

Perran-ar-worthal Local History Group

On Thursday Nov. 15th, David Pollard gave a interesting and informative talk on the Falmouth Packet Ships to a packed house at the Perranwell Centre (Perranarworthal Village Hall).

Packet ships were the fast sailing ships that carried mail, passengers and bullion to and from the far flung corners of the British Empire, to destinations around Europe such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Egypt, and worldwide to North, Central and South America and the Caribbean Islands.

The Post Office Packet Service dates to Tudor times and continued up to 1823, when the Admiralty assumed control. Prior to this the mail would have been delivered by runners! Oliver Cromwell established the Post Office's monopoly of mail deliveries during the Commonwealth, and Charles II installed the first Postmaster General, Henry Bishop, in 1660. Bishop introduced the postmark, a precursor to the postage stamp.

The Packet service was transferred from Plymouth to Falmouth in 1688 and for over 150 years, between 1688 and 1850, Falmouth Packet ships filled the harbour, landing at Greenbank or Custom House Quay. The Packet Service made Falmouth the information hub of the Empire, second only to London for knowing the news of the day.

Although the ships were fast, they were lightly armed and relied on speed for their security. During much of this period Britain was at war with other European sea powers (and the Americans), and basing the Packet Service in Falmouth in the far west avoided the problem of running the gauntlet of rival naval ships and privateers in the English Channel. This was of particular significance in the early 19th century when Napoleon's navy was attempting to disrupt British trade and communications.

In 1810 men of the packet service at Falmouth went on strike (mutinied) over pay levels. Previously, the seamen had been allowed to augment their salaries by trading on their own account. When this was banned as smuggling, they objected to the resulting loss of income. In punishment for the refusal to man ships, the Post Office moved the Packet Station to Plymouth. Much lobbying of the Postmaster General and HM Treasury by a delegation from Falmouth and by Cornwall's forty-four members of parliament (!) soon persuaded the Post Office to return the service to Falmouth in January 1811.

The creation of the Falmouth Packet Service had many economic and social spin-offs in Cornwall. In particular, it became essential to improve the roads from Falmouth to London for both mail and passengers. The main Truro-Falmouth route was moved south from a river crossing at Bissoe to pass across Carnon Downs and through Perranwell, via Carnon Bridge. In Perranwell, the Plume of Feathers (later called the Prince Regent) was established as a coaching inn. In 1754 this route was greatly improved and became a toll road with coaches able to travel throughout the year. The small building opposite the station was a toll house on this route.

In 1828 the route was again changed to avoid the steep inclines into Perranwell (Station Hill and Cove Hill). A new turnpike road was constructed along the estuary, through Perran Wharf and past the Norway Inn, crossing the Carnon river by a causeway and a new bridge. The Norway Inn served as the coaching inn, and this route is still followed by the A39. A nice feature of the turnpikes was the provision of granite milestones with incised text, and cast iron finger posts with directions and distances to nearby settlements. The fingerposts in the parish were all cast at Visicks Foundry.

Inevitably, however, new technology and the age of steam eventually brought about the demise of the Falmouth Packet Ships. In 1843, Falmouth was threatened by a proposal to move the Packet Station to Southampton, which was now linked by rail to London. Newly built steamships were faster and more reliable than the old sailing packets and could rapidly reach London whatever the weather or circumstance. The last packet ship arrived at Falmouth on 30 April 1851. The Cornwall Railway did not reach Falmouth until 1863.

Colin's talk included a wealth of fascinating detail and was followed by a lively Q&A session. For more information he recommended '*The Falmouth Packets*' by Tony Pawlyn (Truran, 2003).