

THE WYE TOUR, THE
PAUL PRY, AND STEAM
ON THE WYE

I have read Mr. Keith Kissack's fascinating article on 'Monmouth and the Wye Tour' (this journal, No. 2, pp. 27-36) with great pleasure and interest. I was particularly intrigued by his mention of a boat called the *Paul Pry*, for this was the name of a small steamboat which was built and launched at Hereford in 1827. Could it be the same boat? The question made me wonder whether any steamboat had ever been used for the Wye Tour. It also caused me to re-examine some references on the *Paul Pry* and other Wye steamboats, and I was puzzled at the discrepancies in them.

Grahame E. Farr ('Chepstow Ships', Chepstow, 1954, p.14) states that the steamboat *Paul Pry* was of 31 tons, was launched in 1827, was described as a barge, and was sold and transferred to Liverpool within a year or so. In contrast, I. Cohen ('The non-tidal Wye and its navigation', Trans. Woolhope Club, Vol. 35, 1955, pp. 83-101) states that the steamboat was of 64 tons, was launched in 1829, and was mentioned as late as 1845. However, in a later paper ('Ship building on the Wye', *ibid.* Vol. 36, 1958, pp. 75-79) Cohen states that the steamboat *Paul Pry* was launched on 13 November 1827 and was of 64 tons burthen with engines of 14 horse-power. Quotations from local newspapers showed that 'she was available for transport of goods', and that almost certainly on at least one occasion (26 December 1827) she carried fare-paying passengers (with a service of refreshments) to Chepstow. Cohen then states that owing to lack of suitable coal barges for her to tow she was sent to Gloucester on 22 February 1828, and was sent to Liverpool in July 1829.

This confusion of facts is very curious. I wonder if you or Mr. Kissack can clear up this matter and also state any known dates of operation of the *Paul Pry* referred to by Mr. Kissack as being used for occasional passenger traffic, just in case it was the steamboat.

Farr refers also to two other steamboats which operated on the Wye, but much later and for cargo-carrying up to Monmouth. One, of unknown name, operated for four years from 1870, and another, the 'wooden river steamer' *La Belle Marie*, operated from about 1905 up to perhaps 1914.

Cohen, in his 1958 paper, gives quotations from contemporary local newspapers which indicate four other steamboats on the Wye (different from those quoted by Farr) as follows:—

1. Steam barge reported as being built in Ross, 1818;
2. Steam launch *Water Witch*, built at Hereford, 1834, 80 ft. long and 23 ft. wide, sent immediately to Liverpool for sale;
3. Pleasure steamboat, paddle-driven, arrived from London for use on the Wye, 1853;
4. Stern-wheel steamboat, the *Wilton Castle*, launched at Ross 1902, 65 ft. long and 10 ft. wide, carrying 100 passengers, laid up about 1912 due to lack of business.

It is clear that steam has played some part, if only a small one, in Wye navigation.

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KEITH KISSACK writes: In reply to Dr. Tucker's letter I have no evidence that the *Paul Pry* I mentioned was a steamboat. Apart from the reference in my article, the only other occasion I have seen the boat mentioned is in an advertisement printed in *The Monmouthshire Gazette* of September, 1850: 'Chepstow Flower Show. William Davis begs to announce to the Public that his boat, the 'PAUL PRY', will leave Monmouth for Chepstow at six o'clock on Thursday morning. Fare — to and fro 2/- each. The boat will start from the Quay, Bridge Street.' It occurs on the same page as a large advertisement for the 'fast sailing iron steam-packet *Wye* from Bristol to Chepstow' and an announcement by the Chepstow Agricultural Society that two steam packets will leave Bristol on the morning of the Show. From the lack of information about the Monmouth boat I have assumed that it was not a steamboat, but I may be wrong.

GRAHAME FARR writes: Dr. Tucker's letter is most interesting. However *Paul Pry*, judging by the number of Severn and Wye barges registered in the name, seems to have been a popular figure in the first half of the nineteenth century. Was he a nursery figure, a character by a cartoonist, or what? The dates given by Cohen for the steamboat *Paul Pry* in his second paper complement those in the Chepstow Custom House Register

and it is a fair assumption that she did not return to the Severn or Wye after leaving in July 1829. There is an interesting item obviously referring to her in *The Bristol Gazette* for 16 January 1828:—

'The application of steam vessels to towing barges &c. along canals and rivers (where there are only two currents, not tides) instead of horses, is beginning. A vessel for such purpose and also for the conveyance of passengers and light luggage has lately been launched on the river Wye. Its general station is near the bridge of the city of Hereford. It is only of 12 horse power, and no fears are entertained about its utility except in summer season when the shallowness of the river may not afford sufficient depth for the working of the paddles.' (One wonders what was meant by 'two currents', but assumes this is a misprint for true').

The apparent discrepancy in the tonnage figures given for the *Paul Pry* can be explained as the register tonnage was the net figure after allowances had been made for machinery spaces. The 64 tons may well be the gross figure, but the 31 net would be used for paying dues, etc. The steam launch *Water Witch* of 1834, built by Captain William Radford (like the *Paul Pry*) was mentioned in the appendix of ships built on the Wye in my 'Chepstow Ships,' but not elsewhere in the book as I found no evidence of her being used on the river. Press accounts in *Hereford Times* 3 May 1834 and *Hereford Journal* 9 May 1834, describe her launch on 30th April and say she was the largest vessel yet built above Wye Bridge. She drew 17 inches of water when launched, but with engines installed 34 inches, and the latter operation was to be done at Chepstow. After this she apparently never again ventured upstream and *Hereford Journal* of 23 July 1834 mentioned that she was to be sent to Liverpool to find a buyer. Actually she was sold at Swansea and was formally registered there in February 1836. Just over a year later she was bought by London merchants and while employed as a salvage vessel was sunk by accident off Gravesend towards the end of 1838.

The pleasure steamboat of 1853 and the stern wheeler *Wilton Castle* of 1902-12 are also most interesting. I hope someone can tell us more.