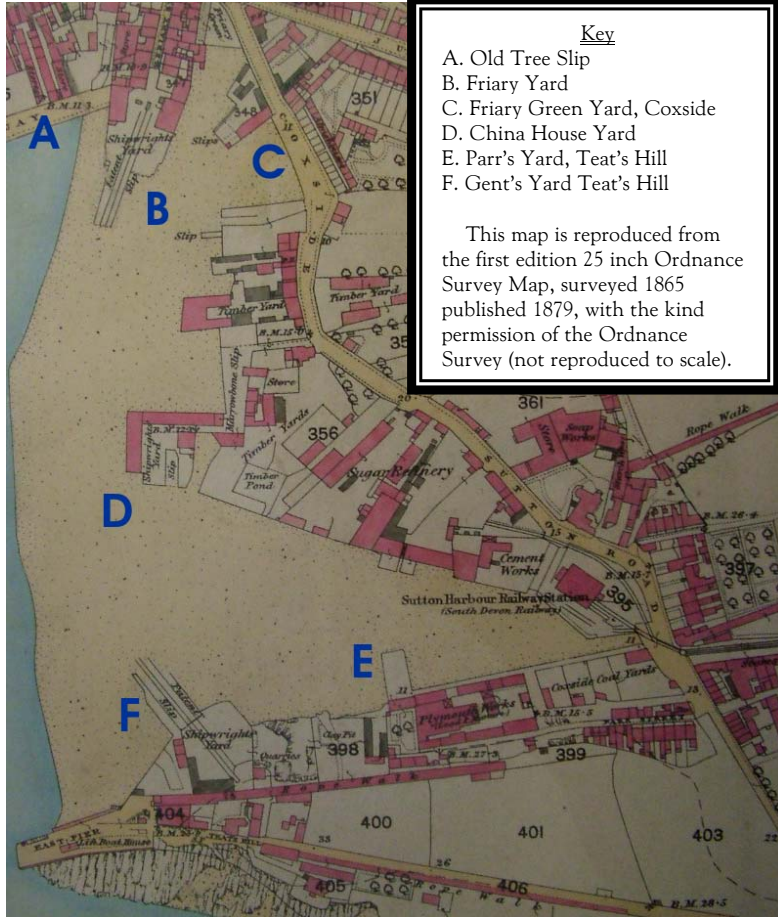


# The Shilston family of China House, Sutton Pool, Plymouth

Although the register of the *Island Maid* does not name her builder, Lloyd's Register shows that she was built by Shilston at Plymouth. The Shilston family had been building vessels on the eastern shore of Sutton



Pool, Plymouth, at China House, Coxside, since at least 1817. The business was started by William and passed to his sons John and William who worked together until bankruptcy severed their partnership in 1833. John continued alone until joined by his son William Hole Shilston, who carried the business on, until his death in 1904. His last vessel, the smack, *Boy Frank* being completed by his Executors and launched in 1905. The extract of the Ordnance Survey map opposite (surveyed in 1865 and published in 1879) shows the location of the yard at "D". The building of wooden sailing vessels at Plymouth was then at the height of its prosperity, with six busy yards within Sutton Pool and numerous other yards within the estuary of the four rivers which empty into Plymouth Sound. Although almost the whole of the Sutton Pool shoreline has been redeveloped the general outline is still recognisable to those who visit Plymouth's historic Barbican area and a visit to the site of the China House Yard is still possible.

The name 'China House' is assumed to have arisen from an association with

Cookworthy's china manufacture on or near the site, but what is certain is that a large and stoutly built building on this site has attracted a number of uses, over the years, being variously a warehouse, makeshift prison and hospital, then a shipbuilding yard and now a restaurant and public house.

In the key to Simpson's plan of Sutton Pool of 1786, it is referred to as a 'Store House & Timber Yard', but by 1799 it was already in use as a shipwright's yard and was advertised to let with other property in the Exeter Flying Post of 7 November 1799: "... Likewise to be LET, for a Term of 3, 5, or 7 Years, all that Spacious Yard, known by the Name of the CHINA HOUSE, at Cox-side, Plymouth, about 107 by 120 Feet, with a Store-house, and a double Tier of Lofts over, of about 105 Feet in Length, and 21 Feet in Breadth, lately in Possession of Mr. Edward M. Sibrell, and used as a Shipwright's Yard, ... For selling the said Lands, letting the Houses &c., aforesaid, a public Survey will be held by J. Wheeler, at Mr. Morris's, the King's Arms, Plymouth, on Wednesday the 13<sup>th</sup> Day of November next, by Five o'Clock in the Evening."

It is possible that William Shilston took the lease of the yard not long after this, but there is no direct evidence of his occupation until an advert for sale of adjoining land in his ownership was placed in the Plymouth & Dock Telegraph of Saturday, 12 July 1817.

The Yard Books, which would have listed all of the jobs which the yard undertook, do not appear to have survived and the vessels built by the Shilstons must therefore be pieced together in an incomplete manner from other secondary sources. In the case of Plymouth those sources are themselves fragmentary, not least because of losses during the Second World War blitz of the City. Various sources attribute vessels first to William between 1814 and 1830 (two vessels only); to John and William (14 vessels) when the partnership ended in bankruptcy. It is unclear whether this partnership is between John and his father or John and his

brother, although, from the name order, “John & William Shilston” it is probably the latter. Then John operated alone with a first recorded vessel in 1834, followed at regular intervals by another 21 vessels to 1849. The register of the *Persian* cutter, launched in June 1850, shows her builder as John Shilston & Son. The business continued in that name for ten years, with another 8 vessels including a floating dock. This important addition to the facilities of the yard was made on 25 August 1858 with the launch reported in the Plymouth Devonport & Stonehouse Herald of Saturday, 28 August 1858. This “huge affair, several months in building”, was 150 feet in length, 40 feet wide, drew about 10 inches of water and was capable of taking a vessel from 7 to 800 tons burthen. When required, the dock was taken from its moorings into the deeper water of Sutton Pool and when the tide left it, the gates were opened. The dock filled on the rising tide and the ship intended to be docked floated into it and was carefully shored up as the tide receded. At low water the gates of the dock were closed and on the rising tide the dock was towed to its moorings for work to begin. The dock was used for the first time on Saturday 9th October, when a schooner and smack were docked together. The draft of the dock was only increased by 4 to 6 inches (Plymouth Devonport & Stonehouse Herald, 16 October 1858).

The schooner *Belle of the Plym*, launched on 2 August 1860, is credited to John’s son William Hole Shilston alone and he subsequently built at least 33 vessels at China House. John was by then 71 and although he ceased to be the named owner, he must have continued to take an interest in the yard, for he was killed in a fall there during 1876, aged 87.

It was common practice for shipbuilders at Plymouth to invest in vessels they had built, either holding shares for short periods after the vessel’s launch, until they could be disposed of at a satisfactory price, or for longer periods as a recognised ship owner. John owned shares in 29 vessels, registered at Plymouth between 1817 and 1875 and in the majority of these he was sole or majority owner. William Hole Shilston continued this aspect of his father’s business, owning 31 Plymouth registered vessels between 1853 and his death on 26 January 1904. The *Island Maid* became one of the vessels in which William chose to spread his risk and it will be seen from her register that he sold 50 of his 64 shares in her within three months of her launch. However, he retained over 20% of the shares and although later he sold more shares he was still interested enough to repurchase shares he had sold, as late as 1881.

At some point either John or William (probably the latter) allowed themselves the dignity of a house flag for their vessels; the portrait of the *Countess of Devon*, painted in 1896, by Luigi P. Plenault of Leghorn (original Teignmouth Museum) shows the flag as opposite, as does a portrait of William’s *Belle of the Plym*, but in ‘Last of the Windjammers’, Basil Lubbock shows the flag with blue over white. A notable feature of William’s ownership was his fondness for naming the large vessels of his own building, which were at the core of his fleet, using the convention “of the Plym” or “of Devon” – the brig *Queen of the Plym* was followed by the schooner *Belle of the Plym* and the barque *Sprite of the Plym*. The *Island Maid* followed, breaking the pattern, perhaps because he did not intend to retain her, and a new line began, with the barque *Pride of Devon*, brig *Queen of Devon*, barque *Rose of Devon*, brigantine *Countess of Devon*, barque *Earl of Devon*, and finally the schooners *Girl of Devon* and *Belle of Devon*.



Born as Plymouth adjusted to peace, in a post-Napoleonic world, William’s death, aged 83, occurred at the end of the era of building wooden trading vessels at Plymouth - the four vessels in which he still owned shares were either lost or quickly sold by his executors and his few remaining competitors ceased trading within a very few years, or dwindled down to barge and boat building.

At his death he left uncompleted the schooner *Antoinette* of 95.46 tons and the smack, *Boy Frank* of 33.6 tons, both launched in 1905 by his executors. In a little under 100 years the family of William Shilston, born Kingteignton, Devon about 1763; his sons John, born 1789 and William born 1797 and John’s son, William Hole Shilston born 1821 had built at least 78 vessels on the China House site. The *Island Maid* appears to be the only “survivor”.